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# The Islamization of the Malaysian Media: A Complex Interaction of Religion, Class and Commercialization

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**Abstract:** The Islamization of the Malaysian media industry has created a debate on whether Islam has been truly adopted for its religious significance or simply manipulated for commercial gains. While Islamic content is abundant, it seems to grow in size but not in value. This paper offers a political-economic look into this problem by 1) contextualizing the Islamization process in relations to Malaysia's socio-political environment, 2) delineating the development of Islamic media in Malaysia and, 3) identifying the influence of media ownership on the Islamization process by locating the role of Islam in contemporary Malaysian media.

**Keywords:** Media, Malaysia, Capitalism, Islamization, Commercialization, Class, Government

**Abstrak:** Proses Islamisasi industri media di Malaysia telah melahirkan suatu persoalan mengenai kesahihan proses tersebut. Terdapat kesangsian sama ada proses Islamisasi yang berlaku adalah benar-benar demi tuntutan Islam atau hanyalah suatu usaha komersial dalam mengaut keuntungan. Tidak dinafikan bahawa isi kandungan Islamik amat dominan didalam koteks penyiaran di Malaysia, namun apakah jumlah isi kandungan yang banyak itu menggambarkan ajaran dan tuntutan Islam yang sebenar? Kertas kerja ini

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akan memperhalusi persoalan ini berlandaskan idea politik-ekonomi dengan 1) memberi konteks terhadap proses Islamisasi yang telah mencorak sosio-politik di Malaysia, 2) menguraikan pembangunan media Islam di Malaysia dan, mengenalpasti pengaruh ketuanan media didalam proses Islamisasi media kontemporari di Malaysia.

**Kata Kunci:** Media; Malaysia; Kapitalisme; Agama Islam; perihal memperdagangkan; Kelas; pemerintah.

## Introduction

Islam is an inherent part of Malaysia. It has been the religion professed by the local Malays since Arab traders started embarking on business and religious ventures in this part of the world in the early 1500s. Today, Islam is acknowledged as the official religion in Malaysia. More than 60% of the Malaysian population is Muslims (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017). Since the late 1970s, the Islamization process has seen Islam legally and structurally incorporated into crucial aspects of public life. The enforcement of Islamic education in public schools and the promotion of Islamic banking system are examples of how in Malaysia, Islam is more than just a religion. It is an institution. The complex relationship between the Malaysian social, political and economic circumstances is the major driver to this development.

The centrality of Islam in everyday life and state institutions can be exemplified through the advancement of the local media industry. New Islamic broadcast channels and online platforms are emerging and are posing significant challenges to the established commercial media. In response, the mainstream media is also starting to incorporate more Islamic content in their programming. As a result, the number of programs considered Islamic is growing rapidly. While this may seem a positive phenomenon for the Muslim media consumers, some are questioning the nature of this programming. Mohamed (2012) argued that most of the Islamic programs available on Malaysian media is superficial in the sense that it does not appreciate the spirit and wisdom of Islam. Instead, what is shown on TV and heard on the radio are the simplistic rituals of Islam that may include the hijab, the *ādhān*, the *tadhkirah*. In many of the TV dramas for example, Islam is usually cosmetically depicted and not included as part of the narrative. For



example, the female characters are usually seen in hijab while engaging in romantic relations that includes physical touch. While such scenes are usually mild and hardly sexual, it is still not permissible in Islam. In almost all the local variety shows, women in hijab are often seen singing and dancing freely. In comedy shows, male comedians often dress up as woman. There are certain quarters (Wok and Mohamed, 2008) (Hussein, 2008) that see this development as more serious than the influence of western media. Mohamed (2012) suggests that such media contents are even more detrimental because it confuses the Muslim audiences. Immoral and hedonistic messages such as romantic relations and gender bending can easily be accepted when presented through what is seen as Islamic images.

This paper offers a political-economic look into this problem by suggesting that the Islamization of the Malaysian media is caught in a complex interaction between national politics, economic development and religious transformation. This interaction has much to do with the state's institutionalization of Islam that resulted in the commodification of Islam as an economic force. In this sense, the practice of Islam is measured through the consumption of Islamic goods. In relation to this, the paper also argues that the rise of the middle-class Muslims is driving the demands for more Islamic media contents that are modern, material and capitalistic.

To explore these arguments, a qualitative case study was conducted through reviews and analyses of literatures, reports, guides and policies. A general observation of the local media content also provided significant input in understanding the nature of Islamic media in Malaysia.

### **The Islamisation of Malaysian Life**

Since Independence in 1957, Malaysia has gone through a persistent process of Islamisation promoted by the state. Barr and Govindasamy (2010, p.293) argued that Islamisation in Malaysia "is basically a variation of the original Malay ethnonationalism, using the nearly complete symbiosis between Malay and Muslim identity as the point of articulation that allows religious nationalism to serve as a cipher for ethnonationalism". This means that the state's Islamisation project is also an ethnicised structural policy that continues to uphold the Malays' special position through a Malay-Muslim nationalist discourse. If Malay nationalism was the catalyst in the fight against the colonialists in the

pursuit for Independence, the state's Islamisation project perpetuates a Malay-Muslim identity to create and maintain the Malays' support for the ruling government. According to Martinez (2001), the Islamic resurgence was never directed at converting non-Muslims to Islam. Rather, it was a political strategy targeted at Malays to adopt a stricter Islamic identity that can bring Islam under the government's control and scrutiny.

Although Islam has been recognised as the official religion since 1957; analysts (Weiss, 2004; Hamid, 2009) claim that it was in the 1970s; during the wake of the Global Islamic Resurgence catalysed by the Iranian Revolution; that the Islamisation project found its footing in Malaysian politics. The ongoing Islamic discourse that was prevalent in the Muslim world revitalised debates about the fundamental questions of what being Muslim is about. Initially, the Islamisation movement was led by Malay university students exposed to the transnational resurgence of Islamic thought, but over time the movement penetrated into major national institutions and took root (Hamid, 2009). This rise of the new Islamic-educated Malays, who were mostly trained in the Middle East, and the influence of Islamic NGOs such as the Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia), asserted intense pressure on the ruling government, especially the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) to prove that it was Islamic.

The rise of political Islam was also entrenched within the rivalry between the two main Malay-Muslim political parties, namely, the historically secular-nationalist UMNO, and the more Islamist Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) in the contest to become the Muslim champion. In the wake of the Malay community's religious scrutiny, the UMNO needed to prove that it was more "Islamic" than the PAS. This led Weiss (2004) to argue that the UMNO Islamisation project was less a religious conviction than an invested electoral strategy.

Barr and Govindasamy (2010) argued that by the time Mahathir Mohamad became the Prime Minister in the early 1980s, it was becoming obvious that religious identity had replaced ethnicity as the central element of national identity among the Malays and that the Malaysian society has been systematically Islamised. One of Mahathir's most important strategies in confronting the Islamisation pressures coming from the PAS and Muslim NGOs was to recruit the then student

leader and Muslim activist Anwar Ibrahim into the UMNO in 1982. Weiss (2004) detailed Anwar's rapid rise through the ranks: elected a vice president of UMNO and head of the party's youth wing within a year; later holding several key ministerial portfolios; and ultimately becoming Deputy Prime Minister in 1993. Together, Anwar and Mahathir continued the Islamisation project by introducing Islamic reforms into the financial sector, establishing Islamic insurance schemes and usury-free banking, strengthening Islamic education policies, stressing the observance of Islamic rituals in official government settings, sponsoring centres for research and teaching on Islam, and enhancing Islam-related programming in the state-controlled media. Weiss (2004) and Hamid (2009) argued that it was the UMNO-led government's Islamisation policy that began in the 1980s that helped to normalise political religion in everyday life.

As a result, Islam in Malaysia has largely become a conservative, pro-establishment entity that enables the state to manufacture and control expressions of Islam in official and everyday Malaysian life (Osman, 2017). Islam has undoubtedly become a force affecting all citizens. In 1988, the Malaysian Parliament approved constitutional amendments and added Article 121 (1A) (Malaysian Federal Constitution, 2006), which reads: "The [civil courts] shall have no jurisdiction in respect of any matter within the jurisdiction of the *Syariah* courts". This initiative to restructure the Islamic legal institutions was followed by all the other Malaysian states. The climax of Islamic resurgence occurred in September 2001 when Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad declared Malaysia to be an Islamic state (Martinez 2001, p.474).

### **Melayu Baru and the economic commodification of Islam**

A visionary leader, Mahathir understood that Islam is central within the Malay identity. In his effort to confront local pressures on his government to be more Islamic, while at the same time building an economically competitive nation, Mahathir had successfully constructed a unique application of Islam that is relevant within a capitalistic global environment. Mahathir promoted a progressive interpretation of Islam. In his nation building efforts Mahathir closely tied Islam, ethnicity and nationalism in one narrative. Mahathir depicts the inception of Islam and the radical break from the pre-Islamic past as turning away from the dark ages:

And so the animistic ancestors of the Malays embraced Islam with such enthusiasm and faith that they destroyed all their old idols and temples. Today, Malays are constitutionally only Malays if they are Muslims. The progress of the Malays after conversion and presently owes much to Islam as a way of life. There had been lapses of course but by and large Malay civilisation and its progress in the arts and sciences, in the systems of government, the concept of justice and the rule of law, have been the result of attempts to adhere to the teachings of Islam. (Mahathir 2001, p. 161)

This break was total in its refutation of the superstitious and traditional local beliefs of the past, and the rejection of a Malay cultural heritage to turn to Islamic modernity and enlightenment. The nationalisation of Islam in Malaysia has incited a broader fascination with the proper and correct 'Islamic way of life'. Mahathir foresighted a new social development of the Malays through 'Urbanization, acquisition of new skills and the acceptance by the Malays of new values which are still compatible with their religion and their basically feudal outlook' (ibid, 114). These visions were translated into the affirmative state social engineering – the New Economic Policy (NEP). Mahathir became the proponent of this policy, devised to improve the economic and social situation of the *bumiputera* through the manufacturing of an urban, educated, entrepreneurial, shareholding and high-consuming Malay middle class also known as Melayu Baru or 'New Malay'.

Generally, the NEP encompassed two major goals. The first was the reduction and eventual eradication of poverty by increasing income levels and employment opportunities for all Malaysians. The second aimed at restructuring Malaysian society to correct economic imbalance, so as to reduce and ultimately eliminate the identification of race with certain economic segments. More specifically, the NEP generated a number of benefits for the Malays especially by increasing their ownership of production and quota access in the educational system. The number and proportion of Malays engaged in the modern sector of the economy also rose significantly (Fischer, 2008).

By the early 1990s, the fruits of the NEP were very much visible. New generations of urban, educated, entrepreneurial and affluent Melayu Baru were taking control of the country's economy. This new middle class is actively manufactured by the state and is promoted as a class of

modern entrepreneurial, hardworking and consuming Malays who had incredible purchasing power. The economic transformation of Islam in Malaysia has displaced Islam as a source of traditional legitimacy of Malay rulers. Their historical mode of articulating Malayness based on universal Islamic authority and '*adat*', local customary law has been seriously destabilised. The NEP has unquestionably actively drawn Islam into the economic sphere through the proliferation of a multitude of Islamic institutions starting in the 1980s (Shamsul, 1998).

While the new Malay middle class upholds strict Islamic principles, their socio-economic development takes place within the context of intensified globalisation and neoliberal capitalism. Consuming *halal* goods is an example of an Islamic tradition that has become a commercial and competitive profit-making industry. In their effort to have an Islamic way of life, the Malay middle class is concerned with the principles of *halal*. In its most basic definitions *halal* is that which is permitted and *haram* is that which is prohibited by Allah. From this straightforward definition *halal* and *haram* in food and drink consumption are filtering into all aspects of Malaysian life (Fischer, 2017).

The increased demands for *halal* products by conscious Malay middle class have driven the development of the *halal* industry. Because of the still lack of available imported *halal* products, local industries were able to tap on this lucrative market. Today, the *halal* industry is not just confined to food but many other products such as cosmetics, fashion and even travel and tours. Malaysia is known to be a very popular destination among Muslim tourists because of its *halal*-friendly image. As such, *halālization* has helped create many local businesses, especially those owned by the Malay middle class. Many of these businesses have even expanded to other Muslim countries.

The state is very much involved in this commercialization of *halāl* goods. Through ministries and religious bodies, the state had control over the certification, commercialisation, standardisation and promotion by the state and private enterprise. Jabatan Kemajuan Islam (JAKIM) or the Department of Islamic Development is the governmental body that is responsible for *halāl* certification. Established in 1997, JAKIM's main purpose is to plan and protect Islamic development in Malaysia. As the only body that can issue *halāl* certification, JAKIM had major power over businesses and consumers. In 2006, the government established *Halāl*

Industry Development Corporation Sdn Bhd (HDC), an agency under the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, to ensure the integrated and comprehensive development of the national *ḥalāl* industry. HDC focuses on the development of *ḥalāl* standards; branding and promotion; and commercial development of *ḥalāl* products and services ([www.hdcglobal.com](http://www.hdcglobal.com)). By regulating and institutionalizing *ḥalāl*, the state was able to assert a certain kind of control over the consumption habits of the Malay middle class. This kind of control shows how the state benefits from the economic transformation of Islam.

Becoming middle class meant that the Malay Muslims are avid consumers. They have the ability to spend and are rewarded by the materials they own. Institutionalizing *ḥalāl* further supports the consumerist habits by assuring the Malay Muslim middle class that they are engaging in proper Islamic consumption (Fischer, 2008). Just like a typical capitalist citizen, the Malay Muslim middle class becomes both the consumer and the driver of the economy. By demanding for Islamic goods and services, this new Malays pushes the boundary of Islamic commercialization by creating new *ḥalāl* industries that range from Islamic fashion to fine dining to entertainment media. In this sense, ideas of capitalism materialise in the interfaces between class formation, religious revivalism and consumer culture.

### **Islamization of the Malaysian Media**

The Islamization of the Malaysian media industry can be contextualized from the dynamic intersection between the state's institutionalization of Islam and the consumerist demands of the new Malay Muslim middle class discussed in the previous sections. In line with the state's attempt to incorporate a modern and transformational version of Islam through the NEP, the local media industry was also driven to incorporate Islamic ideas and contents. Islamic dimensions can be seen in the increase of Islamic programming, the pervasiveness of Islamic images and identity, and the creation of Islamic channels. In the early years of Malaysian broadcasting, Islamic contents were limited to ritualistic programs such as the call of prayers, Quranic recitations, and Islamic sermons and religious talks. These programs run at specific times and day in accordance to the Islamic tradition. Islamic programs are mostly aired after the *ādhān* and special sermons are aired on Thursday nights and Fridays because these are the best times according to the Islamic belief

(Buyong and Ismail, 2012). Images of the pious Muslims can only be seen sparingly. Only the *Ustādh* and *Ustādhahs* in the Islamic programs will put on the full Islamic gear such as the hijab, the robe and the beard.

### *Increase of Islamic programming*

According to Buyong and Ismail (2012), this selective Islamic programming changed as Mahathir Mohamad declared to “Islamize” the government machinery in 1984. The Ministry of Information (now Ministry Communication and Multimedia) stated that all Malaysians should understand that Islam is the official religion and non-Muslim should accept its importance and dominance over other religions and therefore, in 1988, the ministry, through RTM, announced that Islam will be given airtime over radio and television. There are no specific policies regarding Islamic programs in Malaysia but the Department of Islamic Affairs Malaysia (JAKIM) has come out with a general guideline for entertainment in Islam. This guideline will assist anyone in Malaysia who is involved in entertainment industries namely singing, music, dancing, etc. It has since become a guideline in entertainment programs and has been used by most TV stations and production especially when producing Islamic programs. The Ministry of Information for example imposes strict rules on media contents. Contents that are deemed un-Islamic and can pose threats to the position of Islam in the country are strictly prohibited. Any media company that disregard these requirements risk getting summoned or their license revoked.

As Islam became more inherent in everyday life and as more middle-class Malay Muslims become increasingly concerned about the *halāl* and *haram*, demands for more Islamic content became apparent. Islamic images and contents gradually became a natural part of everyday programming. Women in hijabs are reading news, hosting shows, singing on the radio and acting in films and TV dramas. In 1996, the *nashīd* group Raihan took the local music industry by storm when their debut album, *Puji-Pujian* grossed sales of more than 750,000 units in Malaysia alone, with 200,000 units sold within the first two months after its launch. Today, 3,500,000 units of the album have been sold worldwide, which makes Raihan the most successful Malaysian artist of all time in terms of album sales (Barendregt, 2011). The first single off the album, also called *puji-pujian* was a light, melodious pop song



that was radio friendly. With simple lyrics that could easily stick to the listeners, the song became a staple on the commercial radio stations which had previously considered *nashīd* as a non-commercial genre. *Nashīd* used to only be played before and after the *ādhān*, if ever. The success of Raihan changed not only the local music industry but the whole media industry as well. They proved that Islamic content can be successful and most importantly, can sell. Since Raihan, *nashīd* has become a profitable musical genre. Local and international music companies continue to produce *nashīd* groups and artists. Like a typical media celebrity, these *nashīd* singers became familiar figures in gossip magazines, music awards and TV variety shows. They signify both the Islamization of the media and the commercialization of Islam.

*The pervasiveness of Islamic images and identity*

The increase of Islamic images became more rapid as Malaysia approached the new millennium. In 1998, Ezzah Aziz Fawzy became the first newscaster to don the hijab on prime-time news. What makes her image more significant is that she was working for TV3 which is the first private TV channel in Malaysia. TV3 was also the industry leader, consistently dominating the highest audience ratings and shares until today. By allowing its newscaster to portray her Islamic identity indicated that the channel was adopting a more Islamic approach. This also indicated that they were confident that Islamic images would not deter advertisers away.

When local model and actress Wardina Safiyyah announced in 2000 that she will still be active in the entertainment industry despite wearing the hijab, she pioneered a new image for the Muslim women on screen. Instead of getting fewer acting roles, Wardina became more popular. She was still playing the roles of the love interest, the career woman and the everyday woman. She was still fronting magazine covers and modelling for fashion brands. She brought into the media images of the typical Malaysian women who at the time were already modestly wearing the hijab. She represented the Islamic identity that were prevalent and familiar to the local audiences. Today, majority of the female celebrities wear the hijab. Despite the hijab, these women are made to look fashionable, wears the makeup, have the best accessories and are representations of the modern women. They portray the middle ground where Islam and modern consumption can meet. Muslim women



can buy a fashionable and attractive Islamic image (Hasim, Nayan and Ishak, 2017).

The popularity of Indonesian Islamic novels and films also pushed the local industry to acknowledge the profitability of Islamic media content. Novels by Indonesian author Habiburrahman El Shirazy became instant hits in Malaysia. With novels that merge ideas of romance, Islam and activism, El-Shirazy was able to capture the imaginations of the Malay Muslims who were looking for an alternative to romance novels. His novels like *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (2004), *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* (2007) and *Dalam Mihrab Cinta* (2007) were all readily accepted by the local readers. They were also translated into Bahasa Malaysia. These books were even sold in big, international book stores indicating its commercial value. When these titles were turned into films, local audiences went to watch and made these films commercial success. The success of these Indonesian imports showed that there was great demands for Islamic content that are contemporary (Fauzia, 2017) (Weng, 2017). The Malaysian audiences can identify with the Islamic characters portrayed in the novels and films despite them being Indonesian (Hun and Hassan, 2015). The local industry took note and published many Islamic novels. The rise of Islamic publishing houses further accelerated the popularity of Islamic Novels. Publishing companies such as Penerbit PTS, Telaga Biru and Alaf 21 make their profit through the sales of popular Islamic literatures.

### *The creation of exclusive Islamic channels*

The demands for Islamic content and the potential for profit gave confidence to the industry that they were ready to establish Islamic channels that will exclusively focus on Islamic contents and adhere to Islamic traditions. Radio IKIM, established in 2001 by the state owned Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (Institute for Islamic Understanding) was Malaysia's first fully Islamic broadcast media. Radio IKIM was a success. At its early conception, it managed to gather more than 1.4 Million listeners, a relatively big number for a new radio station (Mohamed, 2008). As an Islamic radio, IKIM offers listeners with a total package of Islamic content that range from *nashīd*, Quranic studies to Arabic lessons 24 hours a day, every day of the week.

Between 2004 and 2010, more Islamic channels were introduced. This development can be attributed to the commercial success of

Islamic content in general as well as the conducive environment for Islamic industries as the government adopted *Islām Al-Ḥaḍārā* as its new national vision. When Abdullah Badawi succeeded Mahathir Mohamad in 2004, he introduced the concept or a list of values called '*Islām Al-Ḥaḍārā*'. According to Abdullah (2006, p.3) *Islām Al-Ḥaḍārā* is an approach of 'progressive' or 'civilised' Islam that emphasises on development, consistent with the tenets of Islam, and is focused on enhancing the quality of life. It aims to achieve these through the mastery of knowledge and the development of the individual and the nation. In addition, through the implementation of a dynamic economic, trading and financial system, it aims to achieve an integrated and balanced development that creates a knowledgeable and pious people who hold fast to noble value and are honest, trustworthy and prepared to take on global challenges. It also ensures that the government upholds the practice of good governance and accountability, and transparency to the people. Critics (Sani, 2010) (Chong, 2006) argue that Abdullah's *Islām Al-Ḥaḍārā* is neither original nor new, it is simply an extension of Mahathir's existing policies on progressive Islam that was implemented through the NEP and the conception of Melayu Baru. What *Islām Al-Ḥaḍārā* did was further adding strong inputs on Islam and the Malay agenda. Abdullah's government promoted *Islām Al-Ḥaḍārā* as a bastion of Islamic moderation and a model for development for other Muslim countries. The government at the time also stressed for the application of *sharī'ah* code in Islamic-based industries (Osman, 2017). These policies extended to the media industry.

The government's Islamic vision drove the market at the time. The Muslim Middle class continued to grow and mature. Their consumption habit has also been defined by the state policies that emphasized on local and *halāl* products. This gave confidence to the media companies to invest in Islamic channels. The commercialization of Islamic content was further sealed when the only Satellite pay TV; All-Asian Satellite Television and Radio Operator or better known as Astro introduced its first Islamic channel, ASTRO Oasis in 2007. Promoted as the Muslim Lifestyle Channel, ASTRO oasis offers 24 hours of progressive lifestyle content for Muslims that contains Islamic based educational, entertainment and documentary styled programs ([www.astro.com.my](http://www.astro.com.my)). ASTRO Oasis even claimed to have produced the world's first Islamic reality program called "Imam muda' or young imām. The show

featured young men competing for a post as the imām of a mosque and a scholarship to study at the Islamic University of Madinah. Over 1,000 people auditioned to enter the show that was open for only 10 contestants. Each week of the show, the contestants were tested by undertaking ritual tasks (such as delivering sermons) and on their religious knowledge. The head judge was former imām of Malaysia's National Mosque, Hasan Mahmood. Other prizes offered to winners were pilgrimage to Mecca and RM20,000 cash (Azzman and Manaf, 2017). Astro Oasis followed the success of Imām Muda by producing more Islamic programs like *Pencetus Ummah* and *Ustādhah Pilihan*. Media Prima, Malaysia's largest media conglomerate joined the Islamic bandwagon by rebranding one of its tv channel, tv9 to focus specifically on the rural Malay Muslims. With the channel tagline 'Dihatiku' or 'in my heart', TV9 was never declared as a proper Islamic channel. However, because of its' audience demographic, the channel is known to have heavy Islamic content. According to Buyong and Ismail (2012) TV9 has more hours allocated for Islamic programs compared to the other free to air TV channels TV1, TV2 and TV3. Their most popular Islamic program is "Tanyalah *Ustādh*" (Ask *Ustādh*), a talk show that discusses on the Islamic rules and laws in a form of *Hukum* and *Fatwa*. Other popular Islamic programs include "Halaqah Sentuhan Qalbu" and "Semanis Kurma". Both are recorded talk show that feature prominent Islamic figures as hosts and guests.

Established in 2009, TV AlHijrah is the first Malaysian free-to-air Islamic TV channel. Although it is registered as a private corporation, TV AlHijrah is managed by the AlHijrah Media Corporation, a government owned company under the Department of Islamic Affair Malaysia (JAKIM). Sani (2010) discussed that al-Hijrah television is a government initiative to establish a channel based on Islam and provide an Islamic perspective through its programs. Thus, al-Hijrah television is a commencement and contribution of the government to disseminate Islam (Kanakaner and Ghani, 2016). The vision of *al-Hijrah* television is to be a channel that educates, entertains and unifies the community through creative, high-quality and universal programs that are in-line with Islamic principles and suitable for local and international communities. Al-Hijrah television shoulders the mission to become the first television station with an Islamic concept in Malaysia that broadcasts good quality and creative programs that encourage people to continuously migrate

towards the path of righteousness in all aspects of life (Hamdan, Majid and Hassan 2017).

In 2009, JAKIM introduced its own Islamic radio called SALAM.fm. Although Salam.fm's commercial success was not as big as Radio IKIM's, it managed to gather its own followings. In 2017, ASTRO introduces its own Islamic radio channel, radio Zayan. "Zayan" means beautiful in the Arabic language. Its slogan is #indahdihati, means beautiful is in the heart. Astro positions Zayan as "Contemporary Muslim radio station" that appeals to the modern Muslim community by serving them with contemporary content consisting of the latest fashion, technology, entertainment and lifestyle. All the while still holding true to the timeless creed of their faith. The radio station targets Muslim listeners aged 18-35 and plays music from local and international artists, as well as mainly Islamic-related content (<https://zayan.my>). In the same year, Al-hijrah Media Corporations announced that it will have its own radio station Hijrah.fm. the 24 hours radio station will broadcast Islamic content similar to those of IKIM.fm and Salam.fm. To date, Malaysia has 4 radio stations and 3 TV channels that are exclusively dedicated to Islamic Programming.

### **Media ownership and Islamization**

The section above explained the chronological development of the Islamization of the Malaysian media. From the 1990s till today, the Islamization process is still going strong. However, since in this equation Islam is considered both a religious virtue and an economic opportunity, issues on the sanctity of Islam as a divine revelation becomes universal. The media industry depends on commercialization, and as such, profit making will always be the bottom line. Therefore, this study suggests that the level of Islamization in the Malaysian media is very much dependent on the ownership. There are typically three types of media ownership in Malaysia. They are: the public or government funded, the private media conglomerate and the independently-owned small companies. While each of these media companies produce Islamic content, the ways they produce, promote and sell these contents differ greatly.

#### *The public or government owned media*

In general, the Malaysian government has interest in all the main media companies. Through licenses, laws and elite associations, the

government do have control over; and benefit from all the players in the media industry. However, there is a specific group of media operators that are strictly considered public. These organizations are directly funded by the government and are put under the responsibility of specific ministries. Where Islamic programming is considered, three media organizations fit in this category. Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM), IKIM media and Al-Hijrah Corporations are all broadcast companies that have radio and TV licenses. RTM, being the biggest media organization is the country's oldest and most prominent media outlet. Although RTM is not as popular as the more commercial media channels, it still is the Government's main mouthpiece and the biggest buyer for locally made content (Basri et.al 2011). RTM currently broadcasts 2 free-to-air TV channels and 33 radio stations ([www.rtm.gov.my](http://www.rtm.gov.my)). None of these channels are labelled as Islamic. However, since RTM falls directly under the responsibility of the Ministry of Communication, it strictly follows the government's rules and policies. RTM's content goes through strict scrutiny and they are known to be more conservative. Islamic content aired on RTM are more sensitive to the religious tradition. Islamic dramas must be *sharī'ah* compliant in the sense that it preserves the Islamic tradition for it to be accepted. Even the radio stations are expected to hold a certain standard (Basri et.al 2011). At the beginning of the new millennium, RTM introduced the 'infotainment' concept in its programming. The concept establishes the standard that RTM is not merely providing pointless entertainment but is also providing beneficial and informative content. While this does not imply that RTM is purely Islamic, it does indicate that it upholds social and religious responsibilities.

IKIM Media and Al-Hijrah media corporation are both state entities as they are funded by the government. They were specifically established to meet the government's aspiration of Islamizing the media industry as well as promoting progressive Islamic practices. Although both companies are partly commercial in the sense that they are also dependent on advertising revenue, government assistance enables them to be more selective in terms of content and advertising. IKIM and Al-Hijrah both claims to be fully *sharī'ah* compliant. Both only produce and promote true Islamic content and they only advertise *sharī'ah* compliant products and services. AlHijrah for example has its own *Sharī'ah* Advisory Board that will analyse the acceptability of programs

and advertisements. Al-Hijrah also follows JAKIM's policy on *sharī'ah* compliant products and services. For example, Al-Hijrah will not air any programs or dramas that display physical touch between man and woman. It will also not air entertainment programs that feature women singers. Al-Hijrah will only accept advertisers that sells *sharī'ah* compliant products and services. It will also only air advertisements that promote social responsibility (Johori et.al 2014).

As such it could be concluded that Islamic channels and programs that come from the government funded media entities are more careful in their presentation of Islam. They follow specific policies such as the one outlined by JAKIM. They also take considerable effort to ensure that Islam is portrayed in its entirety and not only used for image and representation. IKIM and Al-Hijrah specifically are more serious in promoting Islam as a way of life by accepting only *sharī'ah* compliant advertisements. In this sense they protect the purity of their source of income as well as promoting only Muslim friendly businesses.

#### *Private media conglomerates*

Currently there are only two private media conglomerates in Malaysia. They are conglomerates because they are large companies composed of many other smaller companies. Media Prima and ASTRO Holdings are media conglomerates that own numerous companies involved in mass media enterprises, such as television, radio, publishing, motion pictures, or the Internet. Because of their size and resources, these media conglomerates monopolize the local audience market share. Media Prima for instance, is a fully integrated media company in Malaysia that has equity interests on television stations, newspapers, radio stations, content creation and digital media. It owns four out of the seven free-to-air channels (TV3, 8TV, ntv7 and TV9) and four terrestrial radio stations (Fly FM, Hot FM, one FM and Kool FM). It also holds 98% percent interest over The New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Berhad (NSTP), which publishes three daily newspapers *New Straits Times*, *BH* and *Harian Metro*. The group also owns the production companies Grand Brilliance and Primeworks Studios Sdn Bhd, which produce television and film content, and a group of outdoor advertising companies under its out-of-home platform. Through its subsidiary Media Prima CJ O Shopping Sdn. Bhd, it operates a home shopping business, CJ WOW SHOP. Media Prima's presence is prevalent in the

everyday life of all Malaysians. Media Prima claims that almost 90% of Malaysians are exposed to one of their platforms at least once a day ([www.mediaprima.com.my](http://www.mediaprima.com.my)).

ASTRO Malaysia Holdings is another media conglomerate. Astro's main business is satellite pay-TV. Boasting a penetration of 71% of total households in Malaysia, Astro broadcasts 188 TV channels in total. 60 of which are Astro-produced. It also owns 19 terrestrial radio channels and produces TV and film contents through its subsidiaries, Astro Shaw and Astro Productions ([www.astro.com.my](http://www.astro.com.my)). Astro has 6 dedicated channels that is focused on the Malay Muslim audiences. These channels' content ranges from film, entertainment and lifestyle. Islamic films and dramas are aired in all these channels. However, the only channel that is established as entirely Islamic is Astro Oasis.

Although the Malay Muslim audiences make up the majority of their audiences, these conglomerates do not offer Islamic content that matches their audience size. This is mainly because both conglomerates are entirely commercial businesses that are more concerned about profit making than religious or social responsibilities. While Islamic content and images are available on TV channels and radio stations that cater for the Malay audiences, they are disparate and are not adopted as the channels' identity. Media Prima's TV3 is the number one free-to-air channel in Malaysia for the past 20 years. It continues to be number one because of its focus on entertainment. Islamic programs are available but they are not the main attraction. For example, TV3 successfully produced an Islamic reality program called *Daie: Pendakwah Nusantara*. Just like Astro Oasis' Imām Muda, the program is modulated into a contest to find the best Islamic preacher. The contestants compete for the grand prize of RM50,000 and a package trip to perform the 'Umrah. Winners also have the opportunity to become celebrity preachers featured on any of Media Prima's platform. The program is open to both male and female contestants and this had invited many criticisms over how the contestants were asked to participate in activities that does not segregate the man and woman. In many of its lifestyle and entertainment programs, Muslim women in hijabs can be seen singing and dancing freely. Some of the Malay serials aired on TV3 has been criticized for not being sensitive to Islamic traditions. In 2014 The drama 'Ariana Rose' was heavily criticized when the storyline featured a woman who fell in love with the man who raped her. It was also denounced for using



non-Muslim actor to play the lead role in which he had to perform many Islamic rituals such as praying and reciting the du‘ā. The production company and TV3 were considered insensitive for allowing a non-Muslim to ‘act’ out sacred Islamic practices.

For these conglomerates, Islam is one of the many methods for attracting audiences. Islamic content is valued the same way as any other commercial programs. Islamic contents are not appreciated for its religious messages but more for its commercial potential. No special scrutiny or advisory board is given to assess the validity of what these organizations consider as an Islamic program. Although they too should abide to the guidelines provided by JAKIM, no strict enforcement has been put upon them. Furthermore, these organizations consider Islam as content for programming and not a principle to be adopted in their operations. *Shari‘ah* compliance is not their main concern. This is why the nature of the Islamic content coming from the commercial media conglomerates is not consistent.

*Independently-owned small companies.*

Big public media organizations and private media conglomerates dominate the broadcast media. Smaller, independent media companies are more prevalent in the small media markets. Small media in this sense refer to media outlets that are neither mass nor broadcast such as music, books, dvds and magazines. Because of their relatively smaller size, these independently-owned companies tend to focus on smaller media segments. Telaga Biru, and InTeam Productions are examples of independent media companies that actively produce Islamic media products. Telaga Biru was established in 1997 by Hj. Waharp Yusoff who wanted to produce Islamic and motivational media content. It started out by producing *nashīd* albums and have now expanded to include Music and spiritual CD’s, Children DVD’s, magazines and books. The music that they produce for example are strictly *nashīd* and often include Qur’ānic verses and *zikr*. Islamic novels published by Telaga Biru for example go through strict review before they are published. The content must be truly Islamic and not romanticized for profit. The company is also very concerned about protecting the Islamic messages and images that it promotes. Telaga Biru considers the business they do as Da‘wah. They want to promote Islam through contemporary means. The media allows them to reach the masses through popular culture. Telaga Biru’s



vision statement as explained on its website ([www.telagabiru.com.my](http://www.telagabiru.com.my)) reads:

“We aim to become an international media and consulting firm that offers quality, elective and efficient products and services for Da‘wah and to educate the masses into adopting Islam as a way of life based on aqidah, shari‘ah, Islamic conduct for the benefit of this world and the hereafter”

Inteam Records produces similar products. The company was established by the nashīd group InTeam who became popular in the local music scene in 2003. After years of serving under an international record label, Inteam realized that major labels showed little interest in their spiritual mission, they decided to launch their own independent record label, Inteam Records (ITR). They used social media to directly communicate with and distribute music to fans. The band members focused, incorporating more serious Islamic genres such as *Ṣalawāt* and *Dhikr* and turning to nasheed’s roots as ‘auditory *Da‘wah*,’ restyling themselves as *ḥalāl* entrepreneurs and lifestyle counsellors for Malaysia’s young Muslim generation.

Today ITR is both pioneer and leader of Malaysia’s Islamic education and entertainment industries, releasing recordings from Inteam, other Malay language nasheed acts and that of some of the biggest stars in the contemporary global Muslim music scene, such as Lebanese-Swedish singer Maher Zain and the charismatic Indonesian preacher Habib Syech. The Inteam members have quickly mastered new digital technologies, now running their own digital recording studio Inteam Studios, Inteam Publishing, and since 2012, Inteam Mobile, a mobile application selling Islamic books, body care, clothing, and DVDs (Barendregt, 2017).

These small independent media companies were able to find a successful interaction between Islam and commercialization. They were able to maintain strict Islamic virtues while exploiting the profitable Malay Muslim market. By keeping abreast with new technologies and entrepreneurial strategies, these companies are able to do Da‘wah in contemporary ways and making good use of popular culture.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The Malaysian government’s policy on institutionalizing Islam by culturing a modern and progressive application of Islam that goes

beyond traditional rituals has indeed been the main driving force in the Islamization of the Malaysian media Industry. By exploring the economic potential of Islam as a way of life, the government was successful in positioning Islam within global commercialism. *Halāl* and *sharī'ah* compliance become significant in defining and driving many modern industries that includes the media industry. The state's consistent and continuous manufacturing of the new modern Malay Muslim middle class that make up the majority of the local consumer market further contribute to this development. This group of Muslims are not only consuming the Islamic products and services, they are also providing them. This creates profitable cycles of production and consumption of commercial Islam. This group of middle class are trained to be religious, knowledgeable and entrepreneurial at the same time. They persistently find ways to become pious yet affluent Muslims. Improving the Muslim economy is *Da'wah* and *Jihād*. Engaging in Islamic industries provide material and spiritual gratification.

It is in this intersection between Islam, social class and commercialization that the Islamization of the Malaysian media could truly be understood. It is the balances and imbalances of these factors that contribute to the level of Islam practiced and portrayed in the Malaysian media. The ownership of the media companies define whether the level of commercialization precedes or exceeds the Islamic principles. This paper argued that between the three types of media ownership available in Malaysia, it is the public-based and small independent companies that are trying to put Islam first. On the other hand, big media conglomerates will always privilege commercial gains over Islam simply because of its commercial size and capitalistic nature. As such, issues of misrepresentation and insensitive manipulation of Islam in the Malaysian media will always be around. It would seem quite impossible to expect a capitalist media organization to conform to strict Islamic principles that will limit the way they do business. At the same time, while the government-sponsored media organizations are more Islamic, they nevertheless are still confined to portray only aspects of Islam that will benefit the status quo. These media outlets would not be able to present fair Islamic views on issues like politics, the monarchy and ethnic relations.

The smaller independent media could be the ones that are truly able to practice media as *Da'wah* as they are less tied to the bureaucracy and are often built own the owner's own Islamic principles. However, this

does not mean that these companies are not enticed to compromise Islam for the material gains offered by commercialization. In conclusion, the economic transformation of Islam in Malaysia has implicated the local media industry in two contrasting, paradoxical ways. On one hand, it has created a conducive and profitable platform to reconcile Islam and the media. On the other, it has opened up a space for Islam to be exploited and manipulated for commercial gains.

The year 2018 may bring radical changes to the Malaysian media because for the first time ever, Malaysia had a change in government. Pakatan Harapan, the new government coalition, aspires to become a more liberal and inclusive government, a stark contrast to the more Malay-centric UMNO led government. For the first time also, the Ministry of Communication and Multimedia which is in charge of the media system is led by a non-Muslim Minister. What would this mean to the Islamization process? Will the new government uphold the Islamist nationalist sentiment used by the previous government? How much would it use the media to its benefit? It would be interesting to observe these new developments in Malaysia. The new communications minister has promised to fight for more media freedom. Among others he has pledged to do away with political ownership of media companies and amend media laws that are deemed to limit free speech and free press (Sivanandam, 2018). While these promises are significant in upholding the media's objectivity and credibility, they are still vague and worrisome when it comes to Islamic programming. Will government owned bodies such as JAKIM and IKIM still be funded so that they can maintain a fully shari'ah compliant programming? Will RTM be able to maintain its conservative Malay-Islamist bias? Will a more open media system that will cut down on control and censorship allows for a further influx of foreign programs that will overshadow the amount and effectiveness of Islamic programs? This paper has established that Islamization of the Malaysian media has mostly been driven by the government's institutionalization and commercialization of Islam, however recent developments may further complicate this relationship. Therefore, it would be interesting to be able to observe the ever-changing dynamics that revolve around Islam, politics and the media in Malaysia.

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