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**Deconstructing Political Islam In Malaysia:  
UMNO'S Response To PAS'  
Religio-Political Dialectic**

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## ABSTRACT

The politicisation of Islam has become a key feature of the Malaysian political terrain in recent years, and has found dominant expression in the so-called “Islamisation race” between UMNO and PAS. This paper studies the religio-political dialectics and responses that continue to define UMNO-PAS rivalry, focusing primarily on the strategies and flaws of UMNO’s attempts to out-Islam PAS. It suggests that UMNO’s representation of PAS as conservative fundamentalists belies the fact that the struggle to define the role of Islam in contemporary Malaysian society has created fissures within UMNO itself, resulting in an incoherent strategy that has prevented it from undermining PAS’ burgeoning popularity.

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## **DECONSTRUCTING POLITICAL ISLAM IN MALAYSIA: UMNO'S RESPONSE TO PAS' RELIGIO-POLITICAL DIALECTIC**

The politicisation of Islam, defined as the mobilisation of Muslims for political power, has become a key feature of the Malaysian political terrain in recent years. This process has found dominant expression in the so-called “Islamisation race” between the two major political parties who both look to derive legitimacy from religion – UMNO (Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu or United Malays National Organisation) and PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia). While Islamic resurgence in Malaysia has spawned a range of Islamic movements and organisations, it has been the UMNO-PAS relationship that has most fascinated scholars and observers of Malaysian politics.<sup>1</sup>

This paper looks to contribute to the literature on political Islam in Malaysia by exploring the UMNO-PAS rivalry in terms of the religio-political dialectics and responses that define the parameters of political Islam in Malaysia. It contends that UMNO's representation of PAS as “conservative” proponents of “extremist” Islam bent solely on instituting an Islamic state in Malaysia belies the fact that the struggle to define the role of Islam in contemporary Malaysia has created fissures within UMNO itself, resulting in an incoherent strategy that has prevented it from undermining PAS' burgeoning popularity. The paper begins with an exploration of the politicisation of Islam in Malaysia and the religio-political dialectic that has come to be associated with PAS. It then moves to consider UMNO's response to this dialectic, and the problems related with it. The paper then concludes by highlighting key areas that demand address in relation to UMNO's attempt to rescue Islam from the Islamists of PAS.

### **From Periphery to Centre: Islam as Mainstream Politics**

Scholars have emphasised the need to locate the emergence of political Islam in Malaysia in the context of global trends of post-colonial Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>2</sup> While

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<sup>1</sup> See K.J. Jomo and Ahmad Shabery Cheek, “Malaysia's Islamic Movements” in Joel Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah (eds), *Framed Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), for a study on major Islamic movements in Malaysia that have emerged from the Islamic resurgence of the 1970s.

<sup>2</sup> As a sample of this scholarship, see Judith Nagata, *The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam: Modern Religious Radicals and their Roots* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984); Chandra Muzaffar,

post-war Arab nationalism (as well as the anti-colonialism movements in Malaya and Indonesia) saw Islam dissociated from secular politics and confined to the realm of personal belief and practice, the failure of secular nationalism in preventing the subservience of Islamic societies to Western culture harkened a return to the Quran to re-establish Islam as the core of governance. As with all other Muslim countries, Malaysia was caught up in this fundamentalist turn.<sup>3</sup>

In essence, the politicisation of Islam in Malaysia was given institutional form in the years following the 1982 PAS party elections.<sup>4</sup> Though formed in 1951 as Party Islam Se-Malaya, PAS had for long periods in its history focused on ethno-nationalist objectives.<sup>5</sup> By 1982 however, PAS changed its political shape. During this time, old-guard nationalists were cast out via party elections and replaced by *Ulama* leadership.<sup>6</sup> This transformation, as scholars have noted, coincided with an increasing feeling among Malay-Muslims that as *Addin* (a way of life), Islam had to be accorded greater prominence not only in the personal lives of Muslims, but in the public sphere as well.<sup>7</sup> Driven by the global resurgence of Islamic consciousness and strengthened by the enthusiasm of a new guard epitomised by the likes of Fadzil Noor, Abdul Hadi Awang, and Nakhai Ahmad, a rejuvenated PAS began pushing a more deliberate Islamic agenda in Malaysia to whittle away support for UMNO.<sup>8</sup>

The popularity of the rejuvenated Islamic party was evident in the speed to which its influence expanded in states such as Terengganu, Kedah, and Perlis, and in the

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*Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Penerbit Fajar Bakti, 1987); K.S. Jomo and Ahmad Shabery Cheek, "The Politics of Malaysia's Islamic Resurgence", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.10, No.2 (1988); Hussin Mutalib, *Islam in Malaysia: From Revivalism to Islamic State* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Mohamad Abu Bakar, "External Influences on Contemporary Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.13, No.2 (September 1991).

<sup>4</sup> For a study of PAS' history and political ideology, see Alias Mohamed, *PAS' Platform: Development and Change, 1951-1986* (Petaling Jaya: Gateway Publishing House, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Previous presidents such as Burhanuddin Al-Helmy and Mohd Asri Muda were known more as Malay nationalists than Islamists. See Safie Ibrahim, *The Islamic Party of Malaysia: Its Formative Stages and Ideology* (Kelantan: Nawawi bin Ismail, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Asri Muda was replaced as party president by Yusof Rawa, the first *Ulama* to head PAS.

<sup>7</sup> This has been argued in several places such as Judith Nagata, *The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam: From Peasant Roots to Religious Radicalism* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984); Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "New Trends of Islamic Resurgence in Contemporary Malaysia: Sufi-Revivalism, Messianism, and Economic Activism", *Studia Islamika*, Vol.6, No.3 (1999).

<sup>8</sup> Mohamad Abu Bakar, "Islamic Revivalism and the Political Process in Malaysia", *Asian Survey*, Vol.21, No.10 (October 1981); Chandra Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti, 1987).

universities throughout the country.<sup>9</sup> The religious conviction behind PAS politics was such that the Islamic party was prepared to forego potentially fruitful cooperation with secular opposition allies in order to maintain fidelity to their declared objectives.<sup>10</sup>

### **PAS – Parochial Conservatives or Visionary Reformists?**

In assessing the rationale for the popularity of PAS, Patricia Martinez has looked to Quranic exegesis, arguing that while UMNO defines Islam through a literal interpretation of the Quran, PAS relies on the “correct traditional route” of classical resources.<sup>11</sup> Beyond that however, PAS has, in its search for legitimacy, fashioned Islam into an identity and voice of dissidence for the Malay-Muslim community. In other words, Islam was reconstructed by PAS as a counter-hegemonic discourse against the stratification, social dislocation, and alienation of Malaysian society brought about by the government’s developmental and modernization drive, not to mention the corruption and money politics that has long plagued UMNO.<sup>12</sup> Very often, PAS attacks against UMNO have been premised on what they argue is the latter’s questionable religious credentials and secular approach to politics.<sup>13</sup> This has included the demonisation of UMNO leaders as *Kafir* (infidels).<sup>14</sup> In the same vein, in response to recent statements by Prime Minister Mahathir that Malaysia was already an Islamic state, PAS President Mustapha Ali retorted that “the only thing Islamic about Malaysia now is there are mosques, and there are Moslems here....That does not qualify us to call ourselves an Islamic state”.<sup>15</sup> UMNO’s decidedly “materialistic” and “secularistic” approach to governance was contradicted with a PAS platform extending from the ideological and intellectual tradition of the teachings of reformist Islamist ideologues who have emphasised the total inseparability of religion

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<sup>9</sup> Kelantan has long been the traditional stronghold of PAS.

<sup>10</sup> In 1996, relations between PAS and Semangat’46 were broken over disagreements as to the power of the Sultans. Later in 2001, an alliance with the Chinese-dominated DAP (Democratic Action Party) was similarly broken over PAS’ relentless pursuit of the Islamic state.

<sup>11</sup> See Patricia Martinez, “Mahathir, Islam, and the New Malay Dilemma” in James Chin and Ho Khai Leong (eds), *Mahathir’s Administration: Performance and Crisis in Governance* (Singapore: Times Books International, 2001) pp.224-225.

<sup>12</sup> See Chandra Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> See for example, “UMNO korbankan Islam”, *Harakah*, 7 June 1999.

<sup>14</sup> In Islamic theology, labelling a person “Kafir” or unGodly is a particularly serious accusation when made in reference to Muslims. The politicisation of “Kafir-Mengafir” (accusations and counter accusations made by PAS and UMNO politicians regarding each other’s religious credentials) has been explored in Kamarulnizam Abdullah, *The Politics of Islam in Contemporary Malaysia* (Bangi: Penerbit University Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2002), pp. 192-196.

<sup>15</sup> “Political bickering stumbles Malaysia’s model Islamic state”, *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, 24 October 2002.

and politics.<sup>16</sup> Exemplifying this, PAS leaders have been unyielding in their belief that the Islamic state is both a viable and necessary alternative to the UMNO-dominated secular state, and this is enshrined in their party manifesto.<sup>17</sup> Since 1990, when it was returned to power in the state of Kelantan, PAS has presented draft proposals to the parliament for the introduction of Hudud law in Kelantan. Each time, the motions have been withdrawn on “technical” grounds.<sup>18</sup> Similar efforts were made after the PAS electoral triumph in Terengganu in 1999.

It is questionable whether the evidence of greater Malay-Muslim support for PAS can translate directly to a greater desire among them to want to live in an Islamic state.<sup>19</sup> To many Muslims, including *Ulama*, what constitutes an Islamic state remains vague and contestable. Even PAS itself has been unable to provide a practical vision of an Islamic state that is satisfactory for the entire Muslim community in Malaysia, to say nothing of the non-Muslim populations. Be that as it may, those who suggest that PAS’ impending failure is inherent in this lack of an “operational blueprint” for the Islamic state are missing the mark.<sup>20</sup> Even if the Islamic state is unlikely to come into being anytime soon, it is precisely the vagaries behind the Islamic state concept that lends PAS a greater degree of legitimacy and credibility, for as an Islamic party appealing primarily to the Muslim vote, PAS can continue to position itself as the champion of Islam struggling for the realization of a vision of the purest form of Islamic community without having to actually justify the malleability of its vision to a Malay-Muslim electorate, most of whom in any case would invariably be wary of being seen as “unIslamic” opponents of such a vision.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For a critical discussion of reformist Islamic thought, see Muhammad Mumtaz Ali (ed), *Modern Islamic Movements: Models, Problems and Prospects* (Kuala Lumpur: A.S. Noordeen, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> The party’s manifesto is available on its official website, [www.parti-pas.org](http://www.parti-pas.org). See also Nasharudin Mat Isa, *The Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS): Ideology, Policy, Struggle and Vision Towards the New Millennium* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Party of Malaysia, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> See Judith Nagata, “How to be Islamic without being an Islamic state” in Akbar Ahmed and Hastings Donnan (eds), *Islam, Globalisation, and Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.71.

<sup>19</sup> This case has been made by Greg Barton in “The ties that do not bind”, *Asiaweek*, 16 June 2000.

<sup>20</sup> See Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, “An Islamicist’s View of an Islamic State and its Relevance to a Multi-Racial Society” in Harold Crouch, Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, Carmen A. Abubakar and Yang Razali Kassim, *Islam in Southeast Asia: Analysing Recent Developments* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Trends in Southeast Asia, No.1, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> While Hudud bills have been passed by the state legislatures in both Kelantan and Terengganu, their implementation has been blocked because the matter of the death penalty and its merits remains a constitutional issue. Hence, any implementation of the Islamic penal code must first entail constitutional change or amendment. See “UMNO takes on PAS over criminal laws”, *Straits Times*, 15 June 2002.

Noticeably too, PAS has also actively endeavoured to influence non-Malay perceptions of the party.<sup>22</sup> During the tenure of the late party President Fadzil Noor, PAS managed to make the Islamic state concept almost palatable to reticent Muslims, and even to non-Muslims. Subsequently, despite concerns that the replacement of Fadzil Noor by Abdul Hadi would see PAS take a more hardline position on the Islamic state, PAS continues to evince flexibility on the matter. For example, Abdul Hadi has assured individual states that they can exercise prerogative on matters concerning the Islamic state should PAS come to power.<sup>23</sup> This openness was again reflected in the recent announcement of a two-pronged strategy for the election, whereby the Islamic state issue would only feature in PAS' campaign in the northern states.<sup>24</sup> At other times, Abdul Hadi has also attempted to re-assure non-Muslims of their role in a theocratic state.<sup>25</sup>

The public and private personas of PAS leaders, which contrast sharply with those of UMNO, have also had an undeniable impact on public perception. The simple and approachable lifestyles of PAS leaders have been widely documented and contribute significantly to the party's popularity, and the PAS social-economic agenda of redistribution and social collectivism has been well appreciated in comparison to the corruption that has plagued UMNO.<sup>26</sup> PAS has certainly been more cooperative with NGOs as compared to the ruling government, which views the latter as an unnecessary distraction, and at times have even seemed more accommodating towards non-Malay culture. When Abdul Hadi became Menteri Besar of Terengganu for example, he overturned a government policy that prevented Christians from building a church, and permitted pig-rearing by the Chinese community.<sup>27</sup> The significance of these gestures is profoundly ironic, for as Patricia Martinez observed, "it is perhaps significant that in their fidelity to the concept of an Islamic state, (PAS) is the party that represents political Islam in Malaysia that has given non-Muslims more rights in *fundamental issues*, even as it has

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<sup>22</sup> See for example, "Racial Politics versus PAS", *Harakah*, 30 November 1998.

<sup>23</sup> "PAS will not force Islam on Malaysia if it runs government", *Straits Times*, 1 January 2003.

<sup>24</sup> "PAS quietly shifts election tactics", *Straits Times*, 14 January 2003.

<sup>25</sup> "Hadi: Role for all communities in Islamic state", [www.malaysiakini.com](http://www.malaysiakini.com), 27 August 2002.

<sup>26</sup> John Hilley, *Malaysia: Mahathirism, Hegemony and the New Opposition* (London: Zed Books, 2001), pp.193-199.

<sup>27</sup> See Patricia Martinez, "A Response to Dr. Tom Michel", *CTC Bulletin* (Bulletin of the Program Area on Faith, Mission, and Unity, Christian Conference of Asia), Vol.XVIII, No.1 (April 2002).



taken away others such as drinking alcohol in public and closing down unisex hair salons”.<sup>28</sup> (*italics added*).

Ironically, perhaps the clearest indication that PAS is positioning itself as a reformist party is its attempt to look beyond the traditional politics of ethnic representation. In a direct challenge to UMNO’s script for Malay supremacy, PAS has criticised the New Economic Policy and constantly stressed Islam’s recognition of equality among races.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Mahathir’s recent attempt to engage PAS in Malay unity talks provided the Islamic opposition the opportunity and platform to explicitly challenge UMNO’s longstanding monopoly over the “Malay perspective” on issues of multiculturalism.<sup>30</sup> While at first agreeing with the proposal, PAS later rescinded support by criticizing the motivations behind Mahathir’s call as a demonstration of “ethnic chauvinism”. PAS’ subsequent counter-proposal that such discussions instead be framed as “Malaysian unity talks” shed light on an important but overlooked feature of Islamic politics in Malaysia. For UMNO, the Islamisation of its political agenda has to inevitably be reconciled with its *raison d’etre* as defenders of Malay ethnic identity. This has in fact hamstrung UMNO and given PAS an opportunity to justify its political agenda to non-Muslims by arguing that the universalism of Islam rejects UMNO’s narrow ethnic chauvinism. While the non-Muslim community would undoubtedly need more convincing before they accept the PAS agenda, this perspective has nevertheless given PAS some leverage over UMNO in terms of the palatability of Malay dominance<sup>31</sup>

What is significant about the propensity displayed by PAS towards accommodation and compromise is the fact that it has by no means diluted its fidelity to the Islamic state. As numerous PAS ideologues and politicians have argued, unlike UMNO’s secularism, PAS’ gestures has been based on the model of the first Islamic state established in the multi-cultural society of Medina by the Prophet during the *Hijrah*,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. To the author’s knowledge, many non-Muslims as well as Muslims laud PAS’ curbing of such activities as they are associated with the “social ills” that even the Federal Government has acknowledged have become a problem in Malaysia.

<sup>29</sup> It is noticeable that on its website, PAS maintains a column devoted to reports on the party in the Chinese media.

<sup>30</sup> See “Malaysia: Mahathir’s Trojan Horse”, [www.islamonline.net](http://www.islamonline.net), 17 April 2001.

<sup>31</sup> In a groundbreaking study, the noted Malaysian ethnographer Tan Chee Beng has concluded that the Chinese communities in Terengganu have not felt their identities threatened by the presence of a PAS state government. See Tan Chee Beng, *Chinese Minority in a Malay State: The Case of Terengganu in Malaysia* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2002).

where non-Muslims were accorded the freedom of worship and cultural practice, and lived in harmony with Muslims.

### **The Character of UMNO's Response to PAS**

In the face of this PAS challenge, UMNO has realized that previous policies that “domesticated” Islam and kept it away from politics had to change.<sup>32</sup> Under Mahathir Mohamad, Islam was brought to the forefront of UMNO and Malaysian politics. While the PAS party elections of 1982 witnessed reformist Islamists take over the reins of party leadership, the corresponding UMNO General Assembly witnessed the new leader’s pronouncement of a new strategy focused on “the struggle to change the attitude of the Malays in line with the requirements of Islam in this modern age”.<sup>33</sup> Exemplifying UMNO’s decision to confront PAS on religiosity, Anwar Ibrahim, the charismatic leader of the Muslim youth movement, ABIM, was recruited into UMNO to bolster the Islamic credentials of the party.<sup>34</sup> This was followed by a host of initiatives to emphasise the Islamic character of the Mahathir administration. Certainly, at one level, one could suggest that with these internal changes both parties had begun to see the advantage of mobilising religion for political mileage.<sup>35</sup> Even then, such was the increasing attention paid to Islam by the Malay-based parties, it seemed increasingly so that “the Malay political world . . . will now be battling for more than control of governments and the machinery of state. What has become the objective of political struggle is the soul of the people themselves”.<sup>36</sup>

Scrutinising UMNO’s attempts to counter the burgeoning appeal of PAS during the Mahathir administration however, one notices two facets to the UMNO response. On the

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<sup>32</sup> Farish Noor, “Islam Vs Secularism?: The New Political Terrain in Malaysia and Indonesia”, *Asia Today*, 22 November 1999, p.3. During earlier administrations, especially that of Tunku Abdul Rahman, Islam was very much confined to the realm of personal belief and worship, and its only political utility came when it was mobilised as a counter-weight to communism.

<sup>33</sup> Taken from Mahathir’s speech at the 33<sup>rd</sup> UMNO General Assembly, Hilton Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, 10 September 1982.

<sup>34</sup> The role that Anwar played personally in countering PAS during his tenure with UMNO has been discussed in Kamarulnizam Abdullah, *The Politics of Islam in Contemporary Malaysia* (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2002), pp.183-189.

<sup>35</sup> This argument was made during the post-mortem of the 1999 General Elections, when commentators sought to explain the phenomenal increase in support for PAS. See, for example, Zakaria Haji Ahmad, Khoo Kay Kim, K.S. Nathan, Hari Singh, Meredith Weiss and John Funston, *Trends in Malaysia: Election Assessment* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Trends in Southeast Asia Series, 2000).

<sup>36</sup> Farish Noor, “Islam Vs Secularism?: The New Political Terrain in Malaysia and Indonesia”, *Asia Today*, 22 November 1999, p.4.

discursive terrain, defined by contending discourses over the role of Islam in political affairs, extensive media coverage, along with politicking by respective stakeholders, has fashioned the boundaries of political discourse between UMNO and PAS along issues such as the Islamic state, Syariah and Hudud laws, and even the matter of Islamic dress.<sup>37</sup> Here, one sees concerted attempts by UMNO to differentiate itself from PAS by portraying themselves as the “progressive” and “moderate” protectors of “correct” Islam, as opposed to the Islamic opposition who are “conservative”, “radical”, and even “deviationist” proponents of “wrong” Islam.<sup>38</sup>

Beyond this concerted attempt to distinguish its Islamic discourse from PAS however, UMNO has in fact given extensive institutional expression to Islamic orthodoxy. This tension is manifested primarily in the bureaucratisation of Islam, particularly at the level of state governance, as well as the friction within the party between certain UMNO leaders bent on de-emphasising Islamic orthodoxy, and the *Ulama* of the party, many of whom are found in the religious authorities of state governance, whose ideological predilections often echo those of the Islamic opposition. It is to this disjuncture that the study now turns.

### **The Discourse and Polemics of Islamic Politics**

Few would deny that UMNO and PAS have long been engaged in a war of words that has seen UMNO portray the Islamic party as its definitive enemy. UMNO has resorted to its control of the mainstream media to generate public apprehension towards the Islamic opposition. In an attempt to define the boundaries of Islamic politics in Malaysia, the UMNO-led government regularly presents PAS as “fanatics” and “radicals”, while portraying itself as the representatives of “modern” and “progressive” Islam. Indubitably, provocative remarks purportedly made by PAS leaders over the years, and amplified by the government-controlled media, have further engendered negative perceptions of PAS fundamentalism.

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<sup>37</sup> For a detailed study on the background of UMNO and PAS positions on these issues, see John Funston, *Malay Politics in Malaysia: A Study of UMNO and PAS* (Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980).

<sup>38</sup> These labels have been used regularly in the UMNO-controlled mainstream media to construct the boundaries of the UMNO versus PAS discursive debates. While the author is personally uncomfortable with such labelling, seeing that the labels themselves are pregnant with all sorts of meanings and implications that too often reflect misconceptions and ignorance of the complexities of Islam, these discursive debates must nevertheless be subjected to critical de-construction in order to understand their role in the definition of the terms and boundaries of the Islamic debate between UMNO and PAS.

Even so, UMNO's offensive against PAS has largely been the impetus of party president and Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, whom many see as the only UMNO leader, particularly since the incarceration of Anwar Ibrahim, with the audacity and legitimacy to challenge the Ulama of PAS.<sup>39</sup> To a large extent, this explains why UMNO leaders are still reluctant to engage their PAS nemeses in debate on religion.<sup>40</sup> Unlike his predecessors, who refrained from direct confrontation with PAS leaders over matters of religion, Mahathir Mohamad has played an especially significant personal role in defining the discursive boundaries between UMNO and PAS with his regular diatribes against the archaic, "holier-than-thou" leaders of the Islamic opposition.<sup>41</sup> In a recent, characteristically scathing criticism of the Islamists for example, Mahathir has called PAS a "deviationist" movement whose leaders are "headed for hell", and "un-Islamic" worshippers of a God who was a "thug".<sup>42</sup> Such has been the personalized assault on PAS that the Islamists themselves have responded by attacking Mahathir's own credibility as a Muslim leader, comparing him to an Egyptian Pharaoh and questioning his Islamic credentials in the wake of his audience with Pope John Paul II during a recent visit to Italy.<sup>43</sup> Given the government's control of the media however, PAS' ideological counter-attacks have received comparatively less publicity, and have been limited to their own propaganda outlets such as their popular bi-monthly magazine, *Harakah*.

Another common expression of UMNO's attempts at discrediting PAS as "fundamentalist Islamists" revolve around their appropriation of the much-maligned concept of *Jihad* (holy struggle).<sup>44</sup> UMNO has taken the Islamic opposition to task for their literal interpretation of *Jihad* that encourages violence and splits the Malay

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<sup>39</sup> Even Ulama aligned or sympathetic to UMNO have by and large refrained from taking PAS religious leaders head-on in debates over ideology and dogma.

<sup>40</sup> See "PAS minta biar UMNO dan PAS selesaikan soal Islam", *Harakah*, 5 December 2002.

<sup>41</sup> Mahathir himself is not a religious scholar, and has not been particularly prolific in terms of his writings on Islam. He makes several references to Islam in *The Malay Dilemma*, and attempts to illuminate, via numerous quotes from the Quran, the Islamic basis for many of his policies in *The Challenge*. See Mahathir Mohamad, *The Malay Dilemma* (Kuala Lumpur: Times Books International, 1970) and *The Challenge* (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 1997). For a critical study of Mahathir's personal philosophy of Islam, see Khoo Boo Teik, *Paradoxes of Mahathirism* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.163-186.

<sup>42</sup> "Mahathir: PAS leader will face hell", *Straits Times*, 19 June 2002.

<sup>43</sup> See "PAS hopes to bank on Mahathir again for votes", *Straits Times*, 31 May 2002.

<sup>44</sup> For an illuminating, albeit dated, study on the historical legacy of militarism in the concept of Jihad, see Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

community.<sup>45</sup> In contrast, UMNO has avoided focusing on the militaristic dimensions of the Muslim struggle, and instead has pedagogically articulated *Jihad* along the lines of socio-economic efforts to build and strengthen Islamic society and identity.<sup>46</sup> In an effort to substantiate its interpretation of Jihad, UMNO has ventured to publicise the party's economic and cultural activities associated with *Jihad* on its website.<sup>47</sup>

Beyond this discourse on Jihad, UMNO has also sought to attack PAS' policy on women, particularly playing up comments made by PAS spiritual leader Nik Aziz concerning women in the workforce despite the fact that more than half the PAS membership of 800 000 are women, recent pronouncements that the party would field female candidates at the next general elections, amendments in the PAS Constitution that allocated a vice-president position to the female membership, or the party's decision to increase the number of women in its Central Working Committee.<sup>48</sup>

UMNO's portrayal of PAS as a radical Islamic party whose policies are detrimental to the multi-ethnic harmony of Malaysia has taken on greater significance in recent times when global attention has been turned to focus on the notion of Muslim militancy (not to be mistaken with "fundamentalism"). Prior to the terrorist attacks of September 11, the Malaysian government had already made attempts at linking the Islamic opposition party to fringe militant Muslim groups.<sup>49</sup> The most recent of these attempts has seen UMNO link PAS to the KMM (*Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia*). During the government crackdown on the KMM, much was made of the revelation that members of the militant group had affiliations with PAS.<sup>50</sup> They included Nik Adli Nik Aziz, son of

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<sup>45</sup> See "Politik Maklumat Menghalalkan Cara, PAS Belakangkan Agama", [www.jihad-info.net](http://www.jihad-info.net), 16 January 2003. No doubt by portraying PAS as proponents of violence and radicalism through their dominance of the local media, UMNO has accrued much mileage in the international arena as an exemplary "moderate" Muslim state.

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion on this aspect of UMNO politico-religious philosophy, see Ibrahim Ahmad, *Konflik UMNO-PAS Dalam Isu Islamisasi* (Petaling Jaya: IBS Buku Sdn. Bhd, 1989), p.66-81.

<sup>47</sup> See [www.umno-online.com](http://www.umno-online.com) or [www.jihad-info.net](http://www.jihad-info.net).

<sup>48</sup> Maznah Mohamad, "PAS vs UMNO", *Aliran*, Issue 4 (2001); 7.

<sup>49</sup> This political strategy has been evident since 1980, when the Malaysian government sought to link PAS with a clandestine militant group that was responsible for desecrating Hindu temples and attacking police stations. See "The Chosen Ones Who Ran Amok", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 24 October 1980.

<sup>50</sup> "Terror investigations strain Malaysian politics", *BBC News*, 22 January 2002.

Kelantan Menteri Besar and PAS spiritual leader Nik Aziz Nik Mat.<sup>51</sup> Reports also identified Nik Azli as part of the Southeast Asian Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist network.<sup>52</sup>

The incumbent government later upped-the-ante after September 11 by embarking on an intensive television campaign which involved the running of prime-time commercials which interspersed images of PAS leaders with captions of American bombing of Afghanistan and the murder of a woman by Taliban extremists.<sup>53</sup> While the accompanying sound-bite made no mention of PAS, it was clear that the UMNO-led government was attempting to associate PAS rule with the situation in Afghanistan under the Taliban.<sup>54</sup> To some extent, UMNO's action found justification in PAS' own reluctance to take a firm position against Islamic terrorists. For instance, at the 2002 PAS General Assembly, members were unified in their criticism of Prime Minister Mahathir for characterising suicide bombers as terrorists. Instead, the party stalwarts unabashedly voiced their support for Palestinian suicide bombers, whom they eulogised as freedom fighters and martyrs.<sup>55</sup>

Yet while there appears to be increasing support from Malaysia's non-Muslim community for the government's crackdown on Muslim radicalism, the response from the Malay-Muslim majority has been conspicuously muted. Indeed, without substantial evidence, UMNO's allegations that PAS and the KMM are linked may well work against the government as it allows PAS to exploit this as an instance of UMNO's pandering to Western paranoia toward Islam, as well as another example of the arbitrary application of state power to advance the interests of the ruling regime.<sup>56</sup> There are further political overheads that the government establishment may have to bear in demonising the Islamic militants. Because the struggle of these militants has been portrayed (by them) as a Jihad, accurately or otherwise, the condemnation of their struggle might well bring the UMNO leadership's Islamist credentials into question.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> "Nik Aziz's son named in report", *The Star*, 2 January 2003.

<sup>52</sup> See "Indonesia Backgrounder: How the Jemaah Islamiyah Terrorist Network Operates", *International Crisis Group Report*, Jakarta, 11 December 2002.

<sup>53</sup> See "Malaysian row over T.V. propaganda", *BBC News*, 15 January 2002.

<sup>54</sup> It is interesting to note however, that while the Malaysian government has made much of the fact that PAS members were linked to international militant Islamic groups, the fact that at least two Malaysian Armed Forces officers were implicated for their role in supporting the activities of the Al-Qaeda terrorist network has gone relatively unnoticed.

<sup>55</sup> "PAS sticks to champion of Islam role", *Straits Times*, 8 June 2002.

<sup>56</sup> See "Getting Radical", *Time*, 10 September 2001.

<sup>57</sup> See "Jihad in a teacup", [www.malaysiakini.com](http://www.malaysiakini.com), 9 September 2001.

## UMNO, PAS and the War on Terrorism

International consternation for militant and radical Islam in the aftermath of the events of September 11 have nevertheless appeared to avail UMNO the opportunity to further influence domestic and international propaganda against the Islamic opposition, just as the Malaysian government has harnessed international opinion for its political struggle against PAS by portraying itself as a model “moderate” Muslim state.<sup>58</sup> This state of affairs has encouraged the opinion that the global war on terrorism has worked to UMNO’s favour against PAS.<sup>59</sup>

Yet as events unfolded, the apparent “advantage” offered by September 11 appeared more hypothetical than actual. What may have begun as sympathetic support for the American cause among Malaysians has transformed into suspicion of American unilateralism.<sup>60</sup> More noticeably, alarm and controversy surrounding PAS’ initial *faux pas* of vocally supporting the Taliban regime quickly whittled away as the terrorist attacks were followed by the asymmetrical American military campaign in Afghanistan<sup>61</sup>. Likewise, whatever domestic popularity accrued by the Mahathir administration through its support for Washington was neutralised by the immense unpopularity of the Afghanistan campaign among Malay-Muslims.<sup>62</sup> Further to that, the ultimatum issued by President Bush to the global community to choose to be either “for or against” the United States in the battle against terrorism, and Australia’s policy statement regarding Canberra’s decision to consider unilateral pre-emption of terrorist attacks which might emanate from within the borders of other states (which was tacitly supported by Washington), not only aggravated longstanding anti-Western sentiments in Malaysia, it

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<sup>58</sup> Most recently, this has included an attempt to associate acting PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang with Indonesian terrorists. See “PAS wants Hadi’s case in court once probe is over”, [www.malaysiakini.com](http://www.malaysiakini.com), 9 February 2003.

<sup>59</sup> See for example, “Weakening of Opposition Politics in Malaysia”, *Straits Times*, 27 November 2001; “PAS’ Wrong Foot Forward”, *Straits Times*, 17 July 2002.

<sup>60</sup> Even non-Muslim Malaysians have spoken out against American policies towards Muslim states, including Afghanistan under Taliban rule.

<sup>61</sup> It should be noted that soon after the party’s initial response, PAS quickly moved to condemn the terrorist attacks. See “Interviu Wartawan AFP dengan Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat melatih rakyat takutkan Tuhan”, *Detik Daily*, [www.detik.daily.tripod.com](http://www.detik.daily.tripod.com), 17 September 2001. Not surprisingly, this went unreported in the mainstream news media.

<sup>62</sup> Farish Noor, “Globalisation, Resistance and the Discursive Politics of Terror, Post-September 11” in Kumar Ramakrishna and Andrew Tan (eds), *The New Terrorism: Anatomy, Trends, and Counter-Strategies* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2002), p.170.

also bought PAS crucial time to recuperate from earlier diplomatic lapses. Indeed, the domestic political pressures generated by these developments that fell beyond the control of the Malaysian government soon emerged as unanticipated “collateral damage” from the policy of cooperation with the United States in the battle against global terrorism<sup>63</sup>. The extension of the war against terrorism to Iraq by the Bush administration has further alienated the Malay-Muslim community. Hence, while the Mahathir administration allowed itself to be identified with the global war on terrorism in the early days after September 11, it has found it increasingly difficult to sustain this support in light of the manner in which the words of war against terror appear increasingly to translate into deeds of confrontation against Islam.

In sum, while UMNO’s strategy of orchestrating a public discourse targeted at depicting PAS as radical Islamists may have heightened apprehension towards the latter among certain quarters of the non-Malay community, the success of this strategy in turning Malay hearts and minds away from PAS is far less certain. The fact that UMNO has failed at several attempts to influence Malay rulers to delete the word “Islam” from the name of PAS is telling of popular perceptions of the Islamic credentials of the opposition party. Such a strategy has created three problems in particular. First, the use of the entire mechanism of the state to demonise PAS could well have the unintended effect of generating greater sympathy from a Malay community to whom labels such as “fundamentalist” and “extremist” may not necessarily spark consternation against PAS, particularly when “fundamentalists” and “extremists” have framed their actions in terms of the protection of Islam.<sup>64</sup> Second, PAS itself has rebutted UMNO’s attempt to discredit the party by introducing a counter-discourse that characterises UMNO as an “unIslamic” party plagued with rampant corruption and progenitors of unjust authoritarian security laws. In so doing, PAS has capitalized on prevailing public discontent against corporate bailouts, financial scandals involving government agencies, ill-treatment of political detainees, and the state’s manipulation of the legal system to secure the party’s interests as evidence both of UMNO’s disregard for Islamic principles of justice and the need to institute Syariah law to eradicate these problems. Third, the anticipated political transformation in the aftermath of September 11 has not gone according to the UMNO script. Malaysian humanitarianism has gradually transformed into suspicion of, and to

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<sup>63</sup> A.B. Shamsul, “Malaysia’s International Role Post-September 11”, *IDSS Commentaries*, November 2002.

<sup>64</sup> See “The Mousedeer, The ‘Taliban’, and a Sorry State”, *Aliran*, Vol. 22, No.7 (2002).



some extent outrage at, Washington's high-handed foreign policy position towards the Muslim world.<sup>65</sup> The prevalence of this sentiment among the Malay-Muslim community has certainly created a foreign policy dilemma for the Malaysian government.

### **UMNO's "Islamisation" of Malaysia**

While scholars are right to highlight the "discursive" nature of the UMNO-PAS conflict, there is also an element of institutional representation to this contestation that should not be dismissed.<sup>66</sup> In fact, one could argue that the matter of institutional representation, manifested in the bureaucratisation of Islam and the enactment and implementation of narrow Islamic policies by UMNO-run state and local governments, threatens an even more fundamental and far-reaching politicisation of Islam in Malaysia, where UMNO's active attempts to give institutional expression to a more fundamentalist Islamist ideology in response to the PAS challenge brings the party's policies dangerously close to the narrow conservatism it has demonised so vehemently in the discursive arena.

Islamic legislation has been a part of the Malaysian legal system for some time, and because its formulation is the prerogative of state governments, the Federal government has less control over Islamic legislation than is often thought. This fact is significant as it effectively curtails the influence that the political centre can exercise over the kind of Islamic policies tabled or passed in Malaysia. The implementation of Islamic laws however, is another matter, and has to be reconciled with the fact that Constitutional law remains the law of the land. While the administration of Syariah law, which remained the cornerstone of an alternative legal system left untouched by British colonialism, fell under the purview of religious courts under the authority of the Sultan, it remains subordinate to Constitutional law in many instances.<sup>67</sup> As suggested earlier, this explains the Federal government's ability to prevent the implementation of Hudud penal code in Terengganu, despite the fact that the Terengganu state legislature had passed the bill for its institution.

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<sup>65</sup> In particular for Malaysia, the irony that Washington lauded Malaysian support for the war on terrorism while listing Malaysia as a "terrorist-risk" state will not be lost.

<sup>66</sup> The UMNO-PAS discursive debate has been the subject of numerous studies and commentaries by accomplished scholars and columnists such as, among others, Farish Noor, Patricia Martinez, Maznah Mohamed and A.B. Shamsul.

<sup>67</sup> For a study on the details of the relationship between the two complementary legal systems in Malaysia, see Hamid Jusoh, *The Position of Islamic Law in the Malaysian Constitution with Special Reference to the Conversion Case in Family Law* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1991).

As previously noted, a strong impetus to greater institutionalisation and bureaucratisation of Islam under the auspices of UMNO has been the increasing popularity of PAS. Correspondingly, in order to educate the Malay population in the direction of “progressive” Islam, the Mahathir administration embarked on initiatives such as the establishment of the International Islamic University and the Islamic Research Institute. An Islamic banking and finance system was also introduced. At the governmental level, an Islamic department, JAKIM (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia or Department for the Advancement of Islam) was established under the auspices of the Prime Minister’s Office, equipped with its own Minister and secretariat. While the Mahathir administration’s Islamisation initiatives have been directed at countering PAS’ influence, when they begin themselves to take on exclusivist and narrow permutations, these initiatives become a matter of concern in the context of the further intensification of the politicisation and manipulation of Islam. Central to this concern is the bureaucratisation of Islam. Despite concerns expressed by the Malaysian government for the inordinate number of Islamic studies graduates in Malaysia, for some time now Federal and state bureaucracies have followed a policy of preference for applicants with strong religious background. The Malaysian cabinet even attempted to enact a bill to make the study of Islamic civilisations a compulsory component of undergraduate education.<sup>68</sup> Knowingly or otherwise, UMNO’s bureaucratisation of Islam has in effect put in place the infrastructure of an Islamic state run by “state-sponsored firebrands” and a Muslim intelligentsia sympathetic to the government.<sup>69</sup>

Not surprisingly, such government-sanctioned policies resulted in a backlash from non-Muslim communities suspicious of government attempts to impose Islamic values on them.<sup>70</sup> Legislation over the issue of religious proselytisation clearly illustrated this partiality. While the Constitution ensures the right of every person to “profess and practice his religion”, only Muslims are allowed to propagate their belief.<sup>71</sup> Beyond that,

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<sup>68</sup> The bill was only withdrawn after protests by non-Muslim communities.

<sup>69</sup> “When State-sponsored firebrands are just as confusing to Muslims”, *New Straits Times*, 19 September 2002.

<sup>70</sup> “How far should Islamic law go?”, *Sunday Times*, 21 August 1997. Under pressure from non-Muslims, the government later rescinded the original bill and replaced it with one that called for the study of “Asian Civilisations”.

<sup>71</sup> This is in accordance with the Federal Constitution, article II(4), which permits legislation to be passed to “control and restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among the persons professing the religion of Islam”.

the Malaysian government has itself actively engaged in *Dakwah* or proselytising to non-Muslims through the establishment of Perkim (Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia or Malaysian Muslim Welfare Organisation). This has included the expansion of Islamic programmes over public radio and television, more stringent legislation controlling the building of non-Muslim religious buildings, and the curtailment of land plots for non-Muslim burial sites.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the essence of popular concern, particularly from the non-Muslim population, is not so much with the introduction of Islamic institutions and practices, but the hegemony of Islam in public life in Malaysia.<sup>73</sup>

While UMNO-run state governments have not pursued the implementation of Hudud laws as earnestly as PAS, they have however advanced and implemented Islamic policies that perpetuate perceptions of UMNO's politically-driven intensification of the Islamic agenda. This has been an especially trenchant phenomenon at the ground level when one considers state religious organizations and their interpretation and implementation of Islamic legislation. This in turn has created fissures between party rank and file (including Ulama) engaged in everyday contests with PAS representatives for popular support, and members of the UMNO leadership, who have sought to tone down their zeal. An instance of Federal-state tension that sparked much interest and controversy was the arrest under the Selangor Islamic Criminal Enactment of 1995 of three Malay women for participating in a beauty contest in June 1997. Following this, another two women were arrested in Federal Territory under similar legislation, while scheduled public concerts of local music group KRU were banned. In the aftermath of the arrests, comments by the Prime Minister and deputy Prime Minister calling for caution against extremism among state religious officials in implementing *Syariah* law were publicly rebuffed by Selangor Mufti Ishak Baharuddin, who opined that "if we regard everything as extreme, then things will be easier, then no enforcement can be conducted . . . . If something is wrong, it is wrong. If beauty contest is wrong, it is wrong".<sup>74</sup> Of interest also was the fact that a surprisingly large number of Malays supported the actions of the

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<sup>72</sup> Harold Crouch, *Government and Society in Malaysia* (New South Wales: Allen and Unwin, 1996), pp.168-169.

<sup>73</sup> Further examples of the encroachment of bureaucratized Islam in Malaysian society have been given in Patricia Martinez, "The Islamic State or the State of Islam in Malaysia", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.23, No.3 (December 2001).

<sup>74</sup> "How far should Islamic law go", *Straits Times*, 22 August 1997.

JAIS (Selangor State Religious Department) in detaining the women.<sup>75</sup> Not surprisingly, this was not reported on by the mainstream media. As suggested above, this incident was merely symptomatic of the increasing assertiveness of Islamic identity among the Malay populace and the political pressures this has asserted on UMNO, spawning not only a more assertive cultural expression of Islamic consciousness manifested most vividly in the popularity of Islamic dress, but also in legislation that have impinged upon the cultural space of the non-Muslim community.<sup>76</sup>

More recent concerns revolved around the move by elements within UMNO to formulate a Faith Protection Bill (known as the Aqidah or Faith Act) in November 2000 legislating against apostasy, similar to a bill passed in June 2000 in the UMNO-controlled state of Perlis. This followed on the back of earlier attempts by then PAS deputy president Abdul Hadi Awang to obtain parliamentary passage of a bill making apostasy an offence among Muslims in the Federal Territory punishable by death. While the UMNO motion was less severe, it was, again, symptomatic of the extent to which it is prepared to go in defending its Islamic credentials against the Islamic party. Such pressures have been clearly illustrated in the course of debate over the implementation of Hudud law in Terengganu, when four UMNO assemblymen chose to abstain rather than vote against PAS.<sup>77</sup> More recently, in response to Prime Minister Mahathir's provocative declaration that Malaysia "is already an Islamic state", the Selangor state government had organised a seminar entitled "Understanding Malaysia as an Islamic State", where UMNO state officials had proposed constitutional amendments to declare that the Quran and Sunnah be sources of Federal law.<sup>78</sup>

### **Is Malaysia already an Islamic State?**

In view of the intensification of Islamisation in the wake of UMNO-PAS rivalry, some have construed the recent declaration by Prime Minister Mahathir, that Malaysia

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<sup>75</sup> "Stuck in an Islamic Time Capsule", [www.muslimedia.com/archives/sea98/capsule.htm](http://www.muslimedia.com/archives/sea98/capsule.htm), August 1-15, 1997. The report also noted that the women "had admitted that it (their arrest) was a blessing in disguise and they now realised the meaning of dignity in Islam".

<sup>76</sup> This has included local policies that, among other things, prohibit non-halal foods in certain school canteens, bans on signboards associated with alcohol in certain states, denial of permits to celebrate Chinese cultural festivals in some schools.

<sup>77</sup> See Karim Raslan, "For Malaysia's sake, reclaim the debate on Islam from PAS", *Business Times*, 15 July 2002.

<sup>78</sup> This observation was made by DAP stalwart Lim Kit Siang in "UMNO-PAS Islamic competition more far-reaching consequences than 2003 budget", [www.dapmalaysia.org/english/lks/sep02/lks1866.htm](http://www.dapmalaysia.org/english/lks/sep02/lks1866.htm).

already was an “Islamic state”, as an attempt to end the debate over the status of Islam in Malaysia.<sup>79</sup> From a historical vantage, Mahathir’s pronouncement departed substantially from Malaysia’s first Prime Minister and UMNO party president Tunku Abdul Rahman, who countered PAS pressure for the formation of an Islamic state in Malaysia in the 1950s with his oft-quoted response that such a move entailed “the drowning of every non-Muslim in Malaya”. Despite the fact that Mahathir had on previous occasions described Malaysia as an “Islamic country”, his recent pronouncement that Malaysia “was already an Islamic state” marked a fundamental watershed in Islamist politics. Paradoxically however, while Mahathir had hoped to truncate the Islamisation process with this declaration, in truth, he had intensified it.<sup>80</sup>

The concept of the Islamic state lies at the heart of Islamic political philosophy, and has been constructed by reformists such as Hassan al-Banna, Syed Qutb, and Maulana Maududi as a necessary panacea to the ills of Western society and influence.<sup>81</sup> Central to the conception of an Islamic state was the strict implementation of Islamic *Syariah* law.<sup>82</sup> Insofar as Malaysia is concerned, the obvious problem surrounding the implementation of an Islamic state is demographical - Muslims constitute barely a majority of the Malaysian population.<sup>83</sup> Hence, any discussion of an Islamic state in Malaysia will inevitably require the consideration of a *Dhimma* (writ of protection) model of pluralism, where minorities are given some separate, usually subordinate, category of citizenship.<sup>84</sup> Beyond that, however, lies another conundrum pertaining to the contradictions that confront the Malay-Muslim community itself over the issue of the Islamic state. On the one hand, it is well documented that many Muslims in Malaysia, including UMNO’s religio-political ideologues such as Mahathir and Abdullah Badawi, question the relevance of an Islamic

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<sup>79</sup> See Terence Netto, “Islamic State Discourse: Chops and Turns”, *Aliran*, Issue 2 (2002).

<sup>80</sup> See “PM defends ‘Islamic state’ declaration”, [www.malaysiakini.com](http://www.malaysiakini.com), 17 September 2002.

<sup>81</sup> The doctrines of these fundamentalist ideologues in essence carried on from the work of Muhammad Abduh and more so his disciple Rashid Rida, whom many consider the founding theoretician of the Islamic state in its modern permutation. See Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1982), pp.104-160.

<sup>82</sup> For a study of their ideologies, see John Esposito, *Islam and Politics* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1984), pp.131-151.

<sup>83</sup> That said, it must be acknowledged that the Muslim population in Malaysia has been increasing just as non-Muslim numbers have decreased.

<sup>84</sup> Strictly speaking, from the example of Medina, the *Dhimma* model permitted “People of the Book”, namely Jews and Christians, to co-exist as *Dhimmi* (protected persons) alongside the majority Muslim community. This however, entailed a status of subordination. See Bat Ye’or, *Islam and Dhimmitude*. Translated by David Littman (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001). The strict application of this model in Malaysia however, would be problematic given the fact that non-Muslims include Hindus, Taoists, Buddhists, and Animists, who would not be considered “People of the Book”.

state in contemporary times if it is conceptualised as the re-creation of a polity akin to Medina during the *Hijrah*, or even the Caliphates that inherited its traditions. Yet on the other hand, the Muslim faith sets no clear boundary between the secular and the sacred, and Muslims uncomfortable with modernisation and westernisation will most certainly look to the Islamic state as a recourse, and see it as an alluring goal to strive towards.

Mahathir's announcement on 29 September 2001, curiously enough made at the general assembly of the Chinese-dominated Gerakan party, riled some non-Malay sentiments in Malaysia.<sup>85</sup> Further, owing to the timing of his announcement (not long after September 11), Mahathir's declaration also sparked concern among many Western governments.<sup>86</sup> Consequently, some have suggested that the claim was "aimed at depoliticising and indeed negating any attempt from sections of the Malay-Muslim community to label the US attack on Afghanistan as a universal attack on Muslims or Islam".<sup>87</sup> Not surprisingly, PAS quickly condemned the announcement as hypocritical and an empty-attempt at rhetorical brinkmanship.<sup>88</sup>

At first glance, Mahathir's declaration does appear to have pre-empted PAS and allowed UMNO to seize the initiative. Yet this claim that Malaysia is already an Islamic state needs to be viewed in context. First, this "Islamic state" that Mahathir implies Malaysia already is, is essentially a construction of his own administration, and is a result of his Islamisation programme over the past 20 years. Concomitantly, the immediate question is whether it will survive its progenitor. While many have highlighted the impressive Islamic credentials of his deputy Abdullah Badawi, the matter of whether he can carry the fight to PAS has yet to be determined.<sup>89</sup> The possibility of intra-party politicking after Mahathir's departure from the helm, which would without doubt threaten

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<sup>85</sup> See Mahathir Mohamad, address delivered at *Majlis Perasmian Persidangan Perwakilan ke-30 Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur, 29 September 2001. Public responses were featured in "Public Response to the 'Islamic State' Poser", *Aliran*, September 2001. It was noticeable however, that UMNO's non-Muslim allies remained conspicuously silent in response to what appeared to be a significant announcement.

<sup>86</sup> These concerns were more a product of ignorance on the part of Western governments and leaders over the various shades of Islamic politics and general, if ungrounded, concern for the concept of an "Islamic State" than any real sense of transformation in Malaysia's political trajectory as a result of Mahathir's announcement.

<sup>87</sup> A.B. Shamsul, "Beyond 11 September: A Malaysian Response", *Nordic Newsletter of Asian Studies*, Vol.4 (2001).

<sup>88</sup> See "Megara Islam ala UMNO nafikan hak rakyat", *Harakah Daily*, 2 October 2001.

<sup>89</sup> See "Malaysia: Abdullah Badawi – A Model Muslim?", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 September 2002.

Abdullah Badawi's position, can certainly not be dismissed.<sup>90</sup> Here, despite his credible performance thus far, Badawi will no doubt be hampered by his lack of Mahathir's stature and legitimacy; nor will he enjoy the kind of support-base that Mahathir does.

Second, while Mahathir maintains that Malaysia can be an Islamic state without the implementation of Islamic law, this contention goes against the grain of most theories of the Islamic state, where the general consensus is that Syariah law lies at its heart.<sup>91</sup> To that effect, the Islamists can contend (and rightly so in accordance to Islamic political philosophy) that unless Mahathir calls for the institution of Syariah law, his pronouncement is groundless and inconsistent.<sup>92</sup>

Third, Mahathir himself has, throughout much of his tenure as Prime Minister and UMNO President, decried suggestions that Malaysia be transformed into an Islamic state<sup>93</sup>. As recent as April 2001, Mahathir had maintained that "Malaysia will not become an Islamic state" because "any attempts to enforce Islamic laws where the non-Muslims form the majority would create problems"<sup>94</sup>. Mahathir's *volte face* thence, contradicts UMNO's longstanding position and threatens to alienate the *Barisan Nasional's* non-Malay support base, especially if support for the ruling coalition in the forthcoming national elections is construed as endorsement of Mahathir's pronouncement. Moreover by shifting UMNO's position from "Malaysia cannot be an Islamic state" to "Malaysia already is an Islamic state" as nonchalantly as he did, Mahathir's statement might well open UMNO to further attacks by the Islamist opposition.

### **Conclusion: Has UMNO lost the plot?**

PAS has already made it clear that Islam will remain the pillar of its counter-hegemonic discourse and political strategy, and that the main target of its offensive would

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<sup>90</sup> Joseph Liow, "Don't write PAS' obituary just yet", *Straits Times*, 24 December 2002.

<sup>91</sup> This view has been expressed by theorists of the Islamic state such as Rashid Rida and Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani. For a comprehensive survey on the theories of the Islamic state, see Suha Taji-Farouki, "Islamic State Theories and Contemporary Realities" in Abdel Salam Sidahmed and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds), *Islamic Fundamentalism* (Boulder C.O.: Westview Press, 1996).

<sup>92</sup> In fact, PAS has already made this argument in response to an earlier comment by Mahathir that Malaysia was a model "Islamic country". See "Malaysia Bukan Negara Islam", *Harakah*, 28 December 1999.

<sup>93</sup> See for example, "Malaysia Negara Sekular", *Utusan Malaysia*, 10 February 1983.

<sup>94</sup> "Mahathir: Malaysia will not become an Islamic state", [www.asiafeatures.com](http://www.asiafeatures.com), 30 April 2001.

be UMNO's "weak Islamic credentials".<sup>95</sup> There are unmistakably glaring problems confronting PAS' own religio-political dialectics that this paper has merely touched on, such as its nebulous conceptions of the Islamic state and its relevance to contemporary Malaysia, its tendency towards uncompromising behaviour, at least insofar as the media has portrayed it, and its intolerance of debate with views and perspectives originating from different reference points, as evidenced in its reluctance to acknowledge the need to expand the Islamic discursive space in a democratic fashion. Nevertheless, the primary concern of this study has been UMNO's response to PAS. To that effect, it appears that except for the likes of Mahathir Mohamad, and former deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, few from the UMNO fold have displayed either the political gumption or intellectual wherewithal to exploit these weaknesses. In fact, as this study on Islamisation in Malaysia has shown, voices of restraint within UMNO, which these leaders epitomise, have paradoxically enough been themselves hamstrung by the conservative forces from within their own party that have been wary of overtly challenging PAS on Islamic issues. In fact, some within UMNO even hold to the view that being critical of the Ulama of PAS is tantamount to being anti-Islam.

With the political demise of Anwar Ibrahim and the unproven leadership credentials of Abdullah Badawi, Mahathir Mohamad remains, for better or worse, the lone UMNO willing to engage the PAS *Ulama* in Islamic counter-discourse. Even then, the aggressive line that Mahathir has taken against PAS by labelling its leaders "radicals" in the hope that the global tide of anti-fundamentalism, whatever that term may be taken to represent, will sweep them away, or by dismissing them as irrational fanatics to be confined to the peripheries of Malaysian politics, has barely dented the popularity of the Islamic opposition.

More importantly, while UMNO has bandied a range of labels in order to demonise PAS and the Islamists' version of political Islam, elements within the party have themselves overseen the institutional expression and bureaucratisation of Islamic orthodoxy in a manner that echoes the very agendas favoured by the "fundamentalist" Islamic opposition. By responding to the pressing need to display their Islamic credentials in this manner, it is clear that a disjuncture exists between the party leadership, who have

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<sup>95</sup> "PAS endorses vision for an Islamic Malaysia", *Straits Times*, 3 June 2002.



sought to present and defend a restrained conception of political Islam, and the rank and file, many of whom have seen a need to validate their Islamic identity in the face of the challenge of PAS. Concomitantly, some astute scholars of Islam in Malaysia have perceived that, “as the two parties continue to up the stakes in the Islamisation race between themselves, they have effectively blurred the distinction between their respective approaches and interpretations, leading to a fusion of visions and objectives where PAS and UMNO’s stand on Islam seem almost identical”<sup>96</sup>. Given this discrepancy in the UMNO-led government’s response to PAS’ religio-political dialectic, it is not surprising that UMNO has not been able to communicate a coherent message regarding the party’s commitment to “moderate” Islam. To both the scholar and casual observer, this dichotomy is fickle at best, hypocritical at worst. Either way, this inconsistency has placed UMNO in a position of disadvantage in the face of the apparent fidelity of PAS toward political Islam.

In order to counter the challenge from the Islamists, the UMNO leadership will have to deprive PAS of ideological fodder for its political cannons. This entails not merely demonising them and plotting an alternative discourse focused on concepts of “moderation” and “progress” as Mahathir has laboured to do, but also deliberate attempts to internalise this counter-discourse into a new generation of UMNO leadership in order to re-orientate the “Islamisation race” in its favour. Several considerations are consequential in this respect.

First, UMNO must realise that whatever the ideological polemics involved, PAS has in effect profited from UMNO’s increasing alienation from its main support-base, the Malay-Muslim community, particularly when issues of corruption, cronyism, and authoritarianism are raised and related to Islam.<sup>97</sup> Efforts must thence be made to address their own “credibility deficit” in order to counter PAS propaganda.<sup>98</sup>

Second, religious education will have to be carefully monitored, and if necessary revamped, in order to reconfigure the ideological underpinnings of politicised Islam in

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<sup>96</sup> Farish Noor, *PAS post-Fadzil Noor: Future Directions and Prospects* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Trends in Southeast Asia, July 2002), p.15.

<sup>97</sup> From the author’s observations in the course of fieldwork during the buildup to the 1999 General Election, which included attendance at several PAS *ceramah*, this was certainly a key strategy of the PAS campaign.

<sup>98</sup> This term was coined by Farish Noor. See “Malaysian PM claims “Islamic State”, Feature Reports – [www.abc.net.au/religion/news/fr-malaysia.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/religion/news/fr-malaysia.htm).

Malaysia. Scholars of Islamisation in Malaysia for instance, have highlighted the Malaysian government's ignorance about the number of Malay students who have travelled to foreign lands and exposed themselves to reformist Islamic ideologies that teach a rejection of modernism and the pluralism of ideas and identities.<sup>99</sup> Domestically as well, the Mahathir administration has recently moved to curtail the influence of the PAS version of literal Islam by cutting government funding to *Sekolah Agama Rakyat* (Private Religious Schools)<sup>100</sup>. Further to that, the government will have to present an alternative model of Islamic education that focuses on building a strong religious foundation based on openness and receptivity to alternative interpretations of Islam based on *Itjihad* (independent judgement) to take the Malay-Muslim community's understanding of religion beyond that of Arab Islamic orthodoxy.<sup>101</sup> On this note, the role of *Dakwah* (missionary) organisations might also take on greater importance, not just in educating the Muslim population on a less literal and more progressive understanding of Islam, but also in influencing non-Muslim perceptions of Islam in Malaysia.

Third, as political Islam is ultimately as much a political as it is religious and doctrinal phenomenon, party unity is paramount to UMNO's political riposte against the Islamist opposition. Historically, PAS has profited from UMNO internal strife.<sup>102</sup> The paper has already highlighted the contending perspectives on Islamisation between leaders and the rank and file, in particular the Ulama of the party. Such differences have been detrimental to the party's cohesion on political Islam, causing friction within the party and confusion for its support base. In order to counteract the trend of Islamisation that has seen the Arab-influenced literal and exclusivist interpretation of Islam come into political vogue, the ruling party will have to put its own house in order so as to project a united, coherent alternative vision of the role of Islam in Malaysian society. This is of especial

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<sup>99</sup> This point was highlighted by Farish Noor during a presentation on "Islam in Malaysia" at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Singapore, 19 September 2001.

<sup>100</sup> See "Government cuts funding to private religious schools", *Straits Times*, 14 January 2003.

<sup>101</sup> The failures of the state Islamic administrative and educational institutions in performing this role are discussed in Farish Noor, "Panopticon Revisited", [www.malaysiakini.com](http://www.malaysiakini.com), 9 November 2002. It is necessary to note here that as to the concept of *Itjihad* however, the notion of independent judgement has also been a matter of great debate. Some reformist Islamic scholars for example, have suggested that *Itjihad* demands "qualifications" (such as deep understanding of the Quran and Hadith), and not every Muslim can exercise "independent judgement". For an exposition on these perspectives of *Itjihad*, see S.M.A. Sayeed, *The Myth of Authenticity: A Study in Islamic Fundamentalism* (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1999), pp.157-190.

<sup>102</sup> In 1990, PAS benefited from serious internal bickering within UMNO to whitewash UMNO in Kelantan with the help of Semangat 46, a breakaway party from UMNO. Likewise in 1999, PAS capitalised on internal dissent in UMNO toward the treatment of former party deputy-president and deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim to retain Kelantan and also win the Terengganu state.

consequence in regard to Islamisation policies. The state-sanctioned Islamisation programme of the 1980s and 1990s was originally driven by a perceived need to advance an alternative interpretation of Islamisation that brought Islam in line with modernity, progress and national development. Yet as Islamisation spills over into public space, the danger of over-zealous implementation resulting in Islamisation policies associated with conservative and exclusivist tendencies that threaten the traditional multi-ethnic and “moderate” fabric of Malaysian Islam, as some UMNO-sanctioned policies appear to reflect, will be detrimental to Malaysia. If they are to regain lost ground from PAS, UMNO will have to articulate its interests in an Islamic language through a credible representation of Islam that is consistent in rhetoric and practice.

Finally, on the foreign policy front, the UMNO-led Malaysian government will have to tread carefully the ground between overt support for the Washington-orchestrated global war on terrorism (which is increasingly shaping up to be a war between the West and Islam) and condemnation for militant Islamists who subscribe to a narrow interpretation of Islam that focuses on violence. To be certain, much of American foreign policy, particularly towards the Arab world, continue to provide fodder for proponents of conservative and reactionary Islamic ideologies. In this regard, the UMNO-led government will need to remain alert to the potential political costs of support for the American position on issues such as Iraq (which rightfully or otherwise, has been tied by the Muslim world to the question of Palestine), or American “approval” of their hardline policy towards suspected Muslim militants in Malaysia, which could further perpetuate the appeal of narrow ideologies and threaten UMNO’s attempt to re-invent political Islam in Malaysia.

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