

POLITICAL ISLAM

Malay Political Polarization and Islamic Populism in Malaysia

Islamic populism is currently a go-to strategy for Malay-based political parties vying for support from the same pool of electorates. This has been detrimental to the rights and liberties of non-Muslims in Malaysia with the possibility of extremism.

SYAZA SHUKRI

28 JUN 2021 • 5 MIN READ





Thousands of Malays gathering in Kuala Lumpur in 2018 to express dissatisfaction with the Pakatan Harapan government which was accused of eroding the special rights of Malays and Islam in Malaysia. Credit: THE STAR/ASIA NEWS NETWORK

Introduction

Malaysia has always been a Muslim-majority country, but the rise of Islamic populism is a worrying trend that began in the past few years, culminating in the current rule of the Perikatan Nasional coalition. During Barisan Nasional's (and its predecessor) six-decade in power, Islam has been successfully institutionalised. As a result, there was no doubt among the Malays regarding Islam's special position in the country. This changed when Pakatan Harapan came to power.

Populism as a political strategy seek to replace the supposed corrupt elites with those who represent "the people". Since the values of the Malay majority have always been assumed by the Malaysian government, and UMNO as a party championing Malay rights specifically, there was little need for populist rhetoric by the elites before 2018. Unfortunately, when the Barisan Nasional government was defeated by Pakatan Harapan in the 14th general election, the new government was portrayed by its opposition as threatening Islam's special position in Malaysia. Islamic populist strategy was thus employed in the rhetoric of both UMNO and the Islamist PAS party as proof that they represent the true values of the Malay voters.

Islamic Populism in Malaysia

The Pakatan Harapan coalition comprised of two multiracial parties—

resembled a more consensus-style decision making process. Because DAP leaders, known for their secular ideology, were seen as being on an equal footing with other Malay leaders in the coalition, accusations were thrown of Islam being under threat. Taking advantage of the Malays' suspicion towards the Pakatan Harapan government, UMNO and PAS, two sworn enemies since PAS split from UMNO in 1951, formed an alliance in 2019 called Muafakat Nasional as a response to the devastating defeat they encountered in the previous general election.

UMNO and PAS leaders engaged in populist strategy steeped in Islamic rhetoric by alleging the Pakatan Harapan government of failing the majority Malay population. Examples can be seen in a number of incidents such as the recognition of the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC), the ratification of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and the introduction of Jawi calligraphy in school syllabus. Although defending Malay rights have always been important to both parties, bringing these issues to the forefront as part of its political discourse is a relatively new innovation by UMNO which found itself in the opposition during Pakatan Harapan's 22-months rule. Furthermore, as a response to the Jawi calligraphy controversy, a Malay-Muslim coalition called Gerakan Pembela Ummah (Ummah) promoted the Buy Muslim First (BMF) campaign. This shows that Islamic populism was not an exclusive strategy of political parties, but also for other Islamic organisations that wanted to take advantage of the Malays' dissatisfaction with the Pakatan Harapan government.

Attacks by the Malay opposition arguably worked to weaken Pakatan Harapan as less than two years later, the Mahathir-led government was toppled in a soft coup by members of his own party. The newly formed Perikatan Nasional government consists mainly of three Malay-based

voters, in contrast to the meagre 17% positive feedback received by Pakatan Harapan. It is not hard to see how Perikatan Nasional's strategy of Islamic populism had been one of the reasons for its success in this war of perception. Populism, as a thin ideology, is known to be about politics of public opinion rather than about substantial policy goals. This explains the political infighting between UMNO and Bersatu as they do not have clear objectives except to defeat Pakatan Harapan and to block Anwar Ibrahim from becoming prime minister. As a result, the Perikatan Nasional government now holds on to power with a slim majority especially after three UMNO members withdrew support for Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin. Alas, we may not know the exact standing of the government as Malaysia went into a so-called health emergency on 12th January 2021 that disallows Parliament from sitting. Knowing that their survival is hanging by a thread, the Perikatan Nasional government has resorted again to a strategy of Islamic populism especially following several recent court cases. The government has vowed to strengthen the Syariah court by introducing a five-year roadmap that includes the amendment of the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Bill 355 (RUU355). This would allow the Syariah courts to mete out *hudud* law as prescribed in the Qur'an. More worryingly, after the High Court declared that non-Muslims are allowed to use the word "Allah", UMNO was quick to claim that Muslims are willing to go to the streets over the matter. Even Zahid Hamidi, UMNO's current president, mentioned in his speech at the party's annual general meeting that UMNO will prioritise the strengthening of the Syariah court system as long as the people vote the party back into power. With other state Islamic religious bodies joining the government in appealing the High Court's decision, there is no doubt that UMNO is playing to the public's sentiment.

Reactions of Non-Malays

interests of non-Malays as best exemplified in the right of non-Muslim speakers of Bahasa Melayu who have used “Allah” to mean God for generations. Thus, the most affected are the *bumiputras* in Sabah and Sarawak, two states in East Malaysia that have real concerns that the Islamisation process across the sea would spill over into their territories. Jeffrey Kittingan of STAR, an ally of Perikatan Nasional in Sarawak, has reminded PAS that the incumbent coalition could not secure a two-thirds majority in the next general election if the sensitivities of the people in East Malaysia are not taken into consideration. The relative silence of other non-Malay parties shows a level of pragmatism and understanding over the current temperature of Islamic religiosity in the country.

More than political fallout, the impact of growing Islamic populism in Malaysia is the growing polarisation within society between Muslims and non-Muslims. For this reason, populists have always been branded as antagonistic to democracy, because instead of uniting the people, populists find success in wedging a gap among the people to illustrate the “us” from the “them”. The Islamic populists in Malaysia are peddling to the people’s base instinct to defend Islam since the religion is tied to their identity as Malays and also to their political claim over Malaysia (or specifically, the concept of *Ketuanan Melayu*). As a result, Malaysia is seeing the disentangling of its social fabric with many non-Muslims leaving the country because they have lost all hope in the possibility for democracy to save the country.

Dangers of Islamic Populism

Why should we be concern with the rise of Islamic populism in Malaysia? After all, Islamisation of Malaysia’s society and administration have been ongoing since the 1970s. The problem today is

within a democratic framework, but their commitment to democratic values is unpredictable. Liberal democracy requires whoever governing in Putrajaya to respect the rights and liberties of the minorities who do not vote for them. Unfortunately, populists see these minorities as “others” who do not deserve a modicum of respect. As the ideas of these Islamic populists spread in society, extremist views among the Malay population may increase. These extremists are unfortunately less tolerant to democratic ideals, and the fear is that when all else fails, they would resort to violence. Although this is not an immediate concern, it is imperative to strengthen democratic norms in Malaysia to avoid such possibility. With the country’s limited experience in democratic forbearance, it is up to the average democrats in Malaysia to defeat Islamic populism and right-wing extremism through civic engagement and discourse.

TAGS: [POLITICAL ISLAM](#), [MALAYSIA](#), [POLITICS](#)

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of

[STRAT.O.SPHERE CONSULTING PTE LTD.](#)

This article is published under a [Creative Commons Licence](#). Republications minimally require 1) credit authors and their institutions, and 2) credit to [STRAT.O.SPHERE CONSULTING PTE LTD](#) and include a link back to either our home page or the article URL.

AUTHOR



Syaza Shukri is an assistant professor of political science at the International Islamic University Malaysia. Her research interests are in identity politics, democratisation, and the intersection of both. She can be reached at syazashukri@iium.edu.my while her other written work is accessible on her ResearchGate profile.

MORE IN POLITICAL ISLAM

Exclusive Statement by FPI Lawyer, Aziz Yanuar

21 Jan 2021 – 8 min read

FPI Disbandment: Setting a Bad Precedence

21 Jan 2021 – 5 min read

The Politics of Religion in Indonesia: Exploiting the Islamic Identity in a Fragmented Society

21 Jan 2021 – 6 min read

See all 3 posts →