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RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 22 August 2025

JAIS and the Reimagining of Islamic Education for Civic Engagement

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Screenshot of JAIS Selangor Page on X taken on 20 August 2025.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Islamic education in Malaysia under JAIS in Selangor is being reimagined as a platform for cultivating civic awareness, moderation (*wasatiyyah*), and social responsibility.
- With the lowering of the voting age to 18, JAIS recognises that Malaysian youths are entering the political arena with limited exposure to civic or political education, and it now seeks to provide structured, ethically grounded guidance to counteract the polarising influence of social media and populist rhetoric.
- JAIS incorporates contemporary Islamic jurisprudential concepts such as *fiqh al-dawla* (statehood) and *fiqh at-ta'ayush* (coexistence) into its extra curriculum. These efforts aim to reinforce Islam's compatibility with pluralism and national unity without compromising doctrinal integrity.
- The module's effectiveness in engaging students to support a vision of Islam that promotes mutual respect over division demonstrates the potential for nationwide replication. This highlights how decentralised education can enable curricular innovation while preserving Malaysia's stability and security.

INTRODUCTION

Following the 2022 general elections and 2023 state elections in Malaysia, there has been a spotlight on youth voters and the factors that led them to vote for Perikatan Nasional.¹ Their choice to vote for the Islamist PAS and its coalition partner, the Malay-based Bersatu, has been attributed to many factors, top of which is youth reliance on social media for information. PAS has dominated TikTok,² and TikTok being the platform of choice for Malaysian youths has led them to be excessively exposed to ideas shared by PAS leaders and/or religious figures who are PAS-adjacent. Unfortunately, youths in Malaysia have generally little, if any, exposure to politics or civic education. As mentioned by Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin and Nabighah Azruna, at school, there is a

... notable absence of dedicated subjects or specific curricula focusing on government operations, electoral processes, and civic rights and responsibilities among young voters... [H]istory and civic education subjects briefly touched on certain aspects of the Malaysian government and democracy, but these topics were not comprehensive.³

Another study by Mohd Mahadee et al. conducted before the 15th General Election indicated that Malaysian youths in higher education do show strong civic education, though not necessarily on democracy.⁴ The main avenue youths have for political socialisation is through family members and social media. These sources can sometimes offer skewed or sentiment-driven perspectives. Social media tends to amplify sensational stories,⁵ shaping young minds more through emotion than factual understanding. Similarly, family members who might not have received comprehensive civic education can inadvertently pass down limited or biased views.

In 2019, Malaysian lawmakers passed the Undi18 bill which lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. Malaysian youths are expected to make very important political decisions out of high school and with little exposure to political education. Realising this, the Selangor Islamic Department (Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor or JAIS) has come up with a module on citizenship issues. This initiative originated from the Director General of JAIS, and is aligned with a top-down approach encouraged by the federal government led by Pakatan Harapan since 2022.⁶ This effort aims not only to educate but also to politically engage Muslim youths, ultimately developing in them a balanced perspective that can counteract the one-sided narratives they encounter through social media and family.

Given that Malaysia is a Muslim-majority nation with Islam permeating almost every aspect of life, Malay-Muslim voters in Malaysia, not just the young, could be easily swayed by a political leader, movement, party or coalition that claims to represent the religious community. This is not surprising. A survey conducted by ISEAS –Yusof Ishak Institute showed that Malaysian undergraduates surpassed their peers in other countries regarding the significance they place on a political candidate or leader's religion. 75.9 per cent of Malaysian respondents indicated that religion was "very important" and "quite important"⁷ in their voting choices. For this reason, Muslim youths need to be exposed to the idea that the relationship between Islam and politics goes beyond electing leaders who share their faith, and is instead about integrating Islamic ethical principles into political decision-making.

The role of Islam in politics should not be left to self-guided politicians or political parties. For example, Mohd Faizal Musa and Afra Alatas highlight how PAS strategically used Islamic education in Perak to expand its political influence, especially through under-regulated institutions like *tahfiz* and community religious schools.⁸ These schools often promote Salafi ideologies and expose students to political messaging, blurring the line between education and

political indoctrination. PAS is involved in education—from its kindergarten Pusat Asuhan Tunas Islam (PAS Islamic Preschool, PASTI) to its secondary school Sekolah Menengah Integrasi Teras Islam (Tertiary Integration Islamic Secondary School, SMITI).

Although a (state) government body like JAIS could be considered biased in favour of the government of the day, it is better positioned to guide youths due to several key factors. Firstly, such institutions often have access to a wealth of scholarly resources and expertise in religious studies. This enables them to deliver teachings based on well-established theological principles rather than populist, politicised interpretations. Secondly, a formal religious body is typically more organised and systematic in its approach, ensuring that the teachings provided are consistent and coherent. Moreover, governmental religious institutions are also more likely to have accountability mechanisms in place. These can ensure that any guidance provided aligns not only with religious doctrine but also with overarching national values and legal frameworks. Most important is their ability to integrate teachings into broader educational initiatives, and to reach a larger audience through structured programmes.

EVOLUTION OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

Islamic education in Malaysia experienced significant evolution, particularly from the 1980s onwards, when it began to be integrated into national policy frameworks. Initially shaped by informal institutions such as *pondok* schools, Islamic education has since been embedded into the mainstream schooling system.

The early 20th century saw the emergence of madrasah institutions inspired by Middle Eastern models, especially after Muslim students began returning from al-Azhar University in Cairo. These reformist scholars helped transform traditional *pondok* institutions by adopting a structured (*nizami*) system that incorporated modern pedagogy and sciences.⁹ While the British colonial administration allowed Islamic instruction in Malay vernacular schools, formal Islamic education remained fragmented and community-led until independence.

Following independence in 1957, and especially after the establishment of the Religious Education Division in 1973 (later renamed the Islamic Education Division), the Ministry of Education began to centralise and standardise Islamic instruction. The government's educational reforms during this period aimed to bridge the longstanding dualism between secular and religious education. This was further emphasised through the introduction of an Islamic Philosophy of Education (Falsafah Pendidikan Islam) which sought to integrate moral and spiritual development into broader educational aims of the nation.

The Islamisation of education gained further momentum with Anwar Ibrahim's appointment as Minister of Education in 1986.¹⁰ Under his tenure, Islamic Studies became a compulsory subject for Muslim students in national schools. The institutional framework of Islamic education was strengthened through increased support for teacher training, textbook development, and curricular expansion. Anwar also supported the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), which was founded in 1983 to promote the "Islamisation of knowledge" philosophy championed by Syed Naquib al-Attas and Ismail Raji al-Faruqi.¹¹ IIUM and other institutions such as Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) became centres for propagating integrated Islamic education that blend traditional disciplines with modern sciences.

Islamic education in the 1990s and early 2000s expanded through the national religious secondary schools (Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama, or SMKA), while also being integrated into mainstream public schools. A notable development was the launch of the J-QAF

(Jawi, Qur'an, Arabic, and Fard 'Ayn) programme in 2005, which reinforced religious literacy at the primary school level.¹²

Asyraf Israqi et al. further traces Malaysia's shift from an integrated curriculum model to a standard-based national curriculum including in Islamic Religious Education as part of broader reforms to promote 21st-century learning competencies.¹³ According to the authors, the change was deliberate, signalling a move toward a more uniform, nationally prescribed curriculum to ensure all students acquire a common baseline of knowledge in Islamic studies. Centralisation of Islamic education thus became a mechanism not only for religious literacy but for producing a particular vision of the ideal Muslim citizen who is loyal to state-sanctioned interpretations of Islam.¹⁴ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid and Mohd Haris Zuan Jaharudin argued that,

[G]reater control is exerted over operators of Islamic education [by the federal government], with debilitating effects on creativity and innovativeness as Islamic interpretations are essentialized in accordance with norms desired by the government.¹⁵

The political undertone of these developments was made explicit during periods of tension between the federal government and independent religious schools (Sekolah Agama Rakyat), which were accused of fostering extremism. The latter were subsequently defunded in the early 2000s.¹⁶

The Islamisation of education has not only proceeded through formal channels but has also become deeply embedded in Malaysia's socio-political structures. By the 2000s, both the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) began aligning in their religious outlook, resulting in a convergence of revivalist discourse that emphasised Islamic symbols and laws in public policy.¹⁷ While these developments were politically expedient, they had structural implications for education, particularly as bureaucracies such as JAKIM (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia) exerted influence over curricula, teacher appointments, and institutional narratives.¹⁸ The Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013–2025 marked a major attempt to reform Islamic education. While its overarching goal was to produce students who were "holistically developed," the Blueprint also proposed that Muslim students should understand the philosophies of other major religions in Malaysia.¹⁹ However, its practical impact on Islamic education remains limited due to persistent centralisation and lack of curricular innovation. In contrast, JAIS' effort focuses on developing a dynamic and adaptable Islamic educational framework tailored to contemporary needs.

JAIS AND CULTIVATING A CIVIC-MINDED UMMAH

In the Malaysian federal system, Islamic affairs fall under state jurisdiction, and in Selangor, this responsibility is vested in JAIS. As the executive religious authority under the Selangor Islamic Religious Council (MAIS) and the Sultan of Selangor, JAIS plays a central role in shaping Islamic education within the state's jurisdiction. Its involvement ranges from curriculum development and school management to teacher training and regulatory oversight.

JAIS administers several types of Islamic schools with each tailored to different educational stages and objectives. These include Sekolah Rendah Agama (SRA), which provide primary-level Islamic instruction; Sekolah Agama Menengah (SAM), which offer secondary-level religious education; and Maahad Integrasi Tahfiz Selangor (MITS), which integrate *tahfiz* (Quran memorisation) with both religious and academic studies. In addition, JAIS oversees the Kelas Al-Quran dan Fardhu 'Ain (KAFA) system, a part-time religious programme targeting Muslim students enrolled in national schools. Through these institutions, JAIS promotes a dual-

track model of education that integrates national academic curricula with rigorous Islamic instruction.

In order to understand the role that JAIS plans to take to assist Muslim youths in performing their duty as responsible voters, interviews were conducted between 23 April and 28 May 2025 with three figures involved in Islamic education under JAIS and Asatizah Negeri Selangor (ANAS). The two officers from JAIS were Ustaz Anas bin Ayob, Chief Assistant Director of the Islamic Education Division, and Ustaz Muhamad Asmadi bin Mustakim, Head of Education Management Sector of the Islamic School Control Unit. Ustaz Marwan Bukhari A Hamid was interviewed for his role within ANAS working together with JAIS to come up with the module on citizenship to be used in JAIS' secondary schools.

Ustaz Marwan shared that the efforts towards this module started in 2022 with a political school called "*Pondok Siasah*" that was introduced to university students on matters relating to citizenship, civic education, and on state and politics. This module is currently contextualised for students at secondary school, and is called "*Celik Siasah*." The idea is to introduce citizenship matters to students who would be first-time voters when they graduate from secondary school. This new module integrates the nation's history with Islamic teachings, and will be used as part of extra-curricular activities for students at 28 of JAIS' secondary schools in Selangor.

Ustaz Asmadi explained that the best way to move beyond narrow theological instruction to a more holistic model is to begin by correcting students' views and understanding of the nation's history. The integration of academic subjects such as history and civics into religious studies aims to prepare Muslim students to function as active, informed citizens without falling to racial-based sentiments. These efforts align with the Malaysia Madani framework championed by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim to build a pluralistic and democratic Malaysia. This reflects a paradigm shift among Muslim students at JAIS-operated schools regarding religious education being a private spiritual endeavour to it being a strategic national instrument.

This module aims to deconstruct extremism by equipping students with a moderate worldview and critical thinking skills. Rather than relying on rote memorisation of religious texts, the module integrates historical reflection, ethical reasoning, and active dialogue. The module also seeks to align with contemporary scholarly interpretations, such as *maqasid al-shariah*. Ustaz Marwan explained that the *maqasid al-shariah* framework employed in the module integrates both classical and contemporary perspectives to provide a holistic and context-sensitive analytical lens. Drawing from classical scholars such as Ibn 'Abd al-Salam and al-Shatibi, the framework upholds the five foundational objectives of Islamic law while also appreciating the methodological depth and moral intent embedded in their jurisprudence. At the same time, the framework incorporates insights from modern and contemporary scholars such as Ibn 'Ashur who expand the scope of *maqasid* to include considerations of public interest (*maslahah*).²⁰ This combined approach allows the module to engage with an evolving ethical framework that balances tradition with contemporary relevance.

Another major theme that was discovered during the interviews is the deliberate inculcation of *wasatiyyah* (moderation) and *ta'ayush* (coexistence) especially considering Malaysia's multi-religious composition. The interviewees are consciously reorienting religious instruction to emphasise values that foster harmony, social justice, and empathy in the context of religious schools under JAIS' jurisdiction. This vision positions Islam as a contributor to societal stability rather than exclusivity. Theological concepts are framed through contemporary concerns like pluralism and intercommunal peace, with examples coming from the Qur'an such as in Surah Al-Hujurat.²¹

The citizenship module is yet to be finalised. Nevertheless, the ultimate success of the module hinges on teachers' competency. There is concern that some teachers may not exhibit the required responsibility or proficiency when presenting these topics in class. Thus, Ustaz Asmadi stresses the importance for JAIS to provide training for the teachers. Another concern is whether the module will be perceived as catering primarily to Muslims and ignoring the needs of non-Muslim youths. This could inadvertently contradict efforts to promote pluralism in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

Islamic education in Malaysia as exemplified by the efforts of JAIS in Selangor reflects a shift towards embedding civic consciousness and ethical pluralism within religious instruction. It is not about telling youths how to vote, but it is about helping them make informed decisions. Islamic education is no longer confined to personal piety or ritual learning; it is increasingly seen as a strategic tool for nation-building. Institutions like JAIS are spearheading a pedagogical reorientation that seeks to harmonise Islamic values with the demands of living in a diverse and democratic society.

This transformation is especially urgent considering recent electoral trends, where a significant number of young voters demonstrated susceptibility to narrow ethno-religious rhetoric. In a context where political actors may instrumentalise Islam or racial identity for populist gain, the absence of structured civic education leaves youths vulnerable to simplistic and divisive messaging. By incorporating concepts like *wasatiyyah*, *fiqh at-ta'ayush*, and *maqasid al-shariah*, the JAIS module offers a proactive counter-narrative. The integration of historical awareness and civic responsibility within religious education underscores a broader ambition to cultivate a generation of Muslim youths who are not only confident in their religious identity but also capable of engaging constructively with Malaysia's pluralistic realities.

ENDNOTES

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² Focus Malaysia. (2023, June 10). PH lags while PAS thrives on TikTok ahead of state elections. <https://focusmalaysia.my/ph-lags-while-pas-thrives-on-tiktok-ahead-of-state-elections/>

³ Saidin, M. I. S., & Azrun, N. (2025). Barriers to youth political participation: insights from Malaysia's lowered voting age policy (Undi18) in the 15th General Election. Cogent Social Sciences, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2491710>, p. 11

⁴ Mohd Mahadee Ismail, Zaini Othman, Nor Azlili Hassan, Nor Hafizah Abdullah, Azlina Abdullah & Umami Munirah Syuhada Mohamad Zan. NATION-BUILDING AMONG YOUTHS IN MALAYSIA: THE CIVIC EDUCATION APPROACH. (2019). Journal of Nusantara Studies (JONUS), 4(2), 390-409. <https://doi.org/10.24200/jonus.vol4iss2pp390-409>

⁵ Lim, S., Bentley, P.J. Opinion amplification causes extreme polarization in social networks. Sci Rep 12, 18131 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-22856-z>

⁶ When asked why they didn't create the module back in 2008 when Pakatan Rakyat first took over the Selangor administration from Barisan Nasional, the interviewees responded that it is easier now that the state and federal government are administered by the same coalition.

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- ⁹ Abdul Hamid, A. F. (2017). Islamic education in Malaysia. In H. Daun & R. Arjmand (Eds.), Handbook of Islamic Education (p. 6). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-53620-0_27-1
- ¹⁰ Formerly a leader of the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM), Anwar played a key role in advancing Islamic education within the national curriculum
- ¹¹ Abdul Hamid, A. F. (2017). Islamic education in Malaysia. In H. Daun & R. Arjmand (Eds.), Handbook of Islamic Education (p. 3). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-53620-0_27-1
- ¹² Ibid. (p. 11)
- ¹³ Bin Jamil, A.I., Rekan, A.A., Badar, S. (2024). From Integrated to Standard: Reformation of the Islamic Religious Education Curriculum and Teacher Training in Malaysia. In: Akgün, B., Alpaydin, Y. (eds) Global Agendas and Education Reforms. Maarif Global Education Series. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-3068-1_9
- ¹⁴ Azmil Tayeb. (2018). Islamic Education in Indonesia and Malaysia: Shaping Minds, Saving Souls. Routledge.
- ¹⁵ Abdul Hamid, A. F., & Jaharudin, M. H. Z. (2022). Islamic education in Malaysia: Between neoliberalism and political priorities. In C. Joseph (Ed.), Policies and Politics in Malaysian Education: Education Reforms, Nationalism, and Neoliberalism (p. 38). Routledge.
- ¹⁶ The decision to stop funding to these schools was reversed under the administration of Anwar Ibrahim. See Media Perpaduan. (2023, October 13). Tun M hentikan, Anwar kembalikan bajet Sekolah Agama Rakyat. <https://media-perpaduan.com/2023/10/13/tun-m-hentikan-anwar-kembalikan-bajet-sekolah-agama-rakyat/>
- ¹⁹ Saat, N., & Alatas, A. (2022). Islamisation in Malaysia beyond UMNO and PAS. ISEAS Perspective, 2022(96), 1–8. ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/ISEAS_Perspective_2022_96.pdf
- ¹⁸ Azmil Tayeb. (2018). Islamic Education in Indonesia and Malaysia: Shaping Minds, Saving Souls. P. 31-32.
- ¹⁹ Abdul Hamid, A. F., & Jaharudin, M. H. Z. (2022). Islamic education in Malaysia: Between neoliberalism and political priorities. In C. Joseph (Ed.), Policies and Politics in Malaysian Education: Education Reforms, Nationalism, and Neoliberalism (p. 32). Routledge.
- ²⁰ Ibn Ashur, M. A. (2006). IBN ASHUR: Treatise on Maqasid al-Shariah. International Institute of Islamic Thought. (Translated by Mohamed el-Tahir el-Mesawi)
- ²¹ Surah Al-Hujurat is the 49th chapter of the Quran. Key themes include respecting the Prophet, verifying information before acting, conflict resolution, and avoiding negative behaviours like backbiting and suspicion. It underscores the importance of universal brotherhood among Muslims, highlighting that true nobility is based on piety (taqwa) rather than race or origin. See <https://medium.com/adventure-of-the-quran/introduction-to-the-tafsir-of-surah-al-hujurat-e5258c688505>

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