
*The State, Ulama and Religiosity:
Rethinking Islamization of Contemporary Malaysia*

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Introduction

This paper hopes to uncover *inter alia* the State-Ulama relations in the Islamization of contemporary Malaysia. Departing from the dominant approach of looking at Islamization in Malaysia in terms of statism, political parties and civil activism, this paper aims to analyze the state's strategies in dealing with the Ulama.¹ While the state's carrot-and-stick measures in handling the various resurgent groups have often been underscored—through the introduction and setting up of Islamic programmes and Islamic institutions, and the strict regulation, if not banning, of the deemed 'deviant' Islamic organizations—very little focus has been given on the important personalities who have made these measures possible and sustainable.

This paper deconstructs the whole notion of the strong-state thesis, which inclines to the Malaysian state as the homogeneous and omnipotent actor of Islamization. Instead, the significant role played by the

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1. For examples of the statist approach see works by Judith Nagata, *The Reflowering of Malaysia Islam: Modern Religious Radicals and Their Roots* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984); Chandra Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Penerbit Fajar Bakti, 1987); Zainah Anwar, *Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia: Dakwah Among Students* (Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1987); K. S. Jomo and Ahmad Shabery Check, "The Politics of Malaysia's Islamic Resurgence," *Third World Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1988); Hussin Mutalib, *Islam in Malaysia: From Revivalism to Islamic State* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1993); David Camroax, "State Responses to Islamic Resurgence In Malaysia: Accommodation, Co-optation, and Confrontation," *Asian Survey* 36, no. 9 (1996): 852–868.

Ulama as the ‘legitimizing elements’ which is essential in any Islamic movements and organizations, and in validating any Islamic discourses, needs to be recognized. I argue that the ability of the Ulama to gain power, influence, and following independent of the state compels the state to constantly devise and reassess its strategies in dealing with the Ulama in order to remain a relevant Islamization actor. In this paper, I shall examine several of the state’s strategies in dealing with four types of Ulama of different orientations and capacities. The state’s handling of Ulama such as Ashaari Muhammad (Darul Arqam), Nik Aziz Nik Mat (PAS), Harussani Zakaria (Perak Mufti) and Dr. Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin (USM lecturer) shall be treated as my case studies.

The State and The Ulama in Contemporary Malaysia

In response to the Islamic resurgence movement of the 1970s, the state’s approach towards Islamization can be described as both reactive and proactive—the former through mosque building and court promotions, whilst the latter through the developing a Malaysian model of modernization.² In his first year as Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir’s government announced a seminar entitled “The Concept of Development in Islam.”³ Many other initiatives followed including the setting up of Islamic institutions, such as the Islamic Bank and Islamic Economic foundation; the upgrading of the Islamic Centre; the airing the azan (prayer call) on national television (RTM); the building of massive mosques; the setting up of Islamic universities; and the forming of Islamic think-tanks and federal institutions such as ISTAC and IKIM. The state also rationalized and bureaucratized the administrative and legal institutions, including the functions and authority of the religious elites at the federal level.

By 1982, the Federal Government had over 100 Ulama in the Department for Islamic development in the Prime Minister’s Office and some 715 religious elites in the Ministry of Education.⁴ The recruitment

2. Camroux, “State Responses,” 857.

3. Hussin, *Islam in Malaysia*, 30–31.

4. Norani, Zainah, and Zaitun, “Malaysia: Islamization, Muslim politics and state authoritarianism,” in *Muslim Women and the challenges of Islamic extremism*, ed. Norani Othman

of the Ulama is a strategic attempt by the state not only to boost its Islamic legitimacy vis-à-vis other dissenting voices in the religious public sphere, such as PAS, Darul Arqam and ABIM, whose members too include many influential Ulama and religious teachers; but also to divide and rule the Ulama so that their influence never transcends the state's.⁵ The remainder of this paper seeks to capture the various strategies adopted by the state towards the Ulama. Many would argue that the state will co-opt and reward the Ulama who share its ideology and punishes those who run counter to it. While such a postulation stands, especially in the 1980s to the 1990s, the state today finds itself in an increasingly tenuous position because the very Ulama whom they relied upon adopted positions which may contradict the positions and roles they are designed to occupy.

Ashaari Muhammad (The Sufi-Mystic)

Ustaz Ashaari Muhammad was affectionately addressed by Darul Arqam members as the "Sheikhul Arqam." He excelled in Islamic studies and became a religious teacher in a government school in the 1950s. Ashaari's oratorical skills and charisma captivate many young and old Muslims. Ashaari identifies his teaching as Aurad Muhammadiyah.⁶ The Darul Arqam movement had a huge following; some sources indicate that its membership was as high as 10,000, excluding another 100,000 to 200,000 followers.⁷ Some of his followers are rumored to be prominent personalities, politicians and even top academics,⁸ such as the son of the

(Sisters in Islam, Kuala Lumpur, 2005), 90.

5. For the study on Tunisian and Iranian Ulama, see Kamel Ghazzi, "The Study of Resilience and Decay in Ulema Groups: Tunisia and Iran as an Example," *Sociology of Religion* 63, no. 3 (2002): 317–34.
6. See Ashaari Mohamad, *Inilah Sikap Kita* (Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Sheikhul Arqam, 1990). He claims that the founder of the Aurad, an Indonesian Syeikh Suhaimi Muhammad, did not die but would reappear as Imam Mahadi, a savior of the Muslims. See also Kamarulnizam Abdullah, "National Security and Malay Unity: The Issue of radical religious elements in Malaysia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 21, no. 2 (August 1999).
7. Camroux, "State Responses," 864.
8. Ashaari Mohamad, *Nasihat Buatmu: Bekas Kawan-Kawan Lamaku Dalam Arqam* (Selangor: Penerbita Minda Ikhwan, 2005).

Deputy Premiere, Ghabar Baba.⁹ The level of loyalty the Darul Arqam followers show towards Ashaari was unmatched. Some members claimed that Ashaari had held a dialogue with the Prophet Muhammad, and that he is the Abuya al-Imam at Tamimi (their long-awaited savior).

Previously, Darul Arqam had always been treated as an ally of the state to weaken the appeal of a rival, anti-establishment *dakwah* organization ABIM.¹⁰ This alliance broke when Darul Arqam appeared to have openly challenged the state. It was reported that Ashaari challenged Prime Minister Mahathir in a popularity contest, in which Ashaari boasted that he would emerge the victor. The maverick mystic Ashaari later pointed out that through his nightly mystical encounters with God and the Prophet, he knew about the internal political struggles within the ruling party UMNO; and saw a new caliph to be installed in Malaysia which bore resemblance to himself.¹¹ His popularity with the state plunged further when he began criticizing the state's religious administrators in JAKIM and even other civil organizations such as ABIM.¹²

To curb the increasing influence and meteoric rise in popularity of Ashaari, the state had to respond swiftly to declare Darul Arqam as deviant. This can only be done by winning over the support of other Ulama. The Darul Arqam was banned by the state in 1994 on the grounds that it breeds a deviant ideology, a move which some would argue is politically motivated. A special meeting of *muftis* from various states was convened on the 6th of August 1994 in Kuala Lumpur and this meeting was orchestrated by the Prime Minister's Department. In the meeting, a *fatwa* was issued declaring the Darul Arqam movement as a deviationist cult that should be banned.¹³ Rais noted that it was ironic because the meeting of the *muftis* took place only three days after Dr. Abdul Hamid Othman, then Deputy Minister, hinted that Darul Arqam would be banned as soon as the *muftis* declared the organization illegal.¹⁴ This episode in

9. Camroux, "State Responses," 864.

10. Camroux, "State Responses," 859.

11. Farish A Noor, *Islam Embedded: The Historical Development of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS (1951–2003)* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 2004), 1, 2: 511.

12. Kamarulnizam, "National Security and Malay Unity," 6.

13. In Malaysia, a gazetted fatwa becomes law and is enforceable.

14. Rais Yatim, *Freedom Under Executive Power In Malaysia: A Study of Executive Supremacy*

the 1990s illustrates the state's strength in mobilizing the Ulama in the bureaucracy to legitimize the government's actions and clamp down on others. However, it indirectly empowers the Ulama in the bureaucracy with the right to define the "deviants" and "mainstream" in future instances.

Nik Aziz Nik Mat (The Conservative)

Nik Aziz is PAS's spiritual leader and the Chief Minister of Kelantan. The title "Tuan Guru" or respectable teacher has also become synonymous with his name. Often hailed as the "adored leader," Nik Aziz commands a huge following particularly in the rural areas, especially for his piety, humility and modest lifestyle.¹⁵ However, his ideas and *fatwas* (religious opinions) are largely conservative, which are manifested through his views on women and Malay Arts. He is famous for making sexist remarks on women such as "scantily-dressed women invited rape and caused social ills" and "Muslim women should not wear lipstick outside their homes because it could arouse men and caused them to rape the women."¹⁶ In addition, Nik Aziz also criticized several Malay traditional art forms such as *makyong*, *dikir* Barat and *menora*. Such performances, in Nik Aziz's view, do not parallel the true Islamic teachings of Islam.¹⁷

Being a leader of the opposition party, the relationship Nik Aziz had with the state can be characterised as confrontational. As in the case of Ustaz Ashaari in the 1990s, the state pounces on any ambiguous statements made by the 80-year old theologian, and mobilize the Ulama the

(Kuala Lumpur: Endowment Sdn Bhd, 1995), 249.

15. Hussin Mutalib, "Religious Diversity and Pluralism in Southeast Asian Islam: The Experience of Malaysia and Singapore." In *Religious Pluralism in Democratic Societies: Challenges and Prospects for Southeast Asia, Europe and the United States In the New Millenium*, ed. K. S. Nathan (Singapore and Kuala Lumpur: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2007), 40–41.

16. "Going after women, again," *New Straits Times* (8 December 2008).

17. Nik Aziz, "Perasmian Karnival Kebudayaan Kelantan 1996 (15 August 1996)," in *Koleksi Ucapan Rasmi YAB Tuan Guru Dato' Haji Nik Abdul Aziz Bin Haji Nik Mat Menteri Besar Kelantan*, ed. Wan Ismail Bin Wan Jusoh (Kota Bharu: Dian Darulnaim Sdn Bhd, 1999).

state-bureaucracy it has set up and controlled to discredit Nik Aziz. In 2002, Nik Aziz created a storm when he remarked that “God is a Thug, arrogant, and wicked than any human being”.¹⁸ Nik Aziz refuted the claim that he had insulted Islam for meant that nobody can act with the toughness of God. The state subsequently approached the National Fatwa Council for Islamic matters, which constitute the Ulama and *Muftis*, to issue a *fatwa* against Nik Aziz. Nevertheless, unlike in the case of Ustaz Ashaari a decade earlier, the council refused to issue the *fatwa* but mainly advised all parties to respect the attributes of God. A similar position was taken by the Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM)¹⁹ director, Dr. Abdul Monir Yaacob, dismissed this episode as a political issue, and hence there was less of a need for a *fatwa* against Nik Aziz.²⁰

Nik Aziz was again put to task by the state in 2009 when he declared that, “Only PAS members can go to heaven.”²¹ Nik Aziz claimed that UMNO, unlike PAS, had practised false Islam; hence only those who had voted for PAS can go to heaven. In response, the Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yasin called for the National Fatwa Council and other Ulama to issue a statement declaring Nik Aziz’s view as deviant. “Although I understand Islam,” Muhyiddin opines, “any statement that I make will be interpreted in a political angle. I do not want to resort to politics. This is about religion, faith, and religious doctrines.”²² This time around, the National Fatwa Council did issue a statement condemning Nik Aziz’s comment as against Islamic teachings.²³ These two episodes show that the Ulama in the bureaucracy may not always be on the side of the state, and may defy state’s orders. This contradicts the general perception that the federal institutes, being creations of the state to legitimize its Islamic agenda, are merely rubber stamps of the state’s discourses.

18. C. Van Dijk, “Religious Authority, Politics and Fatwas in Contemporary Southeast Asia,” in *Islamic Law in Contemporary Indonesia: Ideas and Institutions*, ed. R Michael Feener and Mark E Cammack (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 63–64.

19. IKIM is a federal think-tank set up by the state.

20. Dijk, “Religious Authority,” 64.

21. “Nik Aziz doing it again,” *New Straits Times* (19 August 2009).

22. “National Fatwa Council, Ulama to clarify Nik Aziz’s allegations,” *Bernama News Agency*, (18 August 2009).

23. “Fatwa: Only Allah Decides whether one goes to heaven or hell,” *Bernama News Agency* (19 August 2009).

Harussani Zakaria (The Ethno-Nationalist)

Dato' Harussani Zakaria has served as the Mufti of Perak since 1985. The most part of his illustrious career as an Ulama is spent in the Perak religious bureaucracy. He has also sat in various committees, both at the state and federal level. At the federal level, he was a distinguished member of the National Fatwa Council and IKIM.²⁴ Harussani Zakaria's views, though largely conservative, incline more to the ethno-nationalist orientation which runs parallel with the dominant political ideology of the ruling elites, particularly UMNO. For instance, Harussani constantly fights in defence of Malay Rights and the Malay Royalty. During the Perak constitutional crisis in 2009, he was quick to shield the Sultan of Perak from any criticisms by controversially declaring that those who go against the Sultan (Perak) as un-Islamic and *menderhaka* (treacherous). Harussani justifies the notion of loyalty to the Sultan as a *Quranic* injunction.²⁵ Reacting to the demonstrators during the crisis, Harussani famously remarked that, "The Malays do not defy the Sultans. As Malays, they (demonstrators) should not be cursing, swearing, and destroying other people's property as Malay culture is refined. How can we say we are struggling for Islam when we behave in such an un-Islamic way?"²⁶

Harussani's style of thinking and ideology defines the state's strategies towards him. Apparently, the state has been very accommodating towards Harussani's views. As a result, the voice of Harussani has been privileged in the mass media and he is given the leeway to comment of social issues of the day. Harussani's views are utilized to give weight and legitimacy towards the state's Islamic discourse. Harussani showed full support by arguing that the contents and objectives of *Islam Hadhari*, a slogan coined by Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, upon implementation will take Malaysia to greater heights. Harussani even promised to go to the grassroots in Perak and explain Islam Hadhari to Muslims.²⁷

24. Azman, Zahari, Nik Sahida, and Adel M Abdul Aziz, *Biografi Mufti-Mufti Malaysia* (Negeri Sembilan: USIM, 2008), 60–61.

25. "Tidak taat pada Raja adalah derhaka-Mufti," *Utusan Malaysia* (7 February 2009).

26. "Act that goes against Islamic culture and Islam teachings," *Bernama News Agency* (6 February 2009).

27. "Fatwa council thumbs-up to Islam Hadhari," *New Straits Times* (7 May 2005).

Harussani was conferred many titles and state honours. In 2008, Harussani was named the *Tokoh Maal Hijrah 1430*, the prestigious recognition awarded to Islamic personalities for their contributions to society. In 2009, he was conferred the title of “Dato Seri” by the Sultan of Perak. These awards were an addition to the awards received much earlier in his career, such as the Mufti of Perak.²⁸

Without doubt, many observers would dismiss Harussani as an official Ulama and a pro-establishment;²⁹ but in reality, he is not. Harussani has made remarks that may run counter to the state’s interest and even embarrassed them. He was famously known for making the unsubstantiated, yet controversial, remark that 100,000 Muslims in Malaysia had become apostates, which elicited an emotional response by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.³⁰ He also riled many for declaring the “Sure Heboh” carnival organized by TV3 as “haram” (forbidden) in Islam.³¹ It is highly probable that his strong views would result in clashes with other states Muftis such in the Fatwa Council, which makes the council less of a coherent body to be easily mobilized by the state.

Dr. Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin (The Reformist)

Dr. Mohd Asri, was the Mufti of Perlis for as short as two years, but has created a major storm in the religious public sphere. Before his resignation from the post of *Mufti* in 2008, he was one of the youngest Mufti Malaysia had ever had. The outspoken, charismatic Dr. Mohd Asri is an academic and an expert in *Hadith*. His ideas for reforms are closely identified by the younger generation and educated middle-class Malaysians, and his personal blog is widely patronized.³² Dr. Mohd Asri obtained his

28. Azman et al., *Biografi Mufti-Mufti Malaysia*, 62.

29. Abdullah Saeed, “The official ulema and religious legitimacy of the modern nation state,” in *Islam and Political Legitimacy*, ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh and Abdullah Saeed (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 21–24.

30. Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 51.

31. “No TV3 Jom Heboh carnival in Perak this year,” *Bernamea News Agency* (27 April 2008).

32. Norshahril Saat, “Re-negotiating the Muslim Public Sphere: New Media and the reconstruction of the Ulama’s Authority in Contemporary Malaysia” (paper presented at

Bachelors degree in Arabic and Shariah (Islamic law) from the Jordan University. He completed his Masters in Islamic Studies from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and later his PhD in International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM). Dr. Mohd Asri's discourse always bears modernist overtones, which has several times made him ran on collision course with the state administrators who are largely conservatives. Even though Dr. Mohd Asri had held positions in the state-bureaucracy, he had criticized the state and the administrators.

Rumors are widespread that the state had at times been trying to court Dr. Mohd Asri into their camp as a candidate which he refused.³³ In the 2008 General Elections, the state was rumored to have approached Dr. Mohd Asri, himself from Pulau Pinang, to run against the wife of Anwar Ibrahim, Wan Azizah in the Permatang Pauh seat (Pulau Pinang). Also, after his shocked resignation as the Mufti of Perlis in 2008, the state has been trying to recruit him to head several state-related institutions, such as YADIM. The state must have noticed the growing influence Dr. Mohd Asri has in Malaysia; even his shock resignation from the position of *mufti* raises questions and speculations that he had clashed with the state officials.

When he was arrested by the Religious authorities of Selangor (JAIS) in November 2009, on the grounds that he does not have the credentials to preach, again both the state and the opposition tried to land in their support for the embattled ex-Mufti. Even statesmen like Mahathir and Abdullah Badawi condemned JAIS for their actions. Although the incident occurred in an opposition-led state, the huge number of sympathizers for Dr. Mohd Asri must have served as an eye-opener for the state that the use of draconian laws to curb the influence of an *Ulama* is no longer possible. The state must have realized that popular legitimacy alone can move public opinion and can even mobilize protest. By lending the its full weight towards Dr. Mohd, one can sense a general fear of the state that the neutral, but PAS sympathizer, Dr. Mohd Asri would one day join ranks with PAS, which could seem to mean a death blow for the

National Seminar 2009 Media & Islamic Thinking organized by Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, July 21–22, 2009).

33. See his comments in his blog drmaza.com <http://drmaza.com/home/?p=876> (assessed December 11, 2009).

state to wrest control of Pulau Pinang from the opposition.

Conclusion

It is obvious that the process of Islamization in contemporary Malaysia is not free from power contestations. Power is at play in the attempts of the state to remain the dominant actor in Islamization. As seen, the Ulama play a pivotal role in many of the state's Islamization projects, for they provide the legitimizing elements in any Islamic discourses and slogans. The Ulama also facilitates in sustaining any religious actions against dissenting voices, especially against other influential Ulama. However, recent cases have shown that the Ulama do not need the state to obtain legitimacy and authority. Moreover, the state could no longer rely on legal instruments and state mechanisms to curb the influence of the Ulama, for the Ulama are the ones who determine whether these legal mechanisms are justified or otherwise. These legal instruments can only be used with the Ulama providing the ideological basis. With greater democratization in recent times, the ease for the Ulama to tap on other alternative sources and centers of power, and create a niche for themselves, has weakened the state's unilateralism.

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