Islam, the state and politics in Malaysia

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Muslims account for approximately 60 percent of the population of Malaysia. Among Malaysia’s many ethnic groups, Malays are the largest followers of the Islamic faith. In fact, Malay identity is legally tied to Islam, for according to the Malaysian constitution, a ‘Malay’ is ‘a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom . . .’.

The imbricated nature of religious and ethnic identity, and the persistence of the racial narrative in Malaysia’s social, economic, and political spheres, has meant that the factor of Islam has enjoyed considerable influence and attention in Malaysian politics. This influence can be traced back to the rise of anti-colonialism in British Malaya, when Muslim groups such as Hizbul Muslimin played a significant role in mobilising opposition to the colonial administration after the Pacific War. Following decolonisation in 1957, Islamist forces formed the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party, which eventually morphed into Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, better known by its acronym, PAS. Since 1955, when PAS managed to secure the first opposition representation in the federal government dominated by UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) through the Alliance coalition, rivalry between UMNO (also a Malay-Muslim based party) and PAS has become a definitive (and mostly divisive) feature of politics in Muslim-majority Malaysia. At the same time, growing Islamic consciousness and piety among the Muslim population have also witnessed the emergence of a host of Islamic civil society movements that have further animated political Islam in Malaysia, thereby fuelling the intensification of Islamist discourse in the country. In Malaysia’s federal system of government, matters of religion come under the jurisdiction of state authorities, and shari’a is accorded the foremost role in managing the personal affairs of Muslims. This has created controversy in recent years, however, as the scope of religious authority appears to have expanded at the expense of the constitutionally enshrined right to religious freedom.

The evolution of Islamism in post-colonial Malaysia

While ‘Islamism’ remains in some respects a contested term, there is broad consensus among social science scholars on one point: it is a political ideology premised on the primacy of Islam as an organising principle for government. In the case of Malaysia, Islamism is most profoundly...
expressed in political competition between key Malay-Muslim parties, UMNO and PAS, and more broadly, in the increasingly exclusivist social and political discourse in the country that has caused great consternation to the sizeable non-Muslim minority.

PAS was officially formed prior to Malaysian independence, on 24 November 1951. 2 Ironically, PAS was initially a part of UMNO, which was established in 1946 by the traditional Malay nationalist movement in an attempt to unite a hitherto disparate Malay-Muslim community in preparation for independence. The genesis of PAS came about when clerics, dissatisfied with the role that Islam was accorded by UMNO politicians of that generation, left the party to form another. Yet such was the close proximity between PAS and UMNO in PAS’s formative years, its members enjoyed the privilege of holding dual party membership. It was only under its second president, Dr Abbas Alias, that PAS was officially registered as a political party on 31 May 1955 in order to contest federal elections, and ties with UMNO were officially severed. Once PAS became fully independent from UMNO, it intended to serve as a direct challenge for the Malay-Muslim vote bank (Funston 1976). From then on, the core objective of PAS, from which it has never wavered, is the creation of an Islamic governing structure in Malaysia by elevating what the party perceives to be the purely symbolic status of Islam accorded in the Malaysian Constitution to a more substantive and operational plane. 3 Put differently, PAS was the first proponent of the cause of the transformation of Malaysia into an Islamic state. 4

In its formative years, PAS advocated the creation of an Islamic state in only the most general of terms. In addition to the religious aspects of its agenda, strong emphasis was initially placed on what former PAS president Burhanuddin al-Helmy described as ‘Malay nationalism with Islamic ambitions’ (Syed 2002: 85). 5 The ethno-nationalist ethos behind PAS’s early Islamist discourse was driven by what the party perceived to be UMNO’s selling out of Malay interests to the ethnic minorities, in particular the ethnic Chinese, in return for political power.

PAS’s initial foray into mainstream politics was unimpressive – it won a solitary parliamentary seat in the first federal elections in July 1955. However, after that performance, the party’s leadership concentrated attention on creating a more robust organisational structure, expanding the geographical reach of the party, increasing its number of members, exploiting new means for the dissemination of the party’s agenda and message, and better integrating religious and nationalist agendas. This expanded focus resulted in PAS’s first substantial electoral victory in the 1959 election, which saw the party gain control of the state assemblies in the north-eastern Peninsular Malaysian states of Kelantan and Terengganu – where the electorate was largely traditional, conservative, and Malay – as well as thirteen national parliamentary seats. With this election, PAS made history by becoming the first Islamist party to come to power (albeit as a state government in a federal system) by electoral means in Southeast Asia, and one of the first in the entire Muslim world. PAS met with mixed results in the 1964 general elections, when it lost the Terengganu state assembly even as it saw its share of the popular vote in the northern Malay states increase. 6

The 1969 election yielded similar results despite the fact that PAS won almost half the Malay-Muslim popular vote nationally. The suspension of parliament from May 1969 until 1972 due to the rise of ethnic tensions, coupled with the highly personalised and authoritarian style of leadership under then PAS president Asri Muda, led PAS to join its rival UMNO and other parties in a coalition as a means of consolidating the political power of the Malay community. Prior to joining the coalition, there had been much debate within PAS about whether or not to cooperate with UMNO, given that many within PAS fundamentally disagreed with UMNO’s secular approach to governance and politics. Under the leadership
of Asri Muda, a staunch Malay ethno-nationalist, PAS’s own agenda had begun drifting away from Islamism towards that of ethnic politics, which alienated the religious component of the party’s traditional base of support. This alienation was further amplified by the rise of Islamic consciousness within the Malay-Muslim community as a whole, as a consequence of the global Islamic resurgence in the 1970s. Despite residual differences between UMNO and PAS, both sought accommodation for reasons of political expediency. For its part, PAS’s leadership was able to justify compromise with its political rival after identifying its priorities (purportedly, Malay-Muslim unity) and possible areas of shared interests with UMNO.

While participation in the coalition brought some benefits, many of PAS’s more substantive Islamic proposals, such as amendments to parts of the Constitution in order to make it more ‘Islamic’, were rejected outright by UMNO, leaving PAS dissatisfied with its role in the governing coalition (Liow 2009: 31–33). PAS’s first power-sharing experiment unravelled in 1977 when it was unceremoniously ejected from the coalition by UMNO due to internal disagreements. The internal disagreements which forced PAS from the ruling coalition also caused a split within the party leadership, with many PAS leaders and members joining the ranks of a new, offshoot Malay-Muslim party, Berjasa, as well as UMNO. These factors contributed to the party’s loss of Kelantan at the 1978 elections.

The loss of the party’s Kelantan stronghold, which it had controlled since 1959, was a major psychological blow for PAS, and paved the way for a fundamental shift towards a more religious register when in 1982, Islamic clerics, inspired by the 1979 Iranian Revolution (despite deep-seated misgivings towards the Shi’a brand of Islam in Iraq), gained control of the party. At the same time, the controversial UMNO president, Mahathir Mohamad, took high office to begin twenty-two years as Malaysia’s prime minister.

Mahathir’s initial focus upon entering office was to defeat the political challenge posed by PAS. He sought to do this by beating the Islamist opposition at their own game by pursuing his own brand of modernist-developmentalist Islamic policies. To assist him in this endeavour, Mahathir enlisted the help of the charismatic Islamic youth movement leader Anwar Ibrahim – long considered to be a PAS sympathiser – through his UMNO ally, Suleiman Palestine, who was also Anwar’s uncle. The successful co-option of Anwar allowed UMNO to contest actively for Islamic discursive space against the clerics of PAS. Anwar led the charge by overseeing a raft of policies and programmes perceived to be Islamic, including the creation of more Islamic education institutions up to tertiary levels, the introduction of Islamic finance, the inflation of the religious bureaucracy at both state and federal levels, greater tolerance for the practice of moral policing by state religious departments, and an active watch against Christian proselytisation in the country, especially among Malay-Muslim communities. This contestation ushered in what has come to be known in the Malaysian political lexicon as the UMNO–PAS ‘Islamisation race’.

To be sure, this Islamisation race was not merely a consequence of Anwar’s co-option. Since the early 1970s, Muslim civil society activism had been on the rise on the back of international events that had quickened the political consciousness of Muslim societies worldwide. In Malaysia, the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement, ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia), which Anwar led in the mid-1970s, played a pivotal role as a pressure group that lobbied the Malaysian government to focus more on Islamic governance. ABIM soon provided the collective pool of politically socialised Muslim youths from which UMNO and PAS would draw a new generation of leaders. Indeed, even as Anwar joined UMNO, many of his ABIM peers and colleagues chose to join PAS. Among their numbers were Fadzil Noor and Abdul Hadi Awang, two future presidents of the Islamic party.
Islamist reformists

The latter half of the 1990s marked a major turning point in the fortunes of the Islamist opposition, when economic adversity and the removal of Mahathir’s ambitious heir-apparent, Anwar Ibrahim, triggered a period of political ferment. As Mahathir’s term in high office drew to a close, he was increasingly seen by many Malaysians as an authoritarian leader under whose leadership the Malaysian business–politics nexus was contaminated by chronic corruption. This was made strikingly clear when the Asian financial crisis struck the Malaysian economy and brought down several erstwhile high-profile and politically connected indigenous enterprises. Led then by the moderate reformist Fadzil Noor, PAS recognised the political opportunity presented by Mahathir’s increasing unpopularity and began to refocus the party’s mobilisation around themes of democracy, social justice, and transparency, while the hard-line Islamist rhetoric that had come to define the party was kept expediently on the backburner. Shortly after PAS embarked on this transition, popular Islamic activist and former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim was arrested and incarcerated in 1999. This action on the part of the ruling government was met with widespread condemnation from all sectors of Malaysian society and led PAS to join forces with other opposition parties to launch the reformasi, or reform, movement.

As a member of the newly formed Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front) opposition coalition, PAS secured its greatest election victory in 1999 when it recaptured the state assembly of Terengganu after having lost it in 1978 and secured a commendable twenty-seven parliamentary and ninety-eight state seats. Following this electoral success and the confidence gained from it, PAS once again began to press its Islamic agenda with renewed vigour, under the mistaken impression that the widespread support it had won on its anti-UMNO, anti-Mahathir platform was instead a sign that the population was prepared to accept its Islamic agenda. This shift is at least in part attributable to the sudden death of Fadzil Noor in 2002 and his succession by his deputy, the fiery orator Abdul Hadi Awang. Following this transition in leadership, the party released its Islamic State Document, which was thus far the most detailed articulation of the party’s vision for Islamic government in Malaysia. What was striking about the document, which was originally the idea of Fadzil Noor, was the fact that its earlier iterations were comparatively moderate, inclusivist, and outward-looking in language and orientation. Controversial issues of hudud and shari’a were skirted and principles of democracy and sensitivity to Malaysia’s multicultural social landscape were acknowledged, whereas the subsequent ‘official’ document stressed Islamic governance and included references to the controversial issue of hudud. Not surprisingly, the move to formalise the document without consultation with party progressives was heavily criticised by the latter, who enjoyed a strong presence in the party’s Central Working Committee but who at the time had little say in the Majlis Shura or Consultative Council. With these disagreements, the seeds of internal discord were sown within the party.

Following Mahathir’s retirement on 31 October 2003 after twenty-two years at the helm, his replacement, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, sought to capitalise on his initial popularity by recasting UMNO’s position on Islamic governance in order to regain support lost to PAS. To that end, the concept of Islam Hadhari (Civilisational, or Progressive, Islam) was introduced as a means of continuing UMNO’s Islamisation of government and countering the political challenge posed by PAS. While criticised for its ambiguity and lack of substance, Islam Hadhari nevertheless provided a viable platform from which Abdullah sought to challenge PAS for the Malay-Muslim vote at the 2004 election. Under Abdullah’s leadership, UMNO managed to regain the ground lost to PAS in 1999, with the new
prime minister providing a much-needed breath of fresh air after twenty-two years of ‘Mahathirism’.

PAS faced its 2004 electoral setback in the same way it has historically dealt with defeat: through self-examination and reform. In response to the debacle of 2004, the leadership began to craft a new strategy of moderation. Foremost in this strategy was the introduction of younger, reform-minded leaders into the party’s leadership ranks. PAS initiated leadership changes during its 2005 Muktamah (general assembly), when younger, more progressive leaders were voted into key party leadership positions. Along with the changes in leadership, PAS advanced several additional policies to broaden its appeal and counteract the caricatures of the party in state-owned media as a party of religious Taliban-type fundamentalists. These steps included de-emphasising its agenda on an Islamic state, calling for enhanced civil liberties and freedoms of assembly and the press, building better relationships with the Chinese and other non-Muslim communities, and enhancing the role of women in the party. At the ballot box, PAS’s shift to a more moderate and inclusivist register, including the creation of a non-Muslim PAS Supporters’ Wing, paid dividends at the 2008 elections when the party joined together with opposition partners, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the People’s Justice Party (PKR), to make significant inroads into the support base of the UMNO-led incumbent coalition. Yet the reality was that PAS’s success was attributed to the non-Muslim support the party received at the election, as a consequence of its watering down of its traditional Islamist agenda in order to broaden its appeal. Paradoxically, the success of 2008 also presented the Islamists of PAS with an existential conundrum: whether PAS should remain on its current path and be accused of losing its core focus, or return to its Islamist fundamentals. This dilemma exercised the party for five years, from 2008–13, as it was pulled deeper into the opposition People’s Alliance coalition. During this period, small but not inconsequential segments within the party started voicing reservations towards the compromises that the party leadership were making, such as agreeing to support Anwar Ibrahim as the opposition’s candidate for prime minister or endorsing the rights of non-Muslims to use the word ‘Allah’ in reference to their deity, and continuing to downplay what was hitherto the heart of the party’s political agenda – the Islamic state.

PAS’s conundrums were compounded by UMNO’s own Islamisation agenda, which had gathered pace. The point has already been made that UMNO’s Islamisation agenda was triggered by the resurgence of Islamic consciousness primarily in the Islamic heartland of the Middle East in the late 1960s, but also affecting Muslim communities from Europe to Asia. In Malaysia, this development took the form of a growing Muslim proselytisation movement, known as *dakwah*, which was driven by social activism of Islamic groups such as ABIM. Specific to the Malaysian context, this resurgence of Islamic identity and piety coincided with a shift in national discourse and policy to the advantage of the Malay-Muslim community when, after the race riots of 13 May 1969, Malaysian society was fundamentally reorganised with the introduction of affirmative action policies that favoured the Malay-Muslim community in the political, economic, and cultural spheres. It was in this climate that UMNO’s Islamisation policy first took root in the form of greater emphasis on Islamic education. By the 1980s, the agenda extended beyond the cultural sphere to encompass economics, with the introduction of Islamic banking, the proliferation of Waqf (Islamic foundations), and Mahathir’s (and Anwar’s) attempt to engineer a Muslim work ethic to drive his industrialisation programme for the country. The agenda stretched to politics, too, particularly foreign policy, as Mahathir sought to position Malaysia as the vocal champion for Muslim causes globally, from Palestine to Bosnia, as well as governance, through an inflated religious bureaucracy.
Importantly, Mahathir’s UMNO Islamisation agenda for Malaysia was pursued in tandem with the party’s tightening grip on society through the incumbent government’s control of various institutions of the state. Through prodigious use of institutions such as the Internal Security Act, created to defend the country against the subversive threat of communism and racial extremists but, under the Mahathir administration, increasingly used to silence political opponents, Mahathir proceeded to eliminate potential challengers and restrict alternatives to UMNO’s Islamisation agenda. Concomitantly, fringe religious groups such as the Darul Arqam movement and followers of different Islamic traditions such as the Shi’a were demonised as ‘deviants’ by state religious authorities. PAS politicians were not spared either, with several purportedly running afoul of the UMNO-aligned state religious authorities and, where necessary, Malaysian government, because of acts interpreted as support for terrorism (see Farish 2003).

Issues

The prominence that Islamism has gained in recent years in Malaysian politics is best demonstrated in a number of controversial, high-profile issues. Two of particular note and interest for this chapter are the controversies over apostasy and perceived proprietary rights to the usage of the term ‘Allah’ (see also López, this volume, on interfaith issues).

Apostasy

Apostasy, specifically with reference to Malaysian Muslims who desire to leave the faith, is an issue that has reverberated across the Malaysian socio-political terrain at multiple levels, generating tension in Malaysia’s multireligious fabric between Muslims and non-Muslims and escalating UMNO–PAS competition over the definition of aqidah (principles of the faith). The apostasy issue has also caused friction within UMNO and the government itself between those who favour hard-line fundamentalist positions on the issue and their more accommodating counterparts. UMNO parliamentarians have reproved the government for appearing to be crippled by the PAS charge that ‘the UMNO-led Government provided no punishment for those who leave Islam, and yet would fine a citizen RM500 (US$132) just for throwing a cigarette butt on the market floor’ (cited in Zainah 2003a).

On the other hand, PAS has been unequivocal in its position on the issue. In his capacity as menteri besar (chief minister) of Terengganu state in 1999, Abdul Hadi introduced a bill in parliament to make apostasy a categorical offence punishable by death. To him, the call for the death penalty was legitimate, for it was based on a hadith that called on believers to ‘kill whomever changes his religion’ (Norani 2003: 129).

Malaysian human rights activist Zainah Anwar makes the case that there are essentially three traditional juristic opinions on the punishment for apostasy. First is the orthodox view of death to all apostates; second is the opinion that prescribes the death penalty only in cases where apostasy is accompanied by rebellion against the community and its legitimate leadership; and third is the view that even though apostasy is a great sin, it is not a capital offence in Islam and hence warrants no punishment (Zainah 2003b). Under conservatives such as Abdul Hadi, PAS appears in this regard to subscribe to the most extreme juristic opinion: death to all who leave Islam.

The controversy over apostasy came to a head with the deceptively straightforward case of Lina Joy, which generated heated national debate. The case revolves around a woman formerly named Azalina Jailani, a convert to Christianity who changed her name to Lina Joy in 1998.
Since then, Joy has been attempting to remove the religious designation of ‘Islam’ from her personal identity card. Her application was rejected by the National Registration Department on the grounds that she had to furnish certification from the Shari’a Court that officially declared her an apostate before such a change could be made. The Federal Territories Shari’a Court, which she consulted on the issue, refused her request to leave the religion. Joy’s appeal to the lower courts against the decision of the Shari’a Court in 2001 was likewise dismissed on grounds that civil courts had no jurisdiction over matters concerning religion. Joy appealed the Shari’a Court decision to the Federal Court on constitutional grounds, thereby setting the stage for a watershed decision with grave ramifications.

Predictably, the Lina Joy case elicited sharp responses from key political actors. The religious leadership of PAS maintained categorically that jurisdiction over this case lay squarely with the Shari’a Court, and moreover that the court should not grant apostate status, as that would entail the death penalty according to the Qur’an. Privately, however, some ulama did say that given her insistence on changing her religion and her conversion to Christianity, Lina Joy’s case was a moot point, as she was already ‘lost to Islam’. Similarly, while some more orthodox UMNO ulama spoke equally stridently of the sanctity of the Shari’a Court, others have been more prepared to countenance Joy’s act of leaving Islam as one of personal choice, albeit one that should remain in the private realm. They further intimate that apostates should refrain from using their case to challenge the delicate balance between the constitution and the shari’a.

On 30 May 2007 the Malaysian Federal Court finally made a much-awaited decision regarding the Lina Joy apostasy case. In a landmark pronouncement that will likely reverberate across the Malaysian socio-political landscape for a long time to come, the Federal Court ruled two to one to dismiss Lina Joy’s appeal of the earlier High Court decision. The panel concluded that only an Islamic shari’a tribunal could certify her renunciation of Islam and the legitimacy of her conversion. In the eyes of the Malaysian judicial system, Lina Joy remains a Muslim despite her public renunciation of the faith (by virtue of her baptism into the Christian religion) many years ago. In addition, the decision established a legal precedent that apostasy matters lay within the jurisdiction of state shari’a courts.

The debate over apostasy lent itself to greater controversy because of the multicultural and multireligious nature of Malaysian society. Political expediency, coupled with a concern for the alleged proliferation of apostasy cases over the past few years, has forced the UMNO-led government’s hand and pressured the state into engaging in this difficult debate. The Department of Islamic Development or JAKIM, the federal agency responsible for governing Islamic practice across the country, stood at the forefront of the state’s response by suggesting the possibility of a parliamentary bill on apostasy in 1998, the contents of which remain to be fully fleshed out. Then legislation was enacted that levied punishment in the form of a RM5,000 fine or a three-year jail term, or both, for the Islamic offence of murtad (Norani 2003: 128). These laws also clarified Article 11(4) of the Federal Constitution, which forbade adherents of other faiths to proselytise to Muslims in Malaysia. In sum, this provision permits states to punish attempts by non-Muslims to proselytise to Muslims by outlawing the propagation of any non-Muslim religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam. In response to concerns raised by non-Muslims who were alarmed at the discriminatory tenor of the clause, the minister in charge of religious affairs, Abdul Hamid, described Article 11(4) as a ‘preventive measure’ against apostasy, intended less to punish than to rehabilitate. Privately, however, notable Islamic figures who supported apostasy laws have argued that their main purpose was to address the problems particularly surrounding Muslim converts – non-Malay Muslims who for
various reasons revert to their previous religion or renounce Islam by way of a statutory declaration.

According to the legislation proposed by UMNO for the ‘crime’ of apostasy, those convicted would also be forced to undergo compulsory rehabilitation at specially created centres. Recalcitrant detainees at the end of the detention period will be officially declared murtad by the Shari’a Court and released from the faith. This rehabilitation programme has come under heavy criticism from civil society groups for undermining the constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of religion. In the UMNO-controlled state of Perlis, matters were taken further when the Perlis state legislature passed the Islamiah Aqidah Protection (State of Perlis) Bill 2000 (alternatively known as the Islamic Faith Bill 2000). According to clause seven of the Bill, evidence of an attempt to change aqidah by a Muslim would be met by a summons to appear before the Shari’a Court (Norani 2003: 128). The Bill further allows for shari’a courts to prosecute deviationist Islamic teachers and detain offenders in aqidah rehabilitation centres for up to a year. Predictably, the Perlis bill caused considerable consternation among the Muslim community for how it evidently criminalised the act of religious conversion, and various petitions were submitted to the government-appointed Human Rights Commission as expressions of concern. In response, notwithstanding the fact that it was state law, the federal government announced that the legislation would be considered further before implementation.

The Allah issue

Another issue which has fuelled religious fervour in Malaysia in recent times was the court ruling over the permissibility of non-Muslims’ use of the word ‘Allah’ in their publications. The issue began back in the 1980s when, in Mahathir’s Islamisation era, certain words were reserved only for Malay-Muslim usage, such as ‘Allah’, ‘Solat’ and ‘Rasul’, which are the Arabic-based words for God, Prayers and Messenger respectively (Kairos Research Centre 2004: 51–52). However, the Catholic publication The Herald was still using the term ‘Allah’ until the Home Ministry prevented it from doing so in 2007. The Herald then opted to resolve the issue through legal channels. When the Malaysian court sided with The Herald in allowing ‘Allah’ to be used by the publication in December 2009, the Home Ministry appealed against the decision. In a ruling in October 2013, upheld by the Federal Court in June 2014, the appellate court overturned the earlier decision and upheld the Home Ministry’s ban on The Herald’s usage of the word ‘Allah’ on grounds that non-Muslims’ use of the term would create ‘confusion’ for Muslims.

The government’s official position to restrict ‘Allah’ only for Muslims signalled UMNO’s pertinacity and bolstered its position as the party that defends Malay-Muslim interests. This was a further demonstration of how UMNO’s policies in recent times have indicated that the party has moved towards the right of the political spectrum, thereby risking the consociational relationship that underpins the governing coalition. Indeed, the consequence of this increasing conservatism within UMNO was evident at both the 2008 and 2013 elections, when non-Muslims abandoned UMNO’s coalition partners in droves. Nevertheless, both gerrymandering (an advantage of incumbency) and a first-past-the-post electoral system ensure that UMNO has no incentive to move away from its conservatism. If anything, the opposite is true – UMNO need only appeal to a rural Malay-Muslim base with its mix of conservatism and access to largesse, the latter of which PAS is unable to provide, to cement its political position.

As for the other Malay-Muslim based party, PAS, it initially took a more conciliatory position and officially supported non-Muslims’ use of ‘Allah’. This 2010 decision came at a time
when the Islamist party had been acquiescent on other key issues pertaining to its identity as an Islamist party, such as the goal of an Islamic state, and also on the controversial hudud issue. Although PAS's initial view on ‘Allah’ was based on religious texts, its opinion on the matter displayed the party's readiness to take the less popular decision involving Malay-Muslim issues. Its initial stance in 2010 was well accepted by its secular counterparts in the People’s Alliance coalition. However, it resulted in PAS's being criticised in several religious circles as being too compliant with secular parties. In 2013, a few months before the general election, PAS rescinded its earlier position on the issue. The PAS Shura (Consultation) Council issued a statement clarifying that ‘Allah’ should not be used by non-Muslims except verbally. In changing its position, the party was clearly attempting to appease both the Malay-Muslim conservative bloc and Christians. Even so, this was a marked change from its original position in support of the right of non-Muslims to use the term ‘Allah’.

Conclusion

This brief chapter has attempted to outline the contours of Islamist trends in Malaysia and to discuss how and why these contours have not only sharpened over the years, but have in fact expanded as well. In October 2013, during a visit to Malaysia, US Secretary of State John Kerry complimented Malaysia for being a model moderate Muslim-majority country. Several days later, the Malaysian courts declared that non-Muslims had no right to use the word ‘Allah’. This dichotomy speaks to the contradictions inherent within Muslim society in Malaysia.

Religious issues in recent years have polarised political parties as well as voters. While it might prove detrimental to racial and religious relations in the country, the outcome has thus far galvanised Malay-Muslim support for UMNO, as it adopted and defended positions parallel to conservative public sentiment. These divisive religious overtones perpetuate a cycle of seeking political legitimacy through the brandishing of religious credentials. Yet in Malaysia, religious credentials are not confined to the endorsement of Islamic scholars. More than that, they are best secured through strident defence of the Islamic faith against any perceived attack, whether on Islam or Malay identity.

Notes

3 It is important to note that while PAS leaders today would make reference to the Islamic state, the formation of such a political entity was not an official objective of the party as reflected in its constitution (interview with Mustafa Ali, Kuala Lumpur, 2 March 2010).
4 Significantly, today, PAS cannot claim to be the ‘only’ proponent of the Islamic state as many within UMNO also share that view. In fact, two UMNO presidents, who were (and are) also prime ministers, Mahathir Mohamad and Najib Tun Razak, have openly declared that Malaysia is already an Islamic state.
5 For an analysis of Burhanuddin's political thought, see Ramlah 1996.
6 The political currents that influenced PAS's electoral fortunes are studied at length in Liow 2004.
7 For a detailed discussion of internal party debates surrounding the Islamic State document, see Liow 2009: 81–91.
8 This fact was revealed to the first author on condition of anonymity by a Central Working Committee member during an interview in Taman Melewar, Kuala Lumpur, 7 February 2004.
9 These internal party issues are discussed at length in Liow 2011a and 2011b.
10 Interview with PAS ulama and officials, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, 15 August 2006.
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Bibliography


