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ANALYSIS ON SOUTHEAST ASIA



A pro-Democratic Action Party (DAP) banner telling voters it is all right to "boycott" the convenience store chain in the "Allah socks" controversy but not to boycott the constituency of Kuala Kubu Bharu and to vote for DAP in Selangor, Malaysia, on 2 May 2024. (Photo: Akmal Saleh / Facebook)

The Risks and Perceived Rewards of Rising Revivalist Populism in Malaysia

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SYAZA SHUKRI

The unhelpful antics of a particular populist politician in Malaysia reflect the dangers of playing up differences when a country needs unity.

Recently, Malaysia has experienced a palpable surge in [populism](#) that has swept across the nation's political and social landscape, stirring debate and discord. The case of Akmal Saleh, leader of UMNO's youth wing, and the unfortunate saga concerning [socks](#) adorned with the word "Allah" serve as a poignant reflection of this trend. This incident is symptomatic of a larger, more concerning pattern of revivalist populist politics in Malaysia. This type of populism often emerges in response to perceived threats to national identity, culture, or the socioeconomic status quo, positing a return to 'the good old days' of Malay political hegemony.

Malaysia, with its [economic disparities](#), ethnic divisions, and religious sensitivities, is fertile ground for populism. Populist politics appeal to ordinary citizens' grievances against perceived elites or the establishment, or pitch one group against the other. Akmal Saleh's incessant calls in March 2024 to boycott a [convenience store chain](#) for selling the abovementioned socks and the violent [attacks](#) against some outlets underscore the potency of identity politics. This uproar over socks, of all things, highlights not only Malay-Muslim sensitivity towards perceived misuse of religious symbols but also the readiness of right-wing political actors to leverage such issues for broader populist agendas.

The essence of populism lies in its double-edged sword: it purportedly champions the people's voice while often simplifying complex issues into 'us-versus-them' narratives. In the case of Akmal and the socks, the incident quickly escalated from a minor oversight that the convenience store chain owner quickly acknowledged and [apologised](#) for, to a litmus test of Malaysian non-Muslims' respect for Islam and the acceptance of Malaysia's Islamic national identity. This is a classic example of how populism operates, exploiting emotions and framing debates starkly, which leaves little room for nuance or understanding.

Unfortunately, Prime Minister (PM) [Anwar Ibrahim](#) and his Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Religious Affairs) Mohd Na'im Mokhtar did not use the opportunity to further discourse on multiculturalism. They instead asked other [authorities](#) to handle the issue; the PM made it clear that after their official reports were made, the matter [should not be discussed](#) further. The saga was unfortunate but could have been used for Malaysians to have an honest conversation about heightened inter-religious tensions. Even more unhelpfully, Malaysia's Islamic Development Department (Jakim) introduced a [hotline](#) to report so-called insults to Islam. This is a one-sided solution; there is no hotline to report insults against other religions or their adherents.

The silence and absence of leadership from the Unity government exacerbates the revivalist populist narrative that the [non-Malays are out of touch](#) with the Malay majority. As a Malay nationalist party, UMNO was affected after Zahid Hamidi brought the party to work with Pakatan Harapan and their arch enemy, the Democratic Action Party (DAP). Akmal could be seen, via a carefully devised populist strategy, as a next-generation leader who could convince Malaysia's Malays that UMNO is still looking out for them. This is based on a simplistic assumption that the

Malays are looking for a saviour to protect their special position and that of Islam, especially since the DAP (more formidable than the Malaysian Chinese Association, MCA) is now in government.

However, the Malays' dissatisfaction with UMNO runs deeper; the party's fortunes cannot be improved overnight. Akmal's calls for boycotts of the convenience store resulted in at least three attacks using [Molotov cocktails](#) against its outlets. In contrast, Perikatan Nasional (PN) has appeared more rational and moderate by [staying out](#) of the boycott.

Akmal has been in the headlines over several such incidents. Other examples include his inciting questions over 'Malaysian identity' (as a Muslim-majority country) over the recognition of [bak kut teh](#) (pork rib tea) as a Malaysian heritage food (when Muslims are prohibited from consuming pork), the possible nomination of [Chinese new villages](#) as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and the [annual](#) dispute over [vernacular schools](#), which coincided with parliamentary debates on whether [school canteens](#) should be open during the Muslims' fasting month of Ramadhan. Akmal has taken advantage of these instances by accentuating or distorting their religious and racial elements. Populists are adept at using [emotions](#) such as anger to rile up support; among Muslim Malaysians, any perceived [insult to Islam](#) ranks high among the unforgivable. In this way, Akmal Saleh appears to be strategically closer to PN, which is unsurprising as he was seen to have spent more time with [PN's machinery](#) in the recent Kuala Kubu Bharu by-election.

Akmal is not the first UMNO Youth leader to use populist tactics. In 2005, Hishamuddin Hussein, then UMNO youth chief, unsheathed and brandished a *keris* (a traditional Malay dagger) as a symbol of Malay supremacy at the UMNO General Assembly. This sparked concerns among non-Malays, causing a significant backlash that contributed to the ruling coalition's loss of its two-thirds parliamentary majority in the [2008 general elections](#) (GE). Such a populist move can be a miscalculation that damages the long-term survival of the party.

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In the face of rising populism, there is an urgent need for Malaysian leadership that prioritises social cohesion, champions inclusivity, and fosters inter-religious and ethnic empathy and understanding. [The King](#), fulfilling his promise to be a more hands-on monarch, met DAP and UMNO leaders, including Akmal, to help douse the flames from the 'Allah socks' debacle. However, this did not stop Akmal from continuing with his populist attacks against the DAP, such as questioning the DAP for not defending a Malay entrepreneur he boycotted for producing an [inappropriate video](#) during Ramadhan.

Akmal's revivalist populist rhetoric will likely continue until the next GE, which is due by 2027. Malaysia's Malays have a chance to tell him at the ballot box if it works.

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Syaza Shukri is a Visiting Fellow at ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute. She is also an Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science, International Islamic University Malaysia.

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