

SOCIETY

IIUM x ABIM: Islam's Role in Malaysia's Education

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Prof. Emeritus Datuk Dr. Osman Bakar's appointment ceremony as IIUM's rector. Prof. Osman Bakar brings a wealth of experience to IIUM as a renowned scholar in Islamic philosophy. Credits: BH Online

Introduction

Education is a gateway to discover the world, going far beyond merely acing exams. It is about understanding the complex realities that shape our existence. In Malaysia, education is an evolving landscape, constantly adapting in pursuit of better outcomes.

A variety of roadmaps and blueprints have been laid out to prepare Malaysians for the challenges of the world. One pressing challenge today is the role of religion in society.

In Malaysia, where Islam is the official religion, its influence pervades many aspects of life. The government actively supports Islamic institutions, mosques, and religious education, weaving Islamic teachings into the national curriculum. The relationship between Islam and education often reflects the priorities of the government of the day, influencing how Islam is communicated to the public. This dynamic serves as a reminder of the powerful role education plays in shaping not just intellectual capabilities, but also cultural and spiritual awareness of future generations.

History of Islam in Malaysia's Educational System

The history of Islam in the Malay Peninsula dates to around the 12th century. Early Islamic education centred in mosques and later evolved into *pondok* schools. These institutions prioritized religious studies, Quranic teachings, and the Arabic language, laying a foundation for Islamic scholarly traditions in the region. As Malaysia advanced, the government aimed to modernize the education system while preserving Islamic values. During Mahathir Mohamad's first administration, he emphasized the integration of Islamic values to cultivate a national identity rooted in Islamic teachings. This vision led to the expansion and establishment of Islamic schools and institutions.

Anwar Ibrahim, serving as the education minister from 1986 to 1991, was instrumental in implementing this transformative agenda. His efforts focused on curriculum reform, ensuring that Islamic studies became a core component of education. Through these transformative steps, Malaysia continues to honour its Islamic roots while striving for a progressive, inclusive future in education.

The establishment of Islamic universities in Malaysia represents a significant step toward integrating modern academia with Islamic teachings. Among these institutions, the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), founded in 1983 with Anwar as the second president (1988-1999), stands out. IIUM's mission is to merge Islamic wisdom with contemporary knowledge, crafting an educational framework that embodies both Malaysia's Islamic identity and its commitment to global relevance. The university offers diverse programs in fields such as law, engineering, and medicine, each infused with an Islamic perspective to ensure a well-rounded educational experience.

In 1998, the political landscape took a significant turn when Anwar Ibrahim was dismissed from his roles in Umno and as deputy prime minister. Despite this political upheaval, the Islamization agenda continued unabated. Abdullah Badawi, who served as prime minister from 2003 to 2009, made substantial changes to the education system by introducing J-QAF. This curriculum aimed to enhance Islamic education in public schools by focusing on Jawi script, Quranic studies, Arabic language, and Fardhu Ain. Najib Razak, Badawi's successor, continued to prioritize Islamic education by increasing budget allocations, ensuring that the Islamization agenda remained at the forefront of national education policy.

When Pakatan Harapan emerged victorious in the 2018 general elections, it marked another shift, particularly with the introduction of Jawi in Bahasa Malaysia textbooks for Standard Four students. This move caused a major debate over so-called Islamic elements in the national curriculum, despite Jawi as a script being more about Malay culture. The return of Anwar Ibrahim to power in 2022 has brought about new educational initiatives, such as the introduction of a module on “Imam al-Nawawi 4.0 Hadith.” This module is now part of the curriculum for Muslim students at various levels, emphasizing moral and ethical teachings derived from the Hadiths—sayings or deeds of the Prophet. These shifts indicate an enduring focus on integrating Islamic values within the educational system, mirroring broader societal trends and political necessities.

In Malaysia, different political parties vie for influence by portraying their commitment to Islam in various ways. Historically, two dominant parties, Umno and PAS, have been leading players in the country's Malay-Islamic political landscape. However, since around 2015, new parties like Amanah and Bersatu have joined the fray, broadening the competition to appeal to the same voter base. Each of these parties, and their respective coalitions, strives to demonstrate their dedication to Islamic principles, including by shaping national education policies.

Anwar Ibrahim's ascent to prime minister marked a pivotal moment. His political journey is deeply rooted in his time as a Muslim activist, dating back to his university days. Notably, he led the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement, known as ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia). Anwar's decision to join Umno in 1981 initially disappointed some ABIM members and leaders. Despite this, his eventual rise to prime minister under Pakatan Harapan has rekindled hopes. His current position signals a potential shift in the political rewards and strategies of his supporters, particularly those who remained active within Islamic movements.

ABIM's Significance in Shaping Malaysia's Educational Landscape

ABIM has been a driving force in shaping Malaysia's educational landscape by integrating Islamic principles into teachings. Founded in the 1970s, ABIM focuses on promoting Islamic education while fostering a comprehensive understanding of these teachings among Malaysian youth. It blends religious teachings with contemporary educational practices to create well-rounded individuals. The alignment between politics and education under Anwar's administration strengthened the impact of ABIM's initiatives.

Concurrently, IIUM has been experiencing notable leadership changes reflecting its commitment to Islamic educational values. With the end of the previous rector's tenure, Prof. Emeritus Datuk Dr. Osman Bakar took on the role as of September 23, 2024. The position of rector is a political appointment, as that of vice-chancellors in other public universities in Malaysia. Prof. Osman Bakar brings a wealth of experience as a renowned scholar in Islamic philosophy and shares a long-standing personal connection with Anwar, stemming from their school days at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar. Osman Bakar's alignment with Anwar Ibrahim through ABIM further reflects their shared vision for a holistic Islamic education, aiming to integrate Islamic principles deeply into the academic fabric of IIUM. Under Prof. Osman Bakar's leadership, IIUM is also witnessing the inclusion of other ABIM-affiliated scholars in

deputy rector positions, further ensuring the institution's adherence to its educational ethos.

Moreover, Zulkifli Hassan, another key figure from ABIM, was appointed as the Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Religious Affairs) in December 2023. His prior experience as IIUM's Deputy Rector for Student Development and Community Engagement underscored his commitment to the university's Islamic educational goals as well. Malaysia's current Minister of Education, Fadhlina Sidek, is also the daughter of Siddiq Fadzil, the third president of ABIM right after Anwar. These strategic appointments having ties with ABIM reflect broader efforts to embed progressive Islamic ethics within Malaysia's educational framework.

The spotlight on IIUM arises from its role as both an academic institution and a symbolic battleground for different interpretations of Islamic values in Malaysia. IIUM was also infamous in the early 2000s for alleged links to terrorism during the so-called Global War on Terror. Founded in the 1980s with the vision of integrating religious and modern sciences, IIUM has long been a centre of ideological diversity. Historically, some student movements within IIUM, such as We Unite for Islam (Wufi), have had affiliations with PAS, a major Islamic political party in Malaysia. This has led to conversations about the university's role in shaping political tendencies, as seen in the presidency of its Student Union (IIUMSU), which has frequently been led by Wufi-affiliated leaders. The election in 2022 of a president from outside Wufi, albeit narrowly, highlights the changing dynamics within the student body.

The emergence of leaders from ABIM, particularly in IIUM's higher management, introduces a new dimension to the university's cultural and educational atmosphere. Students' support for PAS may not necessarily clash with the leadership's ABIM affiliations, as both groups place importance on Islamic values, though with different emphases. Interviews with Wufi members have shown a commitment to upholding Islamic principles while also recognizing the evolving influence and relevance of their movement. A member's remark underscores the complexity: "As a Muslim, for me any agenda or behaviour that leads to goodness and to empowering the understanding of Islam must be supported even if they are in opposite circles in the political stage. However, if the agenda brought is an agenda due to political interests, then it must be rejected because this institution is for all regardless of political ideological differences."

IIUM encapsulates the interplay among Malaysian Islamists, serving as a reflection of the broader societal quest for direction and identity. As the university's new management shoulders the responsibility of steering IIUM towards fulfilling its founding mission—integrating knowledge with a modern, progressive outlook—it holds the potential to shape a generation of Muslims pivotal to Malaysia's future. The 2022 general election results underscore a clear demand among Malay voters on Islam's role as a cornerstone of their identity. The ongoing debate centres on the vision that should underpin this enigma: should it align with Anwar's vision of Islam within the Madani framework, or should it lean towards a more traditional and conservative interpretation championed by his political rivals? The educational landscape in Malaysia has become a battleground for these ideological contests, often caught in the crossfire of political agendas. While political socialization within

schools and universities is inevitable, given their role in shaping young minds, it's imperative to maintain educational neutrality. Students should be equipped with values like compassion, respect, and tolerance, which are at the heart of Anwar's Madani framework, without being subjected to the sway of partisan indoctrination. By nurturing an environment where these universal values thrive, IIUM can contribute significantly to cultivating informed and balanced individuals who can navigate modern-day Malaysia while honouring their cultural and religious heritage.

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