

POLITICAL ISLAM

Hijrah or Pop Islam? Implications for Malaysia

The pace of Islamisation in Malaysia has undoubtedly increase in the past decade. Spiritual Hijrah by the masses towards greater piety is of course commendable – until it is used by celebrities, entrepreneurs, and politicians for their personal gain.

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Hijab-wearing female Muslims in Malaysia taking a selfie. Credit: AFP Photo

Introduction



outlier. Since the 1970s, Muslims around the world have consistently progress towards greater piety; spiritual Hijrah or the heart's migration from veneration of worldly desires to the true worship of Allah. Of course, the genuine Hijrah of Muslims should be lauded and supported as being a better Muslim translates into being a better human being. However, the concern is that these 'born-again Muslims' do not uphold or champion true Islamic faith in accordance with the Qur'an because their changes are simply window dressings to fit social expectations.

With the rise of globalisation and the metaphorical flattening of the earth, there is now greater contestation for public space. According to social movement theory, different actors do so to fit into pre-existing beliefs of the masses. Instead of being kept out of public sphere, Islam is today embraced by a wider section of Muslim society including in Malaysia. The government or the state can no longer make exclusive decisions when it comes to the role of religion within society. There is also the rise of new voices for Islam that include celebrities, entrepreneurs, and the new intellectuals. Muslims in Malaysia are now spoiled for choices when it comes to portraying piety in what is termed as "pop Islam", or popular Islam.

Pop Islam Could Lead to Artificial Piety

Pop Islam is the phenomenon that can be observed across the Muslim world in which Islam has been rebranded and repackaged so that religion is no longer treated as separate from a person's life. Instead, Islam informs the way we dress, eat, travel, and consume entertainment, among others. Although it is not bad, pop Islam makes it difficult for us to distinguish between the fundamentals of the religion as taught by the Prophet and what has been marketed as 'Islamic'. For example, wearing modestly is taught and expected of male and female Muslims. However, buying and wearing a hijab that is sold at an exorbitant price is far from being modest. This is a minor example of how such ostentatious behaviour could possibly lead to accusations of artificial piety. Worse, it might cause frustration from those who cannot afford such luxury which could lead to social discord. Similarly, there



those in need. It is not the ritual that is being questioned, but whether some Muslims are doing so for dubious reasons.

This social construction of Muslim piety combines religion with social class and politics in the modern world. Muslims in Malaysia want to be part of the narrative of a modern Muslim that has progressed since Mahathir Mohamad's administration in the 1980s. Being a modern Muslim is defined as partaking in the capitalist and consumerist world without having to abandon one's Islamic faith. This post-Islamist world is no longer a state-centred phenomenon but is dispersed through Islamic marketisation since the 1990s. Consequently, we can see that those who are part of this public display of piety are mostly from the middle-class who can afford to 'buy' piety. From the author's personal interview with a Member of Parliament from the Islamist PAS party, he talked about how the religious discourse in urban Klang Valley surpassed the quality of religious sermons in mosques in rural Kelantan. This shows that religiosity is better embraced by urban folks. As religiosity is equated with the middle-class, it is not surprising that the phenomenon of pop Islam is spreading to rural Malaysia as well, as more Malays crave to be identified with the Muslim middle-class.

Hijrah and Post-Islamisation in Malaysia

When discussing about the Islamisation of the market in Malaysia, it is unavoidable to mention how the country pioneered Islamic banking and finance in the 1990s. Since then, the halal industry has grown in other sectors including food, travel, cosmetics, and modest wear with halal exports amounting to RM43 billion in 2017. It is not a surprise then that Malaysia tops four indicators in the State of the Global Islamic Economy Report 2020/21. The pervasiveness of the halal industry has turned it into a norm that Muslims in Malaysia rely on the halal logo before making any purchases or economic transactions. Choosing to avoid



when non-Muslim businesses are shunned for no solid reasons such as the Buy Muslim First (BMF) campaign. Another example of Muslims turning to religion in Malaysia can be seen in the mushrooming of alternative treatment centres based on Islamic teachings or Quranic verses called *ruqyah*. Such treatments to resolve various problems from physical pain to emotional turmoil are usually offered by religious clerics as part of their business venture. While it has been around for decades, there is no doubt that some Muslims today put more trust in such treatments than in conventional medicine. This becomes a problem, for example, when a well-known influencer who always gives Islamic talks tells thousands of her followers to stop taking medication for anxiety.

The entertainment industry in Malaysia is also not exempt from this phenomenon of pop Islam as seen in reality television shows that aim to produce charismatic young Islamic preachers. The first was *Imam Muda* (Young Imam), which ran for three seasons beginning in 2010. The fact that the show was followed by two others, *Pencetus Ummah* (Inspirator of the Ummah) and *Da'i* (Missionary), both premiering in 2013, proved that there is an appetite for Islamic reality TV. Make no mistake, these shows are first and foremost produced for entertainment, but is 'purified' by its focus on Islam. These celebrity preachers then 'graduate' to become an 'ustaz', or a cleric. Unfortunately, there have been controversies surrounding these instant preachers; a case of one step forward and two steps back for the cause of Hijrah in Malaysia.

Finally, the most obvious of these Hijrah phenomena is in the attire of Muslim women in Malaysia. If it was difficult to spot a person wearing the headscarf when the country first gained independence, it is now the other way around. More Muslim women are wearing the headscarf, or *tudung*, with modest fashion taking over the country. The numbers speak for themselves: dUCK scarves, founded by Vivvy Yusuf, has sold over 1 million scarves since launching in 2014 while Naelofar Hijab, founded by celebrity Neelofa, hit RM50 million in sales in its first year of operation in 2014. All of this would not have been possible if not for the normalisation of the hijab in the media nearly 20 years ago started



Nevertheless, the hijab has now become synonymous with being a female Muslim who mostly put it on without much thought on its significance to cover a person's modesty. As a result, there have been multiple cases over the years of women donning the hijab acting out in road rage or accused of bullying. Like the controversial celebrity preachers, these actions have brought more harm than good to the image of Islam. Yet, female Muslims will continue to don the hijab because it has now come to a point where those who do not wear the hijab are stigmatized. When bias leads to discriminatory practices, it is time to re-evaluate this Hijrah narrative for that is not what Islam stands for.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

As a Muslim, it is definitely a joyous occasion to see fellow Muslims experience a spiritual Hijrah. Hopefully, the desire to become better is a personal choice that is free from coercion or shame. However, as has been argued, it has become more difficult to separate authentic piety from a desire to avoid ignominy. When Hijrah does not come naturally, there is an ensuing contradiction between a person's outward appearance with their actions that are deemed un-Islamic.

Furthermore, in a multiracial country such as Malaysia in which politics is tied to the ethnic make-up of society, pop Islam can easily be appropriated by unscrupulous politicians who are looking to make a quick gain at the polls. If the Islamisation narrative is hijacked by disingenuous persons, it could lead to extremism and social disharmony in Malaysia. This has already been done by savvy entrepreneurs. Currently, pushback from the community is unfolding with numerous celebrities being called '*penunggang agama*', which literally means religious riders, or those who are taking advantage of Islam for their own agenda. While Islam preaches harmony, the exploitation of the people's wish for spiritual Hijrah could possibly create friction within society.



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