CHAPTER III

ISLAM IN MALAYSIAN POLITICS

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Introduction

The Malaysian domestic political process rests within the framework of a constitutional monarchy, parliamentary democracy, based on the British model, and federal system of government administering eleven states including the Peninsula (West Malaysia) and the North Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia). To understand this framework we must understand the realities of the contemporary political scene which revolve around communal political representation on the part of Malay, Chinese, Indian and other minority interests. The political definition of the Malaysian state since the declaration of the sovereign independence of its Malayan core in 1957 has rested on the axis of a non-negotiable Malay dominance (later to be defined in the distinction between the category of Bumiputra - i.e. as native to the land-from other Malaysians) in both political and economic terms but fully cognizant of, and necessarily committed to, the essentially multi-ethnic character of the state.

3.1 Islam in Malay Political Culture

Since its introduction to the Peninsula between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, Islam contributed significantly to ideas and offices of political authority and was anchored in Malay identity. Historically, it has constituted only one ingredient of Malay political life and has had to compete with and accommodate at least two other fundamental organizing concepts, Malay kingship and Malay nationalism. The combination of these forces have
themselves been affected by the transformation of the country, by the turn of the twentieth century, into a complex poly-ethnic and multi-religious society.

Islam made significant contributions in legitimizing the earliest form of political authority in Malay society. It was acknowledged as a precondition of political and social participation but acted as an embellishment on the existing political order and its social values. Political society was essentially ordered around separate states each with their own ruler (Sultan) and court. Motivated by Islamic symbols and a culture constituting myriad influences from the Islamic world through the Indian subcontinent. The Sultanates were also influenced by religious leaders and scholars (ulama) who increasingly constituted an elite substratum of Malay society.

The unity of the state was symbolized by Islam, mentioned in the covenant defining the loyalty of the Malays to their ruler whose authority and divine power were in turn rationalized and legitimized by Islam. However, the capacity of the religion to both support as well as challenge traditional political authority (kerajaan), re-enforcing existing institutions and practices but also qualifying the legitimacy of the Sultans to rule, indicated its earliest tendencies both to accommodate and to struggle against other constituents of traditional Malay culture.

The subversion of such political structures through the intervening period of colonialism in fact underlined the link between royal authority and Islam by diverting the powers of the Sultan to purely ceremonial and religious
matters. The sustenance of parochial Malay loyalties towards state and locale were enabled by the retardation of Islam's development in political terms even as British rule enabled the codification and development of Islamic law and an expansion of a religious bureaucracy.¹

Over time, however, even these powers have increasingly been rendered ambiguous as the oldest political institution in Malay society has been increasingly challenged by the struggle between the forces of Malay nationalism and a form of Islamic republicanism. In contemporary Malaysia, particularly under the Mahathir administration, the institution of kingship has come under sever attack and challenge. None the less, continued commitment to kingship as a significant feature of Malay culture has both added to and detracted form the development of Islam in the political process.²

3.2 Islam and Malay Nationalism

Reformist influences on Islam in Malay were more widely evident by the early twentieth century. To some extent, these ideas, carried from Muslim societies in the Middle East and Indian subcontinent, were placed within the context of dramatic socio-economic change in the Peninsula, the large scale immigration of Chinese and Indians attracted by new economic activities, the emergence of a money economy, the spread of a modern bureaucracy, the expansion of secular education and rapid urbanization, as by products of colonial expansion. Improvements in communication were also to indirectly aid in the infusion of new religious ideas, contact with the Middle East and
Mecca in particular provided for exchange between Muslim elites and their ideas, bringing confidence and connection for a Muslim community at the furthermost reaches of the Islamic heartland.

While Reformist ideas were to help inject life into the concept of a universal Muslim community, through the umma, in the development of Malay identity, these ideas were also germane to a strengthened synonymity between the ethnic and religious qualifications of Malay and Muslim which had held pre-colonial roots, the Malay language itself expressing the process of conversion to Islam as one of "entering the Malay community" (Masuk Melayu). The imperatives of a Malay nationalism articulated through ethnic and religious perspectives were the recognition of a significant threat to Malay numerical predominance in the country. Rapidly reversed demographic patterns through liberal immigration policies effected by the British indicated a threat to Malay prerogative, underlined by economic policies which provided opportunities for economic initiative and prosperity for non-Malays without a corresponding attention to the vast majority of Malays.

Islamic Reformism as it was articulated by the Kaum Muda in British Malay, helped establish a strong basis for the spread of essentially urban based "modernist" ideas, that sought a return to "the pristine purity of early Islam" while urging the development of Malays through rational, independent interpretation of religious sources and modern education and by verbalizing nationalist and anti-colonial sentiments. This movement was undoubtedly to
traditional religious authorities located in the village based ulama, scholars and functionaries to the Sultans, largely constituted by the Kaum Tua movement whose ideals rested in the preservation of the supremacy of the Malay elites and of the royal courts. Inevitably, Reformism was harnessed towards improving the position of the Malays, challenging any elite connection to, and control of Islam and, very importantly, establishing the first linkage between religion and politics in earliest forms of Malay nationalism. Religious cleavage between the Kaum Muda and Kaum Tua movements in the 1920s and 1930s did not however detract from the fact that, for the Malays, Islam still provided the symbol of their exclusivity and prerogative rights to the country, invigorating intellectual and political exchange and securing significant influence in nationalist agitation by the 1940s.

Instrumental in germinating its seeds, Reformism also influenced the devolution of Malay nationalism into a variety of expressions. Its earliest articulation through popular politics found some combination between Malay nationalist and Islamic ideals, supported even by the ulama, at least until the late 1940s. Indeed, rather than any intense struggle between nationalism and Islam as dominating political concepts, Malay conviction in the propriety of the fusion of these ideals may be explained by the sense of particularism and cohesion that religious identity offered within an increasingly ethnically
plural society. Historically then, Malay nationalism, more accurately, reflected an ethnic assertiveness incorporating religious identity.

Large-scale Malay political mobilization was not however possible until the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), emerged in 1946. weaving together divergent strands of Malay nationalism in resistance to the Malayan Union scheme devised by the British. This would have had the effect of liberal citizenship guarantees to all domiciled non-Malay communities, inviting drastic alterations to the country's demographic patterns while relieving the Malay rulers of even their symbolic political prerogative over religious and ceremonial matters.

UMNO's express purpose in establishment was thus for the protection of Malay identity and rights in the face of the immigrant threat. Amidst its representation of a wide spectrum of Malay nationalism its core leadership comprised a largely traditional elite with basically administrative and aristocratic backgrounds, underlining its mainly conservative expressions in particular towards religious matters. UMNO's political legendary image was assured with its success at obtaining Britain's retraction of its Malayan Union proposals to be eventually replaced by the Federation of Malaya Agreement (essentially negotiated between the UMNO and the British).

Any unanimous Malay alliance under UMNO was, however, only temporarily successful as the allegiance of all Malays was fought for between parties of different political persuasions. Although Islamic reformists had
been at the forefront of the nationalist struggle, their choice of an independent organization reflected a considerable Malay disapproval and distrust of UMNO's secular leadership, thus underlining a continuing division between conservative and radical political interests. In fact, Islamic reformism had found expressly political representation through the establishment of the Hizbul Muslimin in 1947, aimed at achieving independence through an Islamic based society and the consequent establishment of an Islamic state (Darul Islam) in Malaya. Such an organization was to provide a suitable challenge towards UMNO's secular-nationalist ideology and those already oriented towards clearer Islamic objectives.

UMNO's subsequent attempts at including religious leaders as important components of the Party by 1950 could not withstand the persistence of differing ideologies and was eventually to lead to their large-scale defection into the establishment of a new party, the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP) in 1951, its name later changed to Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS).

While the leadership of that party emphasized its intent in having Islam shape the political and economic affairs of the state and serve as a guide for worship and morality, its diverse origins also ensured a periodic flux between a Malay nationalist character and that of a more purely Islamic identity. In fact, any alternative of more radical Islamic expression was denied by the experience of the Emergency in 1948, declared to fight a Communist
insurgency, by British colonial policy, radical Malay politics and its collaboration with non-Malay left-wing forces are important elements of Malaysian political history but cannot be adequately dealt with here. Amidst the gradual crystallization of inter-ethnic and more secularly attuned political representation then, UMNO and PAS predominated national politics.\textsuperscript{15}

The legacy of religious reformism in Malay was in its promotion of an active tradition of Islamic dissent. It was to constitute a permanent feature of Malay Muslim politics in time to come. It brought new ideas that were to prove an important source of future religious and political debates, witnessing the further entrenchment of Islam as a significant paradigm for Malay society and of politics in general. Over a period of time, accompanying important structural changes in Malay and Malaysian society, Malay ethnic nationalism itself has come to be reworked, such as through the contemporary popularity of the \textit{Melayu Baru} (new Malay) concept. Even, while it has also suffered some tensions against this. Indeed, the dilemma of reconciling Islam's universality with the demands of an environment favouring ethnic nationalism has never been entirely resolved and has been further registered in contemporary Malay-Islamic discourse. Although UMNO remained the primary symbol of Malay nationalism for some time, in more recent years, it has had to fight more intensively for this mantle amidst the increasing fragmentation of ethnic political representation. The greater number of Malay parties fighting some combination of a Malay nationalist-cum-Islamic cause,
has at any rate demonstrated the continued marriage between these elements in the characterization of Malay identity, even as that marriage is continually being redefined.

3.3 Islam in a Multi-Ethnic Context

Islam in Malaysia's domestic context serves as an expression of confessional, ethnic interest in a society that is ethnically divided between Malays and non-Malays. The political perception of Malaysia as inherently Malay, with special rights due to that ethnic community, is balanced against the large-scale presence of other ethnic communities as an irreversible fact and by the constitutional commitment to the parliamentary process which enables communal representation. The poly-ethnic complexity of Malaysian society has been shaped against the political context of Malay dominance and by the fragile "balance" of the Malaysian population overall.

A Constitutional guarantee to Malay special rights was "bargained" against a corresponding recognition of jus solid right for the non-Malay communities. The exchange of Malay political leadership for unhindered Chinese economic activity served as the unwritten covenant, although some Malay opposition continued against such inter-communal co-operation and the "selling away of the birthright of the Malays", led in particular by PAS. Nevertheless, the electoral success of the first inter-communal coalition party, the Alliance (a tripartite coalition representing the main ethnic communities through UMNO, the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan
Indian Congress (MIC), in 1955 and the dominance of UMNO within that organization helped its claim to a mandate of leading Malay to independence.\textsuperscript{16}

Initial inter communal political co-operation was a strategy devised for negotiating independence from the British. This ultimately proved more durable in the long run as political governance became determined by an interpretation of consociationalism-important decisions affecting each ethnic co-operation, it was also strategically underpinned by Malay power.\textsuperscript{17}

The consociationalist system did not remain intact through Malaysia's political history. After racial riots in 1969, the pressures for greater Malay dominance and the subsequent structural changes to politics and government were to greatly emasculate the system of inter-elite bargaining. The term \textit{Bumiputra} was to hold greater political validity after 1969 in the promotion of their rights by the State. The imperative of Malay unity has been based on the belief that politics represents the primary means for guaranteeing the Malayness of the country and the community's continued dominance within the political system. UMNO's continued ability to secure Malay prerogative and political dominance has given some support to the idea that it is ultimately the only party capable of ensuring Malay unity and hence power.

After 1969, however, the structural changes instituted in governmental policy and representation in a more Malay oriented direction, also significantly altered the principles and processes for inter-ethnic political co-
operation. Theoretically, of course, Malay political parties do not require non-Malay support to predominate, but while the complex patterns of ethnic and religious alignment are built into the system of popular representation, any political entity intent on stable national leadership has not only to represent and protect the interests of its own community but in doing so must not risk alienating the other ethnic communities. Thus the national aims of political stability and economic development can only be served by a clear commitment to the maintenance of inter-communal harmony. The sizeable minority that the non-Malays represent both in overall population as well as electoral terms combined with their considerable contribution to and stake in the economy of the country stand as political facts which any ruling party has had to recognize. Thus the basic form of multi ethnic co-operation and government first instituted under the Alliance has continued to the present day, with even wider ethnic representation, under the Barisan Nasionals (BN-National Front), albeit significantly shaped by the inclinations of different national administrations, under lining an important principle in Malaysia's political process.18

The exercise of political power is further complicated by the fact that its attainment is not entirely accounted for by numerical superiority. Malay political power was also rooted in a system that provided greater political weight to rural constituencies, where majority of Malays traditionally resided, over urban ones. In part, the ruling party's calculations of the possible effects
of its intensified struggle for the Malay vote on the non-Malay communities and how this translated into electoral support must be understood within the context of unequal representation and gerrymandering in order to amplify Malay political power. In particular, new constituency delimitations considerably increased the principle of rural over-representation, while some non-Malay constituencies held up to three times the population of the smallest Malay majority constituency. In 1969, Malays constituted 60 per cent of federal constituencies but by 1984, this had grown to 74 per cent.\(^{19}\)

In defining Malay identity, Islam is critical not only to Malay politics but also to Malay exclusivity within an ethnically divided society. However, the maintenance of communal harmony within the context of ethnic divisions is both threatened by and dependent upon the political system. The reality of a multi-ethnic context has meant that the role of Islam must be measured, to some extent, against the maintenance of the ethnic balance, which UMNO or any Malay political entity vying for leadership of Malaysian political society must ensure. Thus the ethnic equation has continued to serve as the predominant factor shaping political alignments, determining the structure and role of institutions and defining the basic priorities in public policy in Malaysia. It has also affected the political development of Islam and served as an obstacle to the evolution of a more universal identity for that religion within the Malaysian society.
It is thus necessary to situate religious identity and politics within its widest context, bearing in mind that the State, political parties, indeed all social entities and movements, even those which are more distinctly non-Muslim, are part of any debate on the role of Islam in Malaysian society whether directly or otherwise. The debate is part of a dialogic process of politics, which consists of the interplay between all social and political variables in the Malaysian context. Ultimately, although religious politics has been directed to a large extent by the machinations of intra-Malay rivalry, it has had an important bearing on Muslim/non-Muslim relations. All actors in Malaysian religious politics have consistently been made aware of this.

3.4 Islam in Malaysian Constitution

Although ensured secular impartiality to all Malaysian citizens, the Malayan/Malaysian Constitution has added great weight to the ethnic basis of politics, entrenching Islam in Malay identity, as well as the special position of Malays within the country. Issues of religion were highly significant to Constitutional negotiations, in particular over the propriety of identifying Islam as the Federation's official religion. In the event, its establishment as the state religion was deemed necessary to the definition of Malay identity and towards enshrining Malay prerogative. Even so, some Muslim opposition, such as that of PAS, to the secular spirit of the Constitution was founded on its denial of the development of the religion in Malaysia and as such necessitated the party's persistent struggle for an Islamic state.
In defining Islam as the established religion of the State, the Constitution also safeguards the freedom of religious expression. Proselytization among Muslims is forbidden, thus legitimizing the promotion of Islam amongst non-Malays. On the other hand, the recommendation to officially recognize Islam was claimed not to have the intent of negating the establishment of the Federation as a secular state.21

Important provisions were also made for retaining the practice of each Sultan as the head of Islam in individual states. However, the division between state and federal prerogative in Islamic affairs was never made explicit, neither was the extent to which Islam belonged in national political institutions, thus magnifying issues of authority and legitimacy in terms of religion. This has proved particularly pertinent to the position and role of Islam within the contemporary Malaysian political system where the relationship between the state and centre (federal government) has been fraught with tension.

More importantly, the Constitution also guarantees the "special position" of the Malays, and in granting them certain special rights and privileges defines a Malay as one who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay custom. Malay special rights are therefore recognized through the Constitution as bearing a religious qualification, further reinforcing not only the synonymity of Islam
with Malay culture but also the special needs of the Malays and therefore of the Muslim community.

The Constitution, in legitimizing Malay prerogative through Islam, indirectly but inevitably sanctioned the place of religion in the main arena of politics. The so-called "innocuous" provision for Islam, as it stands in the Constitution, has left unresolved the precise role of religion in the contemporary state. Indeed, the conclusion that Malaysia lies somewhere between the character of a secular state and a theocracy, in legal terms at least, has contributed to confusion and unease among the Malaysian public, not to mention the institutional pressure that it has placed on the government, in contemporary times, towards resolving this ambivalence.

Islam, in defining Malay identity, enshrined in the Constitution, is therefore also inextricably bound to the concept of protection of the Malay community. Its resonance as a political concept has, over time, also enabled the object of protection to underwrite the State's promotion of Islam in Malaysia. It has also remained an important component of the relationship between Malay nationalism and Islam.

Even as more recent attempts have made by national leadership at discounting the culture of protection in politics, including allowing for the membership of other indigenes and non-Malay Muslims within the party in more recent years, and in processes of social and economic development, it has demonstrated a remarkable tenacity in Malaysian political culture.
3.5 Islam in Malaysian Political Development

The ideal of Islam's unifying potential within the Malay community has been perpetuated in ethnic politics even as conflict and dissensions have continued over its role within that community. UMNO's primacy in Malay politics in the immediate post-war years did not liquidate significant support for an alternative PAS. Whereas challenge from other Malay political interests proved surmountable, UMNO-PAS rivalry was marked by a fundamental difference in ideology and policy issues pertaining to the Malay community and importantly, in the multi-ethnic context, which party afforded better protection for the Malays.23

UMNO's political objectives, among which were "the excellence of the religion of Islam and to propagate the same", had been outlined in its first Constitution adopted in 1949. Through the Alliance government, however, this entailed attention to building a Islamic state infrastructure, mosques, education, conferences, even as the viability of a Islamic state was considered impractical. This possibly represented a bias of a predominantly Western-educated elite committed to the traditions of a secular state while underlining the imperatives of Malay socio-economic development through wider interpretations of Islam.24

Indeed, although religious authority was actively recruited and by 1959 a substantive section of ulama were represented within the party, these were
within basically secular political structures, and limits on further recruitment explained by UMNO's participation within the Alliance coalition.

PAS's initial leadership, after the first election in 1955, stood in significant contrast, as its religious scholars and Malay nationalists mobilized Malay support through the employment of a religious idiom for the expression of Malay interests and for the protection and preservation of Islam against "infidel" influence.25

Religion did serve as a significant issue in most electoral campaigns up to 1969. Matters of state assistance towards the promotion of Islam and the necessity for vigilance against over-compromise in intra-communal relations were important, but more significantly, Islam was involved in the controversy over how Malay identity should be preserved and protected.

External events also played an influential role in determining intra-Malay rivalry, particularly where it involved questions of a pan-Malay identity within the Southeast Asian region. They did so also in UMNO-PAS differences over what should, in effect, constitute the Malaysian state, namely, whether the inclusion of large non-Malay components such as Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak in the Federation concept of Malaysia would ensure the loss of Malay dominance. Early UMNO-PAS rivalry was also, in part, a function of tensions within Federal state relations. While Islamic matters, Malay culture and land were the jurisdictions of the state government, the vital functions of education, finance, defence and economic
development remained federally administered. Thus the Federal government's vast powers over the state governments has found its authority in Islam extremely vulnerable when a state has been governed by an opposition party.\textsuperscript{26} Although early campaigns for greater national co-ordination of Islamic affairs existed, UMNO had in fact insisted on the individual responsibility of the Sultans in their respective states. By 1969, however, increasing challenge from within the Party and from PAS convinced national leadership of the need to establish a National Council of Islamic Affairs within the Prime Minister's Office.\textsuperscript{27}

Despite the fears of non-Muslim and non-Malay encroachment, religion remained a point of intra-Malay contention and religious appeals directed at political ends, while the objective of unifying the community through its exclusive identity had the undesirable effect of further fragmenting it. In fact, UMNO's symbolic attention to Islam over two decades allowed for the perception of Islam by non-Malays as simply an additional index of Malay identity, it did not yet affect them directly.\textsuperscript{28} The early period of Malay and inter-communal relations was also marked by a politics of ambiguity, particularly useful as electoral strategy. Subsequent tensions in the areas of social policy, however, increased over time, leading to growing support for UMNO's and the Alliance's competitors and by increased ethno-religious demands from within UMNO itself.
Serious inter-ethnic differences revolving around issues of language, education, and economic opportunity did, however, overshadow Malay differences at this point as inequalities arising from the developmental process were compounded and made more delicate by the inescapable fact that poverty and economic inequality coincided with racial or ethnic demarcations in Malaysian society. Indeed, political dominance had ensured neither economic advancement nor social improvement for a large majority of Malays. Prior to 1969, the Malaysian economy was founded on a relatively free capitalist basis emphasizing growth through trade, commerce and foreign investment. Malays were protected by quotas and reservations as outlined in the Constitution but the majority of Malays remained rural and engaged in traditional occupations. Glaring economic disparities continued between Malays and non-Malays (particularly Chinese) in terms of urban and rural commerce, ownership and share capital and in the general distribution of income, all of which ultimately lent support to the official interpretation of ethnic motivation in the 1969 riots.

Agitation over UMNO's limited success in meeting its "protector" functions, initiated from within the party by younger members constituting the "new guard" (pimpinan baru) against elite leadership, were representative of intensified Malay nationalist demands and of Malay frustration at what was perceived to be the neglect of Malay problems. Although lack of attention to Islam was not specifically part of their grievances, these demands inevitably
accorded a greater attention to Islam as a symbol of the identity. Subsequently, UMNO's incremental attention to religion served as a response to external and internal agitation, for a more Islamic character, particularly at the level of state and regional politics.

Outside of intra and inter-party rivalry, student politics, the active organization, numbers and sophistication of which had swelled in the 1960s, was another platform for the articulation of dissent from government policy on issues of Malay economic and social backwardness and of the non-implementation of Malay as the national language.  

The intensely communal general election campaign of 1969 heightened the polarization between the Malay and non-Malay communities and was to take its toll in the racial riots of that year. The government response was to suspend Parliament and institute a period of emergency rule which was to provide primarily for a reassessment by Malay political leaders of the future political development of the country and for the subsequent restructuring of government.

The major changes to the conduct of politics through the watershed of 13 May 1969 served to highlight the quest for a Malay identity even as they continued to accentuate tensions between, and within, racial and religious communities. The politics of the previous years contributed in one way or another, but the most immediate catalyst of serious ethnic rioting in Kuala Lumpur were the dramatic results of the 1969 General Elections when the
Alliance coalition lost its two-thirds majority in Parliament and the Opposition parties, most significantly the PAS. Changes were instituted in government policy and priorities as a response, many of which were to gradually alter the structures of Malaysian political society and, more importantly, to further stimulate processes of Islamic revivalism which have continued to the present.

Even as the concepts of communal incorporations and representations were widened within the new political framework of the Barisan Nasional (BN), directed towards national unity through the achievement of new economic and social goals, a fundamental shift to greater Malay predominance and orientation within the Malaysian political system was unmistakable. Political restructuring was also directed at entrenching UMNO's standing, stymieing the erosion of popular support and implicitly the stability of the political regime it headed.

UMNO's efforts were therefore directed at Malay unity, clear confirmation of Malay political power, predominance and reaffirmation of a Malay identity for the country. Younger leadership, representative of the ascendant nationalist critique within UMNO, helped articulate this new direction. In as much as the term Bumiputra had been supported since UMNO's birth, restructuring after 1969 ensured its institution as a norm in national politics. This was accompanied by a new national ideology, the Rukunegara, based on the principles of belief in God, loyalty to the King and
country, defending the Constitution and rule of law, good behaviour and morality.

A qualified pro-Malay emphasis, continued recognition that greater dominance also entailed the protection of non-Malay interests, rested on the assumption that UMNO would always be the ruling party, constitutionally recognized by the fact that all government policies should henceforth be initiated or approved by the UMNO Supreme Council.\(^{31}\)

Most significantly, greater attention was paid to the mediation of Malay identity through Islam, even as this continued to refer to some extent to traditional Malay culture. A National Cultural Congress held in 1971 set such guidelines through proposals that a Malaysian culture would also rely on the bases of the culture of its "natural inhabitants", i.e. the Malays, including Islam and other "appropriate" elements. The Congress was also important for its recommendations for the provision of a suitable context for the spread of Islamic moral values, the wide teaching of the religion's significance in founding the modern era in Malaysia and the unification of Islamic and civil law under a basically Islamic structure.\(^{32}\)

Henceforth, communal harmony was envisioned as being protected by the constitutional proscription of any public discussion of issues deemed too sensitive, including the special position of the Malays, the rights of the other ethnic communities and the position of the Sultans. Major changes in language and education policies were intended to raise dramatically the
The greater attention to Islamic affairs worked partly as a response to the challenge from PAS but partly also as recognition of competition from student movements in the political expression of Islam and, more importantly, in the context of a global reassertion of the religion. The semblance of greater Malay unity was in fact obtained through PAS's incorporation within the BN coalition party, further enhancing the new Government's affirmation of its commitment to Islam as central to national development. PAS's own General Assembly in 1971 had reflected its greater preparedness for "the reality of Malaysia" as wide-ranging changes to party ideology underlined its goal of uniting the umma "regardless of party affiliation or race".

Significant to the coalition agreement was the recognition that Islamic values would be propagated without restriction. In fact, PAS continued to champion the creation of an Islamic state, the implementation of Islamic laws, the establishment of an Islamic university and the complete overhaul of the political, economic and educational systems to reflect Islamic rules and values, throughout its tenure within the BN coalition, managing to extract concessions amounting to a recognition of its specifically Islamic role in the coalition government, PAS representatives in the Government and the proportion of Malay representation at tertiary and professional levels while efforts were made to reform Islamic education, which was to be a compulsory topic for Muslim students at some universities.33
Legislature were guaranteed the freedom to question any initiative or Bill on the grounds that they contravened the teachings of Islam.\textsuperscript{35}

Yet intra-Malay rivalry did not really abate. The political realities of two Malay-Muslim parties continuing to vie for the same basis of support, even within a coalition, in fact magnified tensions between the two, aggravated by the absence of grassroots support for PAS within the BN. Strains then continued to build over ideology and insecurities over UMNO's commitment to PAS political representation at state and national levels, all of which were to eventually climax in a crisis in Kelantan in 1977 when a protracted struggle over state control by either party resulted in the Federal declaration of an emergency, and eventual takeover of the state that signalled PAS's exit from the BN. Despite these setbacks, the five years spent within the Government had provided the party, to some extent, with nation-wide respectability and was to greatly lend confidence in waging more intense political competition outside traditional strongholds.\textsuperscript{36}

Although the PAS challenge was not initially substantially electoral, its\textit{ raison d'être} proved a symbolic enough one to UMNO. Over time, however, evidence of the growing support for PAS from the constituencies of the greatest relevance to Malay politics was demonstrated by a significant and growing shift by many Malays in the rural heartlands and regions in favour of PAS. The Party had in fact gained a 20 per cent increase in its share of the total vote though four General Elections, from 1955-1969. The obvious
potential for a dramatic jump in these figures in constituencies with absolute Malay majorities underlined the serious challenge that PAS posed to UMNO in terms of the Malay vote by 1978, it had obtained approximately 40 per cent of that vote in Peninsular Malaysia.37

Structural changes were also induced by the New Economic Policy (NEP), supporting official opinion that national unity was only possible through the alleviation of Malay economic problems requiring their greater protection and that this was linked to national survival in "harmony".38 It essentially sought to restructure the society by removing the identification of race or ethnicity with economic function within a target of twenty years and also to eradicate poverty. The NEP aimed for Bumiputra management and ownership, at a projected 30 per cent of Malaysia's total corporate wealth, and sought for employment patterns at all levels and sectors, rural and urban, to reflect the racial composition of the population.39 Such socio-economic redistribution was primarily to be facilitated by direct government intervention and investment in the economy.

While PAS articulated opposition to the NEP, in principle criticism from other quarters focused on its implementation, the relative success of the redistribution of wealth and resources on an inter-ethnic basis against the emerging gulf in intra-ethnic terms, as well as the continued high incidence of poverty inspite of or due to the NEP. However, criticism of the Policy held political limitations. The increasing equation of the NEP with UMNO meant
that its protection, continued promotion or even existence, were perceived as unquestionable facts, as political survival, for all ethnic communities, was frequently determined by support for NEP.

Politics was also determined by complementary changes in the machinery of the government. As Gordon Means points out, policy changes introduced after 1969 accelerated the Malaysianization of the government apparatus, enabling the rapid development of a largely Malay bureaucracy. The growth in its scale and importance in planning and policy initiatives helped the bureaucracy function as another bastion of Malay dominance, inevitably intertwining with politics as it became exceedingly important for political elites to gain access to the bureaucratic structures of decision making. This was ultimately also to underline the congruence of political and bureaucratic support for a greater Islamic orientation in public policy.

3.6 Islamic Revivalism as Political Challenge

While Islam's principal political manifestation in the preceding two decades was a source of cleavage within the Malay community, by the 1970s its socio-political force and agenda had extended its role beyond the parameters of the party system. Religious resurgence in Malaysia in this period was clearly an integral part of the global resurgence that Muslims themselves had prophesied for Islam. The fifteenth century was to herald a new golden age for Islam and an expansion of the faith. While the international context did hold important repercussions on domestic
developments, the Islamic revival in Malaysia was also rooted within its own domestic circumstances, which shaped the development and attitude of religious revivalist currents referred to as *dakwah*.

*Dakwah* is a generic term that describes multi-functional realities. Reflective of a global phenomenon in the growth of Islamic activism, its primary emphasis has remained that of the promotion of Islam through missionary effort but with the contemporary qualification of socio-political activity and movements aimed at creating "better Muslims", by raising the level of Islamic consciousness in everyday life reflected particularly in religious and ritual observance. Although political *dawah* in Malaysia has emphasized both, it would appear that the intellectual foundations of the phenomenon were more slowly entrenched than the ritual. As a constituent of Islamic revivalism in Malaysia, its character has been distinguished by its heterogeneity of form and purpose.

Accelerated structural and social changes through the NEP provided the background against which such developments emerged. Significant changes in social demography, the massive rural-urban shift and increased opportunities in the tertiary sector were all to mark significant changes for Malay society and therefore Malay politics, and in many ways provided a direct link to the resurgence. The brief UMNO-PAS coalition had also created a political vacuum of a kind. While proclaiming an aversion to party politics, many within the *dakwah* movement gained the opportunity for political
expression in activities which were not overtly so but were carried out in the name of religion. Although student politics had initially reflected the concerns of Malay ethnic nationalism, its conduct displayed a greater Islamic orientation by 1973, occasioned by the influence of the cultural and intellectual phenomenon of *dakwah*. In the decade of the seventies, most associational activities linked with it were on university campuses, and many transformed the student politics to "struggle" through the banner of Islam.

**ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia) or Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia**, launched in 1971 as an "organizational platform for Muslim graduates to play a legitimate role in building a society based on Islam", was among the most successful of these revivalist movements. Indeed, throughout the 1970s, under the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim, it was the most articulate and successful critic on the manner of government and public policy, lobbying against corruption, abuse of power, economic injustice and the failings of the education system. It proposed instead Islam as an economic, political and social blueprint for the Malaysian society. While the establishment of *Shari'ah* law within an Islamic state in Malaysia was an articulated goal, this was also perceived as being a viable solution to structural Malay disadvantage as well as to communalism.42

Other major revivalist organizations such as *Darul Arqam* and the *Jama'ah Tabligh* while sharing similar objectives, proposed different methods for their achievement. Their essentially non-political character indicated their
lesser threat to the status quo, at least in the short term. Their attitude of religious quietism, however, also indicated withdrawal from the prevailing Malaysian socio-political system which in the long run was to prove threatening to the government. PERKIM (Malaysian Muslim Welfare Organization), an officially state patronized organization, was also involved in *dakwah* work, but at its own insistence remained entirely apolitical and thus peripheral to subsequent political developments.  

More religious aims were offered by other revivalist movements, in particular among the Malaysian student populations abroad, such as *Suara Islam* (The Voice of Islam) and the Islamic Representative Council (IRC) who more clearly registered grievances against the Government, denouncing UMNO leadership as infidels, envisaging ideological struggle towards the establishment of an Islamic state, and dismissing the moderation and ambiguity of groups like ABIM.

*Dakwah* activities and discourses frequently focused on theological debate over issues of Islamic justice, the Islamic state and the qualities of political leadership, sufficiently then constitution political discourse. Debate over the viability of an Islamic economy inevitably called into question official plans for modernization and development on the Malays, primarily through the NEP, reflected or denounced because of its basis of race and ethnicity. In lamenting the Malaysian economy's overdependence upon the international capitalist system, ABIM had also been critical of modernization
processes and Western-oriented development as causes of chaos that plagued Muslim countries like Malaysia.45

The greatest relevancy of the phenomenon of *dakwah* has been in its longer term effects on orienting Islamic consciousness towards the articulation of and search for social justice, however broadly defined. To some extent this meant that *dakwah* held a less obvious political agenda in the Malaysian context, at least for a time, but its tenure and popularity have also allowed for its long-term and wider influence. However, as social entities given to politics, whether directly or indirectly, Islamic movements have not been formed by social processes elsewhere but are shaped through the political process in which they engage, they are not independent of their context, but organic to it.46 In the Malaysian context, *dakwah* was inevitably harnessed to mainstream political process and debate, even as some organizations remained apolitical, more concerned with individual conversion and the promotion of a more purely social agenda. In general then, as Islamic social theories informed these *dakwah* movements and were debated among them. This had for-reaching implications for the very nature and structure of the Malaysian society, including necessarily, the authority of the powers that be an UMNO dominated government and of the place of Islam in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society.

*Dakwah* movements give challenge and lay in structural features, their constituents tended to comprise that pool of highly educated Malay political
talent that the State might look to for their future leaders and that UMNO might eventually draw from. More precisely, in addressing Malaysia's Muslims and therefore Malay audience, their discourse implicitly challenged UMNO's role as the protector of Malay interests, even as it reshaped the agenda of socio-economic context of intra-Malay rivalry in the political domain which set the scene for the Malaysian government's attempts to meet such a new challenge to its authority.47

A vast expansion of the Federal religious bureaucracy was projected, in part as a response to state prerogative in Islamic affairs. In 1974, the Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah (Islamic Missionary Foundation) was created directly out of the Prime Minister's Office. The National Fatwa Council, established in 1978 to co-ordinate state religious council activities, also held the power to issue rulings on any religious matter affecting Muslims.48 The influence of Islamic revivalist discourse was to lead the Government towards a re-emphasis of its national development goals as relying on the twin tracks of material and spiritual endeavour.49 On the coercive front, a litany of legislation was introduced that could be used against associational activities concerned with Islam. Dakwah songsang (false dakwah), projected as a serious threat to communal harmony though "extremist" and "deviationist" practices, was proscribed. In 1981, the Societies Act Amendment Bill was introduced, aimed primarily at restricting a new category of political association, it was seen as being largely aimed at ABIM. Dakwah did also
help renew the vigour of Islam as an issue in electoral politics. As the original architect of an Islamic vision for Malaysia, PAS was to benefit directly and greatly from the popularity of *dakwah*. Its religious identity and its participation within the national Islamic bureaucracy from 1973 to 1977 positioned it ideally to direct the political energies of the Islamic revival and to address the question of the place of Islam in society. Its anti-secular image and view of Islam as *ad-deen*, (complete way of life), echoed many of the central themes, if not the spirit, of *dakwah*.50

Despite UMNO's superior party machinery, the termination of its alliance with PAS renewed a fundamental challenge to its legitimacy. In order to avoid the emergence of further Malay challenge, UMNO exerted great efforts to project itself as a guardian of the religion. Islam was recognized in particular as a bulwark against other competitive ideologies among the Malays, in particular Communism and Socialism. Increasingly, UMNO General Assemblies were occasions for reaffirming the party's commitment to Islam while proclaiming its moderate nature, although party members were advised to be vigilant against competition to appear more Islamic than others because it was a responsible party.

Political rivalry through Islam was significantly revived by a tacit alliance between ABIM and PAS in the 1978 General Elections, following its exit from the BN coalition. Their ideological affinity was further cemented in 1980 in their combined efforts in facilitating peasant demonstrations against
controlled rice prices and hunger in Kedah, which proved highly embarrassing to the Government and to UMNO.51

PAS was itself revitalized by the influx of new, younger members between 1978 and 1982, with more advanced educational qualifications. beneficiaries of expanded educational opportunities under the NEP, frequently of a technical nature but also those more learned in the religious field. Despite the party's overall failure in the 1978 General Elections, it still managed to secure more than one-third of the total Malay votes cast. Indeed, PAS had adopted a new strategy of expanding its support base in the north of the Peninsula, particularly in Trengganu and Kedah, which was to provide the consummate challenge to UMNO. By 1980, UMNO was increasingly alarmed by the narrower margin obtained between BN victors and PAS candidates and by record increases in votes polled for PAS in a series of by-elections.52

Its perceived vulnerability over such developments was reflected in growing calls from within UMNO itself for the proscription of both PAS and of the term "Islamic" from the names of political parties. ABIM's activities were increasingly regulated, its supporters in government penalized and authorization for rural public activities increasingly limited. Although couched in new language, the propaganda war between PAS and UMNO continued (particularly for UMNO) to focus on the basis of Malay support. Seizing upon a common theme of global Islamic resurgence, that of the unity of the umma (the Islamic Nation), consistent challenge and persistent
"slander" by PAS against the country's leaders were deemed to be placing this goal even further out of reach. On the other hand, UMNO's efforts and record of achievements in promoting Islam and particularly Islamic education were proclaimed concrete against PAS lip service towards the defence of Islam, despite its nineteen-year rule of Kelantan.⁵³

By the end of the decade, however, the State's record of commitment to Islam and dakwah remained primarily symbolic. The Government appeared no closer to any serious meeting of Islamic revivalist demands and appeared committed to the perpetuation of the political process and the State in its traditional form. The change in national leadership in 1981, however, was to significantly alter and in turn was itself altered by the Islamic challenge in Malaysian society. While political rhetoric concerning Islam had been magnified in the 1970s, this represented a continuation of past trends. The 1980s were, however, to prove that responses to increasing demands would be forced to go beyond rhetoric.

3.7 Islam and Politics in a Plural Society

Religion in Malaysia has remained everywhere an index of ethnic identity. The centralization of Malay-Muslim rivalry in fact marginalized the field of multi-ethnic politics, although, this was also to be explained by serious internal differences within the non-Malay parties themselves.

At any rate, this served increasingly to divert the non-Malay communities from straight politics. Although Chinese politics has not
remained completely docile in the face of greater pressures for Malay-Muslim dominance, periodic attempts at regaining Chinese rights have consistently met with UMNO pressure for the elimination of such radical interests from within the BN for fear of upsetting the balance achieved thus far. While non-Malay coalition partners within the BN necessarily muted their responses to Islamization, some opposition parties like the DAP seized the opportunity for presenting themselves as actively protecting non-Malay rights, campaigning upon the problem of religious Muslim extremism and the potential for further Malay imposition on non-Malays through religion and culture.

In 1983, a conference on National Unity and Ethnic Relations elicited strong emotions from non-Muslim participants over the perceived marginality of their position within the country. Fear and frustration were articulated over such issues as the acquisition of land for religious buildings and burial grounds and the increasing scope and implementation of Shari'ah laws over non-Muslim lives and interests. The Malaysian Consultative Council on Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism formed in 1983, with the specific aim of combating the image of non-Muslim weakness due to the differences between them, deliberately excluded any Muslim organizations from participation. At an influential seminar on National Integration held in 1985, opinions and observations expressed by non-Malay BN leaders indicated levels of polarization perceived even at elite levels and deep
misgiving over widespread "bureaucratic racism" that had made non-Muslims feel "increasingly insecure".

Islamic revivalism has also been met by heightened cultural and religious revivalism within the non-Malay communities. Some studies on non-Muslim religious innovation and ethnic identity in Malaysia demote the arousal of non-Muslim sentiments as an aspect of the larger problem of ethnic identity formation, suggesting that many non-Malays retreat into diverse religious activities as convenient alternatives for ethnic expression. Others suggest that it is also possible to read such heightened religious innovation as reflecting and generating new patterns of Muslim and non-Muslim "this-worldly" orientations towards either community. Both arguments hold important implications for long-term social processes in determining the role and development of Islam and religion in general in Malaysian society. They also indicate the continued connection between Muslims and non-Muslims in defining and determining that role.

Even while working, for the most part, to confirm ethnic particularism the Islamic resurgence has also addressed itself to the pluralistic nature of Malaysian society. The Administration's Islamization policy and the increasing centrality of the religion to Malay politics had engendered a debate over the legitimacy of the ideas of Bumiputraism and Malay nationalism within an Islamic framework. The PAS General Assemblies of 1981 and 1982 witnessed attempts by the party to eradicate its racial image by assuring
Malaysians of the Party's ability to "deliver the message of unity and prosperity for all", opening its doors to all Muslims, irrespective of race and establishing programmes to inform non-Muslims of the party's objectives. Subscribing to a nonconformist view that Islam is supreme and cannot be made subordinate to narrow ethnic concepts such as nationalism, PAS's own campaign against *assabiyah* (ethnic chauvinism) has also constituted an effort to recruit more non-Malays to its membership ranks.

Its sponsorship of a National Unity Conference in 1985 aimed at addressing a multi-racial audience, proclaimed Islam as a universal religion that envisioned equality within its community and suggested the possibility for a pious Chinese or Indian Muslim to assume, eventually, the post of Prime Minister in Malaysia. Subsequent allegations about PAS dispensation with *Bumiputra* rights and privileges were it to come to power, initiated extreme response from all Malay quarters (including UMNO and ABIM), accusing the party of treason, treachery and betrayal of the Malays. These vehement reactions are perhaps best understood in the context of the imminent UMNO General Assembly at the end of the same month, where Dr. Mahathir chose to sound a warming that UMNO's willingness to co-operate with other ethnically based parties could not be taken for granted.

Although PAS attempted to mobilize Chinese electoral support and has been occasionally successful at arriving at co-operative electoral supports and at co-operative electoral strategies with other opposition parties to deter BN
dominance, such as in the 1990 General Elections, there remains general fear that inspite of PAS claims, the establishment of an Islamic state, would simply replace an ethnic dichotomy in Malaysia with a religious one. UMNO's successful depiction of potential PAS betrayal of Malay prerogative and its insistence that the objective of an Islamic state is, contemporarily at least, non-negotiable, ultimately defeated its attempts at inter-communal co-operation.  

In fact, as serious intra-Malay rivalry in the late 1980s was compounded, this also precipitated initiatives from PAS for the formation of an Islamic Front (Barisan Islamiah) composed of all the Malay-Muslim parties in Malaysia, in an effort to protect the interest of Islam. Indeed, the prospect of Malay (now often referred to as Islamic) unity in Malaysia, has traditionally served as a precursor to elections or as a deterrent to non-Malay disputes or demands. The 1990 elections demonstrated the political limits of even national leadership commitment to a balanced approach. At a point when Semangat '46's potential to wrest power from UMNO through a similar multi-ethnic coalition was perceived as an imminent threat, Dr Muhathir employed brinkmanship strategy to discredit his major rival. Semangat's President, Tenku Rezaleigh, was depicted as a betrayer of the Malay-Muslim cause because of his Party's coalition with the Christian Kadazan-dominated Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), the implication being that only UMNO held the capacity to protect Malays, and therefore Muslims, against such threats.
Even while Government leadership has repeatedly asserted that non-Muslims have nothing to fear from further Islamization and their rights as constitutionally guaranteed, it is apparent that the concept and necessity of Malay exclusivity are often conveniently expressed in the Islamic idiom, whether intended or otherwise. Furthermore, non-Muslims have in fact been increasingly affected by legislations directed at issues of religious conversion, apostasy and Islamic reform, even if indirectly, a product of heightened competition between states in the entrenchment of their Islamic identities as well as of the predominance and prerogative of state legislation in religious matters over that of Federal adjudication.62

Another important aspect of contemporary problems in Malaysian politics, is that the myth of monolithic ethnic communities is rapidly disintegrating. This has clearly been a product of structural change, the rapid economic development and modernization, in particular the Malay community (through rural-urban migration and the rapid expansion of a Malay middle class via the NEP) has also accelerated changes in political attitudes. Such fundamental social alterations are perhaps occurring faster than the existing political structures can either understand or accommodate.63

The irony of the unitary depiction of Malay-Muslim identity is the disaggregating of its reality. Even as Malays claim distinctly integrative role for Islam, the very concept of Malay-Muslim identity is being remoulded by divergent paths. The question is begged if in fact any alternative ideological
apparatus to Islam could or would effectively install and sustain Malay unity?.
In as much as Islam continues to be linked to Malay identity and works primarily as an ethnic manifestation within the milieu of a multi-ethnic society, then the role of religion in political development has continued to be expressed through a politics of identity.

Since political organizations in Malaysia remain essentially communally bound, and politicians are ultimately divided by their ethnic origins, then Islam, as the prime component of one community's identity, has stood little chance of gaining a national image. Furthermore, there remains to some extent at least, the vested interests of communal parties in the perpetuation of a system which has thus far enabled their continued political power. UMNO, with its essential ideology of protection of Malay interests and as the ultimate arbiter of conflicting interests in Malaysian society, as the ruling party, is the corporal culprit and also the victim of this syndrome. In the context of the 1990s, however, the Mahathir administration has manifested the search for a definition of Islam acceptable to all, including the non-Muslim communities.
Notes and References


4. The form of traditional Malay political culture and the position of Islam within it applies only to the Peninsula, the state of Sabah and Sarawak hold rather different histories.


*Ibid*.


The party maintained that UMNO's greatest fear about *dakwah* was that it would greatly benefit PAS. Islam as *ad-deen*, proposes that the religion be
viewed and practiced as a complete way of life instead of it being assigned to a specific role (i.e. political, social) in Muslim life.


60 *Semangat '46*, which translate from Malay as the Spirit of 1946, is the name of a breakaway party from the politically dominant UMNO (United Malays National Organization). The schism arose from personal rivalry between the prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and the former minister of trade and industry, Tengku Razaleh Hamzah, and the former deputy prime minister, Datuk Musa Hitam. The term Spirit of 1946 refers to the year in which UMNO was established in opposition to British constitutional revisionism and was intended to register that the breakaway group was the authentic legatee of UMNO's political values and traditions. *Semangat '46* was established in the wake of a decision by the federal High Court in February 1988 that UMNO
was an unlawful society. *Semangat* '46 was officially registered as a political party in May 1989 and then entered into an electoral pact with *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS).

The coalition known as the *Gagasan Rakyat* also included the DAP and a number of smaller opposition parties. Three days after PBS's sudden exit from the BN to join forces with the *Gagasan Rakyat*, *Utusan Malaysia* (the largest Malay, UMNO owned, daily) carried a massive front page photograph of the *Semangat* '46 leader being welcomed in Sabah, sporting traditional Kadazan headwear. The deliberately magnified pattern of the hat however gave the impression that it was marked by a large cross, effectively looking like a 'bishop' habit. The rhetorical caption asked if Tenku Razaleigh's political strategies were in fact endangering Malay Muslims.

The Islamic Administration Enactment Bill passed by the Selangor State Assembly in 1989 which allowed non-Muslim minors to embrace Islam once they reach the age of majority (puberty) was one such issue. According to Islamic law, which also allows for conversion into but not out of Islam, makes the new convert liable to the obligations of that law and subject to the jurisdiction of Muslim courts. The issue was hotly debated between Malay, Chinese and Indian communal representatives in the Assembly with clear expressions of non-Muslim fear that the Bill suggested a serious encroachment on their rights of religious freedom. see more details in Shanti Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, New York, Routledge, 1997. pp. 121-129.