

Petikan Buku: Islam and Civil Society in Southeast Asia (m.s.76-88)

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PART II: THE MALAYSIAN EXPERIENCE: ISLAMIZATION, THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY, AND INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS

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5. Islamization and the Emerging Civil Society in Malaysia: A Case Study, by Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan, author

Dirujuk oleh

- [Pembangunan Bandar Baru Bangi](#)
- [Surau dan Masjid di Bandar Baru Bangi \(1975\)](#)

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, the Islamic resurgence of the 1970s, without doubt, is one of the autonomous forces that has contributed to the expansion of civil society. Responding to the call for a greater representation of Islamic values, norms, and identity in society, a large segment of the urban-based Malay middle class joined several religion-oriented new social movements which arose to challenge the basic premises of the state project of official nationalism, as well as to draw the public's attention to what Sheila Nair described as "the loss of religiosity and spiritual values among the state actors" (Nair 1999, p. 96). However, scholarly treatment of the phenomenon in relation to civil society formation tends to focus on the civic activities of major Islamic organizations, namely, the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM)), the Jemaah Tabligh, and the banned Jemaah Darul Arqam, or Al Arqam in short. No doubt these national level organizations have played a crucial role in empowering and activating Muslims into participatory and political action. However, their emergence in Malaysia is but only one aspect of the Islamization process. The state, political parties, individual ulama and populist imam also participate in the process by promoting their own Islamization agenda. In other words, while it is not wrong to associate Islamization with the emergence of major Islamic organizations, it is also useful to consider those community-based religious organizations that have sprung up in the urban areas as they are also instrumental in instilling Islamically informed civic virtues among the people.

To date, very little has been said about this aspect of Islamization and its consequences for the evolution of civil society in Malaysia. This chapter hopes to fill this gap by examining the micro-processes of Islamization in an urban community in Malaysia as an example of civil society formation

in the Islamic context. Drawing on data gathered in my current research on the social history of Bandar Baru Bangi, a new town in the state of Selangor, Malaysia, the chapter will first provide an overview of the history and thrusts of Islamization in the country. It then discusses the direction and features of the Islamization process as it unfolds in the community concerned and how Islamization helps restructure social relations among people on the basis of civic principles. The chapter concludes by highlighting the essential characteristics of socio-religious organization as a form of civil society that is evolving in Bandar Baru Bangi.

ISLAMIZATION IN MALAYSIA: AN OVERVIEW

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. The dominant ethnic group in the country is the Malays who make up about 55 per cent of the total population. They are followed by the Chinese (34 per cent) and the Indians (12 per cent) (Nagata 1994, p. 65). One of the distinctive features of the Malaysian social system is the close link between Islam and Malay culture and politics. Ever since it was introduced some 700 years ago, the religion has served as a core element in Malay culture providing as Esposito and Voll say, “an integrated perception of religion, traditional values and village and family life” (1996, p. 125). As Malaysia (then called Malaya) moved towards independence in the early twentieth century, Islam became the rallying point for Malays to organize reform and political movements. In the process, Malay political parties and organizations emerged to compete with each other and the non-Malay counterparts for continued Malay political dominance in the evolving plural society. When Malaysia finally became independent in 1957, Islam was enshrined as the official religion of the country. Together with nationalism, Islam became a critical element in Malay cultural identity and a potent organizing force in the country.

Thus when Islamic resurgence swept across most of the Muslim world in the 1960s, it was no small surprise to find Malaysia also participating in the process. In contrast to other Muslim countries, Islamic resurgence in Malaysia was an ethno-religious phenomenon, in the sense that it was largely the Malays who were actively engaged in raising and revitalizing the people's interest in Islam, its teachings, laws, and values. A number of factors coalesced to prompt them to do that. One of them was the change in the material conditions under which the Malays were living as a result of intensified modernization and industrialization in the first decade after Malaysia achieved independence in 1957. Once rural dwellers, many Malays migrated to towns in search of education and jobs. In the urban setting, they were not only exposed to an acquisitive and materialistic culture associated with urbanism, but also became more conscious of the economic and cultural disparities between them and the non-Malays, in particular the Chinese. This, together with influences from countries such as India, Pakistan, Sudan, and Egypt, where Islamic revivalism had already taken place, caused certain segments of the urban-based Malay middle class to seriously consider issues arising from rapid economic growth and state-building, and subsequently formulate responses to them by recourse to Islamic philosophy and teachings. The pressing issues then were the legitimacy of foreign or imported ideologies and institutions in the development process, the efficacy of political parties as instrument of protests, the relevance of the simple equation of Muslimness with Malayness, and the role of the state as the definer of Islamic orthodoxy.

Among the forerunners in the 1970s wave of Islamic resurgence or the dakwah phenomenon, as it was known locally, were the earlier-mentioned Islamic movements such as ABIM, Al Arqam, and Jemaah Tabligh. These Islamic movements agreed that Muslims should re-examine Islamic theological sources, the Qur'an and Sunna of Prophet Mohammed for guidelines on how to resolve the above issues. They, however, differed in terms of the practical solutions that should be offered to Muslims to help them confront the secularization challenge. ABIM, for example, advocated the establishment of an Islamically-oriented social order as the corrective to secularism and capitalist-based development

projects. The movement's Islamization programme was a totalizing process to be accomplished through education (tarbiyah) and mission work (dakwah). The Al Arqam movement established in 1968, and banned in 1994, envisioned the restoration of the ideal Islamic society that once flourished during Prophet Mohammed's time. Islamization to the movement meant progressive discovery of the self, society, and mankind which could be realized if Muslims were to relocate themselves in Islamic villages or communes. The Jemaah Tabligh, which originated in India and which had been in existence in Malaysia since the 1950s, focused on the spiritual development of individual Muslims. This loosely structured organization made it obligatory for its members, mostly men, to spread the Islamic message of moral solidarity among Muslims through tabligh activities.

Although the resurgents did not employ sophisticated language to urge for greater Islamization of Malaysian society, their call did not go unheeded by the masses and Malay-dominated political parties, namely the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia or PAS) and the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). Their religious consciousness stirred by the resurgents, Malays in both rural and urban areas started to observe the Islamic dress code, refrained from consuming food prepared by non-Malays, avoided food products believed to contain substances that were forbidden to Muslims, performed the solat (prayers) more regularly, and a host of other things. PAS, which had been clear right from the time of its establishment in 1951 of its desire for the Islamization of society, responded by reinforcing the resurgents' call to return to Islam. Its opponent, UMNO, the most influential member of the National Front, the ruling party in Malaysia, attempted to strike chords with the resurgents by paying more attention to Islam. Its Islamization programme ranged from the use of Islamic symbols and rhetoric to the creation of Islamic educational, banking, and financial institutions.

Looking at the Malaysian religious landscape then and now, it is obvious that discourses on Islamization embrace diverse groups and that Islamization means different things to different groups. The process is not fading. It, in fact, is intensifying as Malaysia becomes more connected to the rest of the Muslim world and as more Muslim intellectuals, trained locally and abroad, begin to transmit Islamic teachings and philosophy to the masses in an effort to support the state's Islamization policy or alternatively produce their own paradigms for change and development. The following section discusses how the process unfolds in Bandar Baru Bangi, an urban community that was opened for settlement in 1978, the time when Islamic resurgence was mounting in Malaysia.

ISLAMIZATION IN BANDAR BARU BANGI

Bandar Baru Bangi is a new town located in the state of Selangor, Peninsular Malaysia. Its development is a direct result of the implementation of Malaysia's post-independence urban policy, which among other things aimed at creating new growth centres that could serve as the site for industries, offices, and homes for the people. Bandar Baru Bangi is one of these growth centres. The town was developed in stages starting in 1977. The land on which it now stands was formerly covered with oil palms and secondary jungle. These were gradually cleared to make way for houses, factories, shops, offices, and a golf course. When Bandar Baru Bangi was opened for settlement in 1978, there were about 150 families of Malay professionals who were drawn through migration to work at the National University of Malaysia (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia or UKM), University of Agriculture (recently renamed Universiti Putra Malaysia or UPM), and the few research institutes that were located nearby. Without any kin ties to one another, these early settlers of Bandar Baru Bangi occupied the houses that were built in Fasa Satu (translated as First Phase) of the town now considered as the oldest settlement. The number of settlers started to increase in the mid-1980s as more people, mainly Malays, moved into the town to avail themselves of the houses there, as well as to work in the factories, offices, universities, and training institutes found in and around the town. By

1990, the population of Bandar Baru Bangi stood at around 25,000 and rose to about 40,000 within ten years.

The development of Bandar Baru Bangi coincided with the resurgence of Islam. Near the town was UKM, the workplace of the majority of its early residents and one of the hotbeds of resurgent Islam. There students and lecturers who were swayed by the arguments for reforms mounted by ABIM, PAS, and the Islamic Republic Group regularly organized socio-religious activities to stimulate the students' religious consciousness and to protest against the state for its role in perpetuating western cultural patterns. Elements of resurgent Islam penetrated Bandar Baru Bangi through UKM being introduced to the fledgling community by several religious activists who worked at the university. They organized usrah (study circle) on a weekly or fortnightly basis in the homes of individuals to discuss and appreciate the relevance of the eternal truths embodied in the Qur'an and Sunna of Prophet Mohammed to modern times. In the absence of any other form of religious gathering, the usrah later functioned as a context for small-scale social gathering as the host usually served food after the discussion and people stayed back to pray. It was during such occasions that the religious activists influenced those present to undertake Islamically inspired community-based projects.

One of these projects was the creation of voluntary benevolent societies or kumpulan khairat. Two such associations were formed in 1979. Their primary concern was to provide their members with mutual assistance usually in times when death occurred in a family and help was needed to arrange for the funeral. The other project was the establishment of surau or a communal place for prayers. Towards this end, in 1980 the Selangor Development Corporation Authority, the government's agency that was entrusted with the responsibility to develop Bandar Baru Bangi was approached to "loan" one of the semi-detached houses in Fasa Satu so it could be converted into a surau. The agency concerned consented to the request. Thus, the first surau, called Surau Al Umm, was established in 1981. Several people were elected at a meeting to form the surau committee (Jawatankuasa Surau) with roles to co-ordinate the religious activities conducted at the surau. Within the general climate of heightened religious consciousness, the central appeal of this surau was the evening and night obligatory prayers performed congregationally and the religious talks that were conducted after the prayers. These occasions were used to forge a sense of moral solidarity among those present, as well as to reorientate them to a new way of understanding Islam than the established one. Islam was not just a set of rituals but a way of life and a workable doctrine for modern society.

The Islamization process in Bandar Baru Bangi started to intensify in mid-1980s. Three social currents accounted for this. The first was the state's Islamization policy. Since the co-optation of Anwar Ibrahim, the then President of ABIM into UMNO in 1982, the state had been actively communicating the messages that Islam was an important component of national development and that Islamization of society should be done in a spirit of mutual help and consensus. In short, the state was prepared to consider positively grassroots programmes of Islamization in its efforts to maintain an open dialogue with the Islamists. The second factor which had a bearing on the direction of Islamization was the proliferation of members of the Malay middle class into new growth centres in search of houses and jobs. Bandar Baru Bangi was one of those areas that accommodated them. Still culturally unconsolidated but economically well endowed, the middle class proved to be an important resource to help actualize Islamically inspired projects that were formulated by both the state and the grassroots. Finally, the 1980s also saw an increase in the number of ulama and Muslim intellectuals imbued with strong religious sentiments and possessing great capacity for organizing religious activities. These people were not just ready to apply their knowledge of Islam and skills to explain Islam to the masses but also to help mobilize the people into organizations.

These three currents impacted the religious life of the people of Bandar Baru Bangi in no small way. Guaranteed of state support, the religiously active people in the town mobilized economic resources to build more surau. To date, there are thirteen surau in Bandar Baru Bangi. Eight are housed in

separate buildings and the remainder in apartments. Every surau is managed by a committee comprising of about eight to ten people and serves as the focal point of the religious life of the residents of the neighbourhood. The construction of surau in Bandar Baru Bangi is facilitated by donations collected from within and outside the community. The building or apartment which houses a surau and the land, on which it is located is usually donated by wealthy individuals. They are later classified as public endowments or waqf. The construction of surau on the basis of waqfis closely tied to the Islamic injunction concerning the importance of Muslims to do public good and embodied in three concepts that were and still are very widespread in Bandar Baru Bangi: the concepts of sedekah (alms), amal jariah (personal or collective conduct for public good) and fardhu kifayah (communal duty).

The entry into Bandar Baru Bangi in 1984 of an ulama with the reputation as an outstanding theologian, a religious teacher, and a practitioner of Islamic medicine further influenced the trend of Islamization in the town. The ulama was Ustaz Harun Din, a migrant from the agriculture-based state of Perlis and a former Professor of Islamic Theology at UKM. Given his religious background and social position, Ustaz Harun Din rose to become the religious leader in his own neighbourhood playing various roles as imam at congregational prayers, religious teacher, and counsellor. He also popularized the Islamic medicine concept and practised it in clinics housed in a building called Darus Syifaq. When his popularity as a healer increased, Ustaz Harun Din took to training men and women in the science of Islamic healing so that they too could practise Islamic medicine. He also encouraged men and women with some religious education to organize Qur'an classes for children and adults, thereby expanding religious learning and scholarship in the community. No doubt Ustaz Harun Din emerged as the principal figure of authority in Bandar Baru Bangi but at the same time there crystallized in the neighbourhood where he resided informal religious groups. Members of these groups were bonded to one another on the basis of their social and personal relationships with the ulama, their common rural origin, similar educational background, and common residential area.

The zeal for doctrinal and ritual purity which characterized the Islamization process in the 1980s coincided with an approval on the part of the state for the establishment of Islam-oriented non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Saliha 1997; Sharifah Zaleha 1999). In Bandar Baru Bangi, Ustaz Harun Din together with his friends and followers responded to the call by establishing the An Nur Welfare Association (Persatuan Kebajikan Islam An Nur or PKIAN). The main aims of PKIAN were to provide mutual assistance to its members, to dispense specific charitable services, and to supervise the affairs of a surau located in the neighbourhood where Ustaz Harun Din lived. This surau was called Surau An Nur. The charter of PKIAN acknowledged it as a component of this NGO. The PKIAN and Surau An Nur thus became the new bases for the religiously motivated people living in and around the neighbourhood served by the surau to associate with one another formally and to collectively plan for more community-based projects.

Towards the latter end, PKIAN restructured Surau An Nur's administrative system. This it did by creating several committees each with a specific function to supervise the affairs of the institution. The core committee was called the Surau An-Nur Administrative Committee. Comprising of twelve men and three women, this committee was basically concerned with co-ordinating the performance of congregational prayers (solat berjemaah), running religious classes, and organizing religious talks (ceramah agama). Then, there was the Social and Welfare Committee which was entrusted with the responsibility to co-ordinate the social welfare activities that the surau engaged in, such as providing financial assistance to needy students, new converts to Islam, and other underprivileged groups. There was also the Youth Committee with roles to organize religious camps and counselling services for youths. The collection of donations and management of the properties of the surau were made the responsibility of the Finance Committee, while the Security and Technical Committee looked after the maintenance of the surau. Except for the An Nur Administrative Committee, which had fifteen

members, the other committees had between three to seven members each.

The importance of the restructuring of surau administration is that there was an increase in community participation in the religious affairs of the community. Insofar as religious leadership was concerned, the new organizational structure helped spread it among many people instead of being concentrated in the hands of one person, that is Ustaz Harun Din. The people who were elected to sit in the various sub-committees were referred to by their friends as orang surau (surau person or surau people) precisely because of their deep involvement with matters pertaining to the management of the institution. They comprised of men and women between the ages of 30 to 65 and came from different occupational backgrounds. Most of them were elected on the basis of their sustained interest in religion, social position in society, and specialized knowledge in certain fields. Within the surau establishment, élite and non-élite, professionals and non-professionals, men and women, were integrated, some holding positions as imam, religious teachers, counsellors, treasurer, and maintenance men.

Another feature of the Islamization process in late 1980s was the drive to diversify the services provided by Surau An Nur. In addition to providing a place for people to perform the solat, Surau An Nur also provided free lodging for poor students studying at UKM. It also helped procure cows for the ritual of sacrifice (korban) held in conjunction with the Aidil Adha celebrations, made travel arrangements for members and non-members of PKIAN wishing to perform the umrah (minor pilgrimage) and the hajj, organized study tours, and arranged short courses regarding the hajj for would-be pilgrims. In the ritual realm, the surau regularly conducted special prayers called solat hajat for individuals who had personal problems to overcome, as well as for school children who were going to sit for major examinations.

Perhaps the central appeal of Surau An Nur was the religious talks. Surau An Nur organized these talks regularly on a weekly basis and in conjunction with Islamic festive occasions. To deliver these talks, the surau usually invited religious officials and missionaries (pendakwah). The surau held two types of religious talks, one an elaboration of Islamic doctrinal matters and the other, an informed address of current social issues. It was the latter type of religious talks that provided Surau An Nur its distinctiveness. These talks were usually given by missionaries who were well-known political and social activists, and who would not hesitate to comment on current political and social issues with candidness. The fact that Surau An Nur could get these people to participate in its religious talks series distinguished it from the other surau in the town, attracted a lot of people and gave it great weight as a religious institution.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Based on the preceding discussion, it is obvious that Islamization in Bandar Baru Bangi involves giving institutional expression to the personal convictions of individual ulama and inspired religious activists regarding the importance of intra-religious development, religious learning, charity, and mission work (dakwah). With regard to civil society, the process has three important implications.

1. The process produces surau-centred social and religious groups that are capable of creating space for participation and action for the residents of the new town outside the sphere of institutional party politics. Participation in this space is not about accessing to political leadership but institutionalizing a religious culture which is firmly grounded in orthodox Islam and in which aspects of sharing, tolerance, freedom, rebelliousness, and collaboration are evident.

Within this framework, there are two matters that are of great concern to the civil society that is

evolving in Bandar Baru Bangi. One, the production of mukmin, that is Muslims who are highly devoted and capable of demonstrating unreserved belief and faith in the absolute truth of Islam. Of importance to the mukmin is how to strengthen his or her relationship with the Divine (*hablun min Allah*) and how to discharge social responsibility (*hablun min nas*), not absolute freedom as desired by the civil society in the West (see Arendt in Kessler 1996, p. 76). Two, making the concept of giving and sharing the society's norm. That this norm is adhered to in the every day life of the people can be seen in the practice among some families of incorporating converts, needy students, troubled youths, and poor couples into their households, and regarding these people as adopted children or adopted siblings. By subscribing to these norms, the civil society makes traditional Malay Muslim virtues serve the modern and civil needs of the citizenry of the multi-ethnic nation.

2. Islamization as it occurs in Bandar Baru Bangi opens up quite a liberal and classless route to power for the Malays than otherwise possible in mainstream society. They can tread on this new route to status and power in a variety of ways. They can study Islamic medicine and become the students (*murid*) of Ustaz Harun Din. They can attend formal tafsir classes and informal study groups or join the PKIAN. The consequences of such endeavours for an individual's sense of well-being and social worth are enormous. Many men and women who are empowered with skills to make *doa* (prayers) for others, with religious knowledge to guide the others, and with links to Ustaz Harun Din usually find themselves better disposed, psychologically and economically, to participate actively in the social welfare activities organized from time to time in the community. It is this sense of empowerment that accounts for the readiness on the part of some of the community members to help resolve problems of juvenile delinquents, domestic violence, and moral decadence. The same factor also motivates several community members to establish collectively-owned grocery shops and bookstores, introduce rehabilitation programmes for new converts, and set up a foundation called the An Nur Foundation (Yayasan An Nur).

3. Islamization encourages greater reflection and debate on the nation's future by putting forward discussion of what it sees as common concerns such as social injustice, corruption, cronyism, and nepotism. Through the institution of religious talks (*ceramah agama*), the civil society calls on the state for public accountability on matters of public policy and questions the legitimacy of certain state actions and practices. This role of the civil society looms large since the occurrence of the Anwar Ibrahim crisis. The government takes its political discourses quite seriously because they can and have attracted the opposition parties, in particular PAS, and the earlier-mentioned national-based Islamic movements, in particular ABIM, and the Jemaah Islam Malaysia (JIM). Furthermore, civil society has been quite successful in expanding its membership which by now includes a large number of professionals comprising of university lecturers, doctors, lawyers, business executives, and engineers. Most of these people are religiously committed and politically quite influential. However, although able to impose its own Islamic code on the Muslim masses, civil society in Bandar Baru Bangi prefers to be regarded as pressure groups and partners in development with the state. So when establishing linkages, the PKIAN and Surau An Nur organizing committee undertake to form a loose coalition with the religious officials and related state agencies, such as the Department of Religious Affairs and the Islamic Research Centre, while at the same time co-operating with independent preachers and social activists.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, suffice it is to say here that the Islamization process in Bandar Baru Bangi is associated with the mobilization of community members into formal and informal associations and groups concerned with promoting charity work, mutual assistance, and mission work. The process has opened up opportunities for a large number of men and women from all levels in the town to become

involved in the organization of Islam. In the present context, organizing the people's religious life is not just about getting people to perform the solat. It also involves getting people to support religiously sanctioned projects and economic enterprises for the good of all. In a country where the state exercises considerable control over Islamic matters, the ability of Ustaz Harun Din, the surau people and the PKIAN to establish and maintain a widely-based community management system should be appreciated. They also espouse an Islamic economic and human development strategy which is concerned with harmonizing religious beliefs with the urban economy and urbanism rather than one which is biased towards existing political parties. More importantly, they articulate the view that working for religious and social reforms can and should be done through peaceful means; and that if Malaysian society were to survive in this age of rapid development, then the country should consider resolving issues of identity, resource management, and lifestyle as foremost in its agenda for development.

Notes

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PERIHAL BUKU

Kulit								Judul	Perihal	
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