



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

YUSOF ISHAK
INSTITUTE

FRIDAY *KHUTBAHS* AS MODELS FOR MUSLIM CIVIC BEHAVIOUR IN MULTI-ETHNIC MALAYSIA

Syaza Shukri

ISSUE

19

2026

TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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FRIDAY *KHUTBAHS* AS MODELS FOR MUSLIM CIVIC BEHAVIOUR IN MULTI-ETHNIC MALAYSIA

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Published by: ISEAS Publishing
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Singapore 119614
publish@iseas.edu.sg
<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

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ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Syaza Shukri, author.

Title: Friday khutbahs as models for Muslim civic behaviour in multi-ethnic Malaysia / by Syaza Shukri.

Description: Singapore : ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, July 2026. | Series: Trends in Southeast Asia, ISSN 0219-3213 ; TRS19/26 | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: ISBN 9789815361810 (soft cover) | ISBN 9789815361827 (ebook PDF)

Subjects: LCSH: Islamic sermons—Malaysia. | Islam and politics—Malaysia. | Political participation—Malaysia—Religious aspects—Islam. | Citizenship—Malaysia—Religious aspects—Islam.

Classification: DS501 I59T no. 19(2026)

Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Friday *Khutbahs* as Models for Muslim Civic Behaviour in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia

By Syaza Shukri

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This study analyses 420 Friday *khutbahs* (sermons) between 2021 and 2025 across ten Malaysian states and federal territories to examine how Islamic sermons proscribe norms of citizenship.
- Malaysia's centralized Islamic bureaucracy, especially that of the state muftis, ensures sermons are regulated from the top. As a result, the mosque pulpit operates primarily as a structured channel of moral transmission to shape civic behaviour through religious authority.
- Across states, the "good Muslim citizen" is proscribed as being disciplined, loyal to constitutional authority, socially harmonious and resistant to extremism. Participatory or adversarial democratic engagement is much less emphasized than are stability and cohesion.
- Selangor articulates a constitutional model; Sarawak advances integrative federal coexistence; federal territories mirror executive narratives (from Keluarga Malaysia to Malaysia Madani); Pahang advances a protectionist model centred on Malay-Muslim guardianship; Kelantan emphasizes theologically bounded and stability-oriented citizenship; and Pulau Pinang foregrounds ethical pluralism. Variation exists, but harmony remains the shared core.
- The rapid transition from Keluarga Malaysia to Malaysia Madani themes in federally prepared *khutbahs* demonstrates institutional alignment with the agenda of the incumbent prime minister. This highlights the pulpit's role in nationwide narrative management.

- Competing Islamic visions (Malaysia Madani versus a PAS-led opposition) and theological orientations (Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah versus Salafi-Wahhabism) shape contestation, thus necessitating civic discourse anchored in Islamic ethical principles.

Friday *Khutbahs* as Models for Muslim Civic Behaviour in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia

Syaza Shukri¹

Once a week, Muslim men² in Malaysia congregate at mosques to perform the obligatory Friday prayer. Unlike the five daily prayers, the Friday prayer requires attendees to listen attentively to a sermon (*khutbah*) delivered at the beginning of the prayer session. In classical Islamic jurisprudence, the *khutbah* is a constitutive element of the Friday prayer. Historically, it functioned as a key site of moral instruction, communal guidance and political communication within Muslim societies.³ It serves as a medium through which religious authorities transmit doctrinal clarification, ethical reminders and commentary on contemporary issues affecting the Muslim *ummah* (community).

In Malaysia, this weekly ritual acquires additional significance because of the country's institutionalized administration of Islam. Malaysia operates a dual legal system comprising the civil framework inherited from the British colonial administration alongside a state-based

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² In Sunni jurisprudence, attendance at the Friday congregational prayer is an obligation for adult, sane, free, resident Muslim men. It is not obligatory for women, children, travellers, the sick or those with legitimate hardship. Women may attend but are not required to do so.

³ M. Rahman, T. Islam, and M.A. Ahsan, “The Role of Friday Sermons in Promoting Islamic Lifestyle and Social Change: A Critical Study in Bangladesh”, *Sociology of Islam* 11, nos. 2–3 (2025): 251–71, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22131418-11030002>.

Syariah legal structure. Within this arrangement, Islamic affairs fall under the jurisdiction of the states, with the Malay Rulers constitutionally recognized as heads of Islam in their respective states. The religious bureaucracy, including state Islamic religious councils, departments of Islamic affairs and mufti departments,⁴ play a central role in regulating sermons delivered in mosques. Friday khutbah texts are prepared, vetted and disseminated by religious authorities to ensure a standardized message across mosques in specific states.

This institutional structure renders the Friday khutbah into a uniquely powerful channel of communication. It is at once religiously authoritative and bureaucratically coordinated. Every week, a substantial segment of Malaysia's Muslim male population, regardless of class and occupation, gathers in a shared space to hear a state-sanctioned message. This platform presents an opportunity to shape normative understandings of citizenship, social responsibility and peaceful coexistence among that segment of Malaysians.

Malaysia's plural social fabric, comprising Malays, Chinese, Indians, indigenous communities and others, has long required careful negotiation of identity and belonging. Public debates over minority rights and national identity often unfold in highly politicized arenas. Yet the mosque pulpit offers a different modality of engagement. Through scripturally grounded arguments, the khutbah can frame tolerance and mutual respect not as political concessions but as religious imperatives. Properly articulated, themes such as honouring covenants and upholding public order can be linked to broader conceptions of constitutional citizenship and intercommunal harmony.

It must be acknowledged, however, that this mechanism directly reaches only Muslim men. While there are no statistics on the number of Muslim men in Malaysia, based on "Bumiputera Statistics 2025",⁵

⁴ Since Muftis have different backgrounds and orientations, the content of Friday khutbahs also differ accordingly. See Mohd Faizal Musa, *Malaysia's Fatwa Institution: Reform or Relic?*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 21/2025 (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2025).

⁵ DOSM, "Bumiputera Statistics, 2025", 2025, <https://www.dosm.gov.my/portal-main/release-content/bumiputera-statistics-2025>.

the Malay and Bumiputera male population is approximately eleven million (roughly a third of the population). The gendered nature of Friday prayer has historically been accompanied by an expectation that those who attend would subsequently convey religious guidance to their households. Classical juristic discussions and mosque practices often presume that men function as conduits of religious knowledge within the family. This dynamic should not be romanticized or overstated. Women also participate in mosques, especially in all-women mosques in Western countries, empowering female scholars along the way.⁶

This paper examines how Friday khutbahs in Malaysia can shape perceptions of citizenship and peaceful coexistence in a multi-ethnic society. By analysing selected sermon texts, the study explores both the possibilities and constraints of employing the mosque pulpit as a site of civic formation, in addition to others such as schools.⁷ By analysing sermon content, this research contributes to broader debates on Islamic governance, political identity and the role of religious institutions in fostering a peaceful and inclusive Malaysian society.

SACRED SERMONS, CIVIC SUBJECTS

Samuri and Hopkins⁸ show that mosque administration, imam appointments and sermon texts in Malaysia are centrally controlled, and that imams are required to deliver pre-approved khutbahs. This institutional structure transforms the khutbah into an official channel through which religious authorities and, indirectly, the state, communicate normative guidance to Muslim citizens. Samuri and Hopkins argue

⁶ I. Shiekh, “Women’s Mosques: Spaces to Rethink Gender and Religious Authority, in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Space*, edited by Jeanne Halgren Kilde (Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 493–506, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190874988.013.37>.

⁷ See Syaza Shukri, “JAIS and the Reimagining of Islamic Education for Civic Engagement”, *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2025/62, 22 August 2025.

⁸ M.A.A. Samuri and P. Hopkins, “Voices of Islamic Authorities: Friday Khutba in Malaysian Mosques”, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 28, no. 1 (2017): 47–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2017.1280916>.

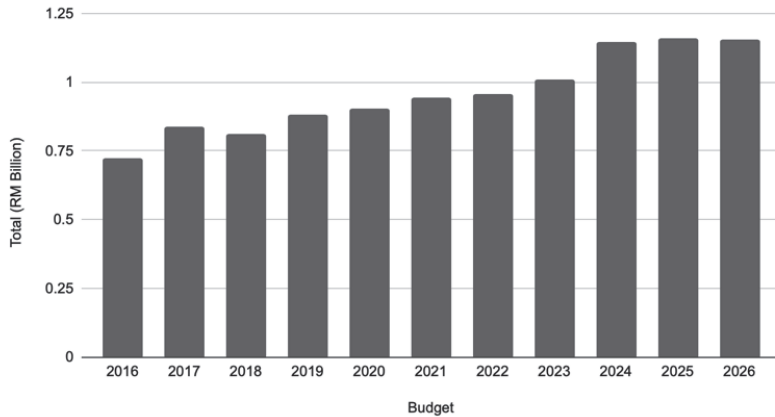
that such a regulation safeguards Sunni orthodoxy and facilitates the monopolization of religious interpretation. Many congregants are reluctant to criticize khutbah content because of its scriptural grounding. In this sense, the mosque functions less as a deliberative public sphere and more as a structured site of civic transmission.

Before engaging the substantive analysis of Friday sermons, it is necessary to outline the institutional procedures governing the production and dissemination of khutbah texts in Malaysia. As Islamic affairs fall under state jurisdiction, each state Islamic religious council (Majlis Agama Islam Negeri) authorizes its corresponding department of Islamic affairs (Jabatan Agama Islam Negeri) to oversee the preparation of Friday khutbahs. For Wilayah Persekutuan,⁹ both the Malaysian Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) and the Federal Territory Islamic Religious Department (JAWI) are involved in the preparation of khutbah texts. Specifically, khutbah texts prepared by JAKIM are used in Putrajaya, Labuan and at Masjid Negara (National Mosque) in Kuala Lumpur, while other mosques in Kuala Lumpur typically use texts prepared by the Mosque Management Unit within JAWI. There are also instances in which JAWI adopts JAKIM's khutbah texts. This study, however, focuses solely on khutbahs prepared by JAKIM, considering these to be more representative of the federal government's position since they are the ones delivered at the National Mosque.

Each state Islamic religious authority manages its own system. Despite this variation, a broadly similar workflow can be identified. Drafting is typically carried out either by officers within specific units (for example, the Translation and Khutbah Unit in Johor or the Office of the Imam in Sarawak) or by a formally appointed writing panel such as in Perlis and Terengganu. These panels usually consist of religious officials, senior bureaucrats and sometimes academics. Once a draft is prepared, it is subjected to a review process by another panel. In many cases, this panel includes the mufti or operates under the authority of the mufti department. In certain cases, the functions of drafting and reviewing are

⁹ Wilayah Persekutuan refers to the federal territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya.

Figure 1: Budget Estimation, JAKIM (2016–26)



Source: Author's creation based on data from Ministry of Finance.

merged under a single committee, suggesting a more centralized and less differentiated process.

Given the heightened centrality of Islamic identity in Malay social and political reasoning, Islamic institutions such as JAKIM and state religious departments play a crucial role not only in religious administration but also in shaping conceptions of citizenship and national belonging. With the budget for JAKIM increasing each year (with a slight decline from RM1.158 billion in 2025 to RM1.155 billion in 2026), there is no doubt that the Islamic bureaucracy in Malaysia plays a huge role in society's narrative development. Malays look to these institutions for guidance on moral behaviour, social priorities and communal responsibilities. In a plural society like Malaysia, this places Islamic bodies in a unique position to articulate an Islamic vision of citizenship rooted in peaceful coexistence.

In practice, sermon themes frequently align with broader state priorities, addressing issues such as family values, social morality, public health, economic ethics, national unity and social harmony. At

times, khutbahs also respond to current events or policy initiatives, such as the dispute over the use of the word “Allah” by non-Muslim publications in 2010.¹⁰ The mosque pulpit thus becomes a channel for communicating religiously framed guidance on contemporary concerns. In moments of political polarization, especially when Muslim political identity is contested, the khutbah can become significant as a mechanism for promoting moderation. This follows decades of exclusivist and polarizing narratives “that pits Islam (read: Islamism) and secularism against each other as binary opposite[s].”¹¹ Empirical analysis of khutbah content becomes essential for evaluating whether Islamic authorities fulfil their pedagogical mandate in a shifting political climate.

Content analyses of Malaysian khutbahs suggest thematic diversity but within a consistent moral framework. Siti Munirah et al.¹² find that JAKIM-prepared khutbahs address social, ethical, religious and contemporary issues. But foundational beliefs and reminders of proper Islamic conduct remain central themes. Political messaging, including themes of patriotism, loyalty to rulers and national unity, appears in general and educative forms rather than as partisan rhetoric. Our research expands on these findings through comparisons across multiple states.

Comparative studies reinforce the civic potential of khutbahs. In Bangladesh, sermons promote patriotism, social responsibility and ethical conduct.¹³ In North America, post-9/11 khutbahs helped Muslim

¹⁰ M. Mohamad, “The Ascendance of Bureaucratic Islam and the Secularization of the Sharia in Malaysia”, *Pacific Affairs* 83, no. 3 (2010): 522.

¹¹ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, “Shifting Trends of Islamism and Islamist Practices in Malaysia, 1957–2017”, in “Divides and Dissent: Malaysian Politics 60 Years After Merdeka”, edited by Khoo Boo Teik, special issue, *Southeast Asian Studies* 7, no. 3 (2018): 374.

¹² Siti Munirah Binti Ibrahim, Fouad Bounama, and Abdul Salam Muhamad Shukri, “The Issues Discussed in Friday Khutbah in Malaysia: An Analysis Study of the Khutbah Texts Prepared by Jakim in the Year 2012”, *Arrasikhun International Journal* 3, no. 1 (2017): 1–12.

¹³ Rahman, Islam, and Ahsan, “The Role of Friday Sermons”.

minorities manage trauma and reconstruct civic belonging.¹⁴ Hashem¹⁵ similarly conceptualizes the khutbah as approximating civil discourse, invoking the ummah as a moral community that extends responsibility beyond narrow religious boundaries. These studies suggest that khutbahs function as platforms for ethical citizenship formation, particularly when civic duties are framed within Islamic moral vocabulary. This is especially true in countries where khutbah preparation is centralized, such as by the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) in Singapore and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) in Türkiye.¹⁶ At the other end of the spectrum, imams in countries such as Pakistan and Indonesia exercise substantial autonomy, reflecting diversity of thought and sectarian influence in relation to citizenship norms.

This study is grounded in the understanding that the khutbah is a form of *dakwah* and a project for moral reform and social transformation.¹⁷ The khutbah is not merely ritual speech but a purposive intervention aimed at moral cultivation (*tazkiyah*) and social discipline. Rather than privileging individual interpretation or rhetorical performance, the

¹⁴ S.R. Fink, “Preaching as Reimagining: Post-9/11 Khutbahs in the United States and Canada”, *Comparative Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2007): 195–212, <https://doi.org/10.1558/cis.v3i2.195>.

¹⁵ M. Hashem, “The Ummah in the Khutba: A Religious Sermon or a Civil Discourse?”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30, no. 1 (2010): 49–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602001003650606>.

¹⁶ Research from Türkiye illustrates the capacity of centralized sermon systems to adapt to political contexts. See O. Aksoy, “Preaching to Social Media: Turkey’s Friday Khutbas and Their Effects on Twitter”, *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 9 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231231182909>; Ö Yigit, “Shifts in Religious Instrumentalization: Friday Sermons and Ethnic Conflict in Turkey”, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 31, no. 3 (2025): 357–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2025.2458572>; I. Yilmaz, M. Demir, and N. Morieson, “The Islamist Populism, Anti-Westernism and Civilizationism of Turkey’s Directorate of Religious Affairs”, European Centre for Populism Studies (ECPS), 19 May 2021, <https://www.populismstudies.org/the-islamist-populism-anti-westernism-and-civilizationism-of-turkeys-directorate-of-religious-affairs/>.

¹⁷ See Mohd Yusof Hussain (2009). “The Friday khutbah as a Channel of Islamic Da’wah”, in *Readings in Islamic Da’wah*, edited by Mohd Yusof Hussad (IIUM Press, 2009), pp. 91–98.

khutbah draws upon a transmitted and authoritative knowledge structure rooted in the Qur'an, prophetic traditions and the accumulated corpus of *turath* (scholarly inheritance). Knowledge is therefore authorized through continuity with established religious sources and interpretive traditions.

In contrast to more decentralized or “popular” forms of preaching, which may rely on personality-driven authority or emotive appeal, the Friday khutbah operates within an institutionalized framework that emphasizes doctrinal consistency and collective guidance.¹⁸ This is particularly evident in Malaysia, where institutions such as state religious departments and the mufti departments play a central role in standardizing and disseminating khutbah texts. Through this process, the state effectively mediates religious knowledge.

SERMON AND CITIZENSHIP

There are as many khutbahs for a single state per year as there are weeks in a year. For this study, khutbahs were screened and 420 of them were chosen from ten states and Wilayah Persekutuan, representing 14.7 per cent of total khutbahs over five years that discussed matters related to citizenship.

Citizenship refers to the relationship between the people, the government and leadership, encompassing the rights, roles and responsibilities that arise from this relationship. As such, the chosen khutbahs fit any of the following themes: social unity and harmony, governance and leadership, and contemporary issues. The fact that nineteen khutbahs in Selangor in 2022 (36.5 per cent) fit our themes shows the importance of civic matters to the state.

The khutbahs were assessed using four indicators: text and language accessibility, availability of search tools, website usability and document availability. Each indicator was scored from 0 to 2 based on direct observation of official khutbah platforms, giving a maximum score of

¹⁸ See L.G. Jones, “Homiletic Exhortation and Storytelling: Challenging the ‘Popular’”, in *The Power of Oratory in the Medieval Muslim World* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

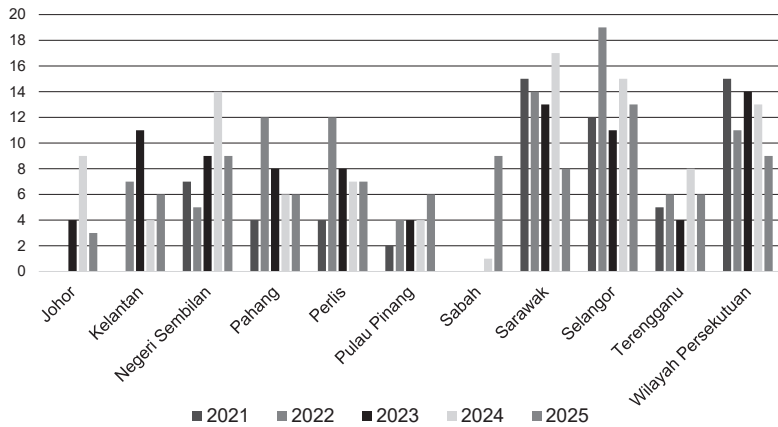
8 per state. Total scores were used to classify states into high, medium or low accessibility categories. Based on this assessment, ten states and Wilayah Persekutuan provide khutbahs through official websites, while Perak, Melaka and Kedah were excluded from full analysis because of limited or inconsistent online availability (posting through Facebook). Language availability varies as well, with Selangor and Pahang offering Rumi (Roman script), Jawi (Arabic script) and English; Pulau Pinang, Perlis, Terengganu and Wilayah Persekutuan provide both Rumi and Jawi; Johor and Kelantan offer Jawi only; and Sarawak, Sabah and Negeri Sembilan publish in Rumi only. Accessibility scores indicate that Selangor is the most accessible (score 8), followed by Sarawak, Pahang and Wilayah Persekutuan (7) as platforms that are well-organized and largely complete. A medium-accessibility group (score 5) includes Johor, Kelantan, Negeri Sembilan, Perlis, Pulau Pinang and Terengganu, which generally have usable platforms but have missing files or restricted language access. Sabah scored lowest (4) as a result of incomplete listings and limited titles from 2021 to 2023.

We chose 2021 as the starting year because we wanted to discern changes between the pre-Anwar Ibrahim administration and the unity government formed by him since November 2022.

Figure 2 shows notable cross-state and temporal variation in the number of khutbahs related to citizenship between 2021 and 2025, with no uniform national trajectory, yet with several discernible patterns. States such as Selangor and Sarawak, as well as Wilayah Persekutuan, consistently register the highest numbers across the five-year period, suggesting a more institutionalized or programmatic emphasis on citizenship themes in their religious messaging. Selangor peaks sharply in 2022 (around 19 sermons), while Sarawak records sustained high figures from 2021 to 2024 (ranging roughly between 13 and 17) before a slight moderation in 2025. Wilayah Persekutuan also remains relatively high throughout, indicating continuity rather than episodic engagement.

In contrast, states like Pulau Pinang and Sabah display comparatively low and fluctuating numbers. Johor and Terengganu exhibit moderate but uneven engagement, with small rises and dips. Kelantan and Negeri Sembilan demonstrate mid-range but variable figures, with Negeri Sembilan particularly spiking in 2024. Across the dataset, 2022 and

Figure 2: Number of Khutbahs Related to Citizenship, 2021–25



2024 appear as stronger years for citizenship-related khutbahs in several states, whereas 2025 shows a mixed pattern with decline in some states (e.g., Sarawak, Selangor) but growth in others (e.g., Sabah). We propose that 2022 was a tumultuous time in Malaysia, with Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob leading the country as it prepared for a general election and identity matters ranking high on people’s minds. While this would not explain the elevated numbers in 2023 and 2024, the fact that Sabah saw an increase in 2025 may lend credence to our hypothesis since Sabah was also preparing for its own election that year.

The next section will look at six states in more depth. Each text (on average five to seven pages long) was read in detail and classified according to the chosen themes to find similarities within and across states. Selangor and Sarawak were chosen because they have the highest number of khutbahs that relate to our themes. Furthermore, Sarawak is a state from East Malaysia that has unique social realities, with Muslims not being a majority in the state. Wilayah Persekutuan was chosen because its administration falls directly under the federal government. We also chose Pahang because of the spike in 2022, correlating to the general election that year. Kelantan was chosen because it is a state that

has been governed by PAS since 1990, while Pulau Pinang was chosen because of its low consistency in producing such texts.

Selangor

Selangor, as Malaysia's most developed state and for being a demographically mixed one,¹⁹ governed by Pakatan Rakyat/Pakatan Harapan since 2008, presents the most explicit and sustained articulation of citizenship themes across the dataset. Unlike states where khutbahs are primarily doctrinal or moralistic, Selangor's sermons consistently integrate religious devotion with civic responsibility, constitutional order, unity management and institutional loyalty.

For example, Selangor's Merdeka-themed khutbahs interpret independence not merely as historical emancipation but as an ongoing ethical project. Independence is framed as liberation from *shirk* (idolatry), *jahiliyyah* (ignorance) and moral decay rather than merely colonial rule. Muslims were reminded that:

Faithful Muslims should not use the weapon of division to achieve their worldly ambitions. It is not right for a few Muslims to continue to cause unrest and confusion among the people with any fake news and stories. All differences of opinion must be resolved patriotically and in accordance with Islamic principles by putting the interests of the country first.²⁰

Citizenship is tied to self-discipline and moral integrity. A "*merdeka*" (independent) Muslim is one free from destructive behaviour and ideological confusion.

Similarly, *Sudahkah Kita Merdeka?* questions whether Malaysians are mentally and spiritually independent despite political sovereignty.

¹⁹ Selangor has roughly 60 per cent Bumiputera (indigenous, including the Malays), 27 per cent Chinese and 11 per cent Indians. <https://open.dosm.gov.my/dashboard/kawasanku/Selangor>.

²⁰ Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor, *Memaknai Erti Sebuah Kemerdekaan* (25 August 2023), pp. 3–4 (my translation).

The khutbah explicitly warns against “penjajahan minda” (colonization of the mind), including political, cultural and economic dependency.²¹ Citizenship therefore requires critical consciousness, not passive nationalism. By 2025, unity had become the precondition for sustained sovereignty in the independence-day khutbah. The Charter of Madinah was used as an example:

We need to understand that within the framework of unity under the Federal Constitution and the Rukun Negara, every Malaysian from various backgrounds remains free to practice their respective religions and cultures. This is one of the main foundations of our country’s harmony. This is in line with the values contained in the Charter of Madinah initiated by Prophet Muhammad SAW, when the Jews and the polytheists were given the freedom to continue to hold on to their beliefs as long as they obeyed the charter.²²

Congregants were reminded that, “In facing the diversity of religious beliefs, the Prophet Muhammad did not consider it a major problem in establishing social interactions with the community.”²³ Selangor’s khutbahs frame citizenship as active moral participation in nation building in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. These khutbahs position *syariah* as ethical governance, with citizenship becoming an extension of religious responsibility through fair and just dealings with all.

Compared with Kelantan’s emphasis on intra-ummah purity or Sarawak’s inter-religious coexistence, Selangor articulates unity as a structural requirement for state stability. The sermon *Keutamaan Persaudaraan Islam* explicitly addresses political polarization following electoral competition in the six state elections held on 12 August 2023.

²¹ Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor, *Sudahkah Kita Merdeka?* (30 August 2024), p. 2 (my translation).

²² Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor, *Perpaduan Kunci Kemerdekaan yang Berkekalan* (29 August 2025), p. 5 (my translation).

²³ Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor, *Teladan Rasulullah SAW Dalam Bernegara* (20 September 2024), p. 4 (my translation).

It urges congregants to prioritize *ukhuwah* (brotherhood) over partisan hostility, cautioning against *taksub* (obsessed) politics.²⁴ Muslim citizens are reminded to manage ideological disagreement responsibly.

Likewise, *Perpaduan Asas Keharmonian* expands unity beyond Muslim fraternity to broader societal harmony. The khutbah integrates *surah* (chapter) Al-Hujurat (Quran 49:10) with contemporary plural realities, reinforcing that Muslim citizenship requires social ethics, respect and restraint. For example, Muslims

have never been taught to demolish the houses of worship of followers of other religions. In fact, history proves that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his companions respected the existence of followers of other religions and their houses of worship.²⁵

This follows a dispute earlier in 2025 concerning the proposed relocation of the Dewi Sri Patrakaliamman Temple located near Jalan Masjid India in Kuala Lumpur. Even a year later, in 2026, this reminder is still relevant given ongoing tensions over proposed demolition of temples built “illegally”.²⁶

Unity is framed not sentimentally but institutionally. Selangor’s khutbah corpus contains strong articulation of loyalty to constitutional institutions. Obedience to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong is framed as a Qur’anic obligation towards *ulil amri* (legitimate authority).²⁷ While the concept of *ulil amri* has generated extensive and contested interpretations

²⁴ Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor, *Keutamaan Persaudaraan Islam* (18 August 2023) p. 3 (my translation).

²⁵ Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor, *Perpaduan Asas Keharmonian* (22 August 2025), pp. 5–6 (my translation).

²⁶ Iman Muttaqin Yusof, “Malaysia’s ‘Illegal’ Temple Row: PM Slams Vigilantism After Rally Ban”, *South China Morning Post*, 9 February 2026, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3342883/malaysias-illegal-temple-row-pm-slams-vigilantism-after-rally-ban>.

²⁷ Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor, *Raja Ditaati, Negara Dirahmati* (19 July 2024); Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor, *Dirgahayu Tuanku: Raja Dikasihi, Negara Diberkati* (30 May 2025).

across Islamic intellectual traditions,²⁸ this paper does not seek to adjudicate between these competing theological positions. Rather, it adopts a contextual and interpretive approach, focusing specifically on how *ulil amri* is invoked within the Malaysian khutbah corpus. In this sense, *ulil amri* is treated not as a fixed doctrinal category but as a functional concept. This allows the analysis to remain grounded in the empirical realities where references to *ulil amri* are within Malaysia's broader framework of governance, with the hereditary rulers being responsible for protecting Malay and Islamic traditions. Importantly, Selangor links monarchy not merely to Malay identity but also to national stability and inter-state constitutional balance. The Agong is framed as protector of Islam and guarantor of social harmony. In Penang, constitutional references are implicit, whereas in Kelantan, political Islam is foregrounded. Selangor, by contrast, embeds monarchy within democratic citizenship.

Significantly, the khutbah *Syariat Dijunjung, Keamanan Terpelihara* invokes the *fiqh* maxim: "The government's actions towards its people should be based on *maslahah* (public interest)."²⁹ This sermon integrates classical Islamic jurisprudence with modern public policy principles. It affirms that both rulers and citizens are bound by public interest and that obedience is conditional upon justice and benefit. This is significant in a politically competitive state. Rather than advocating confrontation, the khutbah channels political disagreement into lawful and *maslahah*-oriented participation.

Despite its plural-demographic reality, Selangor also constructs firm moral boundaries. Atheism has been identified as a threat to *aqidah* (belief) and moral order. However, unlike more confrontational states, the tone emphasizes intellectual clarification rather than political mobilization.³⁰ *Rahmah* (mercy) was emphasized as Islam's core, extending compassion

²⁸ See M. Sirry, "Who Are Those in Authority? Early Muslim Exegesis of the Qur'anic *Ulū'l-Amr*", *Religions* 12, no. 7 (2021): 483, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070483>.

²⁹ Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor, *Syariat Dijunjung Keamanan Terpelihara* (12 June 2025), p. 4 (my translation).

³⁰ Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor, *Bahaya Ancaman Ateis* (25 October 2024).

even to non-Muslims and animals.³¹ By framing Islam as morally expansive rather than exclusionary, this approach softens the boundaries and produces a morally confident yet politically restrained model.

Selangor emerges as the state with the most comprehensive articulation of Muslim citizenship in the dataset. Selangor constructs what may be termed a stabilizing and constitutionally embedded model of Muslim citizenship. In a highly urbanized and politically competitive state, khutbah discourse functions as a mechanism of civic moderation. Rather than mobilizing congregants for partisan contestation, Selangor's sermons channel religious identity towards institutional trust and lawful participation.

Sarawak

In Sarawak, Muslims are not a demographic majority, and Islam is not constitutionally the official religion of the state. The findings from selected Friday khutbahs from the state reveal a distinct model of Islamic citizenship characterized by integrative federal belonging, developmental responsibility, loyalty to constitutional authority, anti-extremism, and plural coexistence. Unlike states where khutbah discourses may lean towards majoritarian consolidation or ideological state projects, Sarawak's sermons articulate what may be termed a stewardship-oriented model of Muslim citizenship.

The first major theme concerns the embedding of Muslim identity within the constitutional and historical framework of Malaysia. Sermons given in conjunction with Malaysia Day, which falls on 16 September each year, explicitly recount the formation of Malaysia and emphasize the declaration of a democratic and sovereign federation. Sarawak's inclusion in Malaysia is positioned not as absorption but as a historically meaningful covenant. Citizenship is therefore framed as territorial and constitutional responsibility. The phrase "our state is our responsibility!"³² reinforces the moral obligation of Muslim Sarawakians to contribute to

³¹ Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor, *Islam Agama Kasih Sayang* (2 June 2023).

³² Jabatan Agama Islam Sarawak, *Membangunkan Sarawak Maju Makmur* (15 September 2023), p. 3 (my translation).

the state's welfare. Furthermore, Hari Malaysia is linked to collective gratitude and unity across Semenanjung, Sabah and Sarawak. A khutbah emphasizes adherence to Rukun Negara principles, including loyalty to king and constitution,³³ thereby embedding Islamic identity within shared civic norms. This formulation moves beyond ethnicized belonging and anchors Muslim citizenship within federal constitutionalism.

Similarly, a khutbah presented a few days before the celebration of Sarawak Day on 22 July 2025 tied Sarawak's self-governance and subsequent federation under the Malaysia Agreement 1963 to collective gratitude and obligation.³⁴ Here, citizenship is constructed as stewardship of inherited sovereignty. In contrast to more Islam-centric state narratives elsewhere, the Sarawak sermons situate Islam within Malaysia's constitutional history rather than above it.

Given Sarawak's demographic diversity, the theme of social cohesion is especially pronounced. Not unlike in Selangor, the Prophet's governance of Madinah is invoked as a model transcending tribal and ethnic boundaries. The sermon explicitly acknowledges Malaysia's plural composition, including indigenous groups of Sabah and Sarawak. The congregants were reminded, "In terms of religion, Allah subhanahu wata'ala forbids us from insulting the idols of followers of other religions because it only causes anger, revenge and envy, until they respond by insulting Islam beyond limits."³⁵ Rather than Muslim dominance, the sermons affirm coexistence. Diversity is framed as divine design and a source of strength rather than a threat.³⁶

Another theme concerns disciplined loyalty to leadership. *Pemimpin Ditaati Kemakmuran Dikecapi* emphasizes obedience to ulil amri, citing Surah al-Nisa' 4:59. The khutbah clarifies that obedience is conditional

³³ Jabatan Agama Islam Sarawak, *Perpaduan Teguh, Negara Kukuh* (12 September 2025), p. 3.

³⁴ Jabatan Agama Islam Sarawak, *Semarak Merdeka, Sarawak Sejahtera* (18 July 2025).

³⁵ Jabatan Agama Islam Sarawak, *Perpaduan Asas Kemakmuran Negara* (5 July 2024), p. 4 (my translation).

³⁶ Jabatan Agama Islam Sarawak, *Perpaduan Teguh, Negara Kukuh* (12 September 2025).

upon alignment with divine law,³⁷ thus maintaining theological limits on authority while affirming civic compliance. The Yang di-Pertuan Agong was further situated as constitutional protector and religious guardian.³⁸ Loyalty is both religious obligation and national virtue. The reciprocal relationship between ruler and ruled is highlighted through hadith (the Prophet's saying), emphasizing mutual prayer and goodwill. In Sarawak's minority-Muslim context, this rhetoric serves stabilizing purposes. Rather than encouraging contestation for political dominance, the sermons cultivate disciplined integration within Malaysia's constitutional monarchy.

The final theme concerns the safeguarding of moral order. For example, *Mencegah dan Menangani Fahaman Khawarij* warns against extremist *takfiri* tendencies and violent dissent.³⁹ By tracing Khawarij⁴⁰ origins and condemning indiscriminate excommunication, the sermon delegitimizes insurrectionary politics. This is not unique to Sarawak, as other states and territories, including Pahang, Pulau Pinang and Wilayah Persekutuan, also have khutbahs on the matter. The issue was widely discussed in 2024 when the then minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Religious Affairs) mentioned the rise of Khawarij and takfiri ideologies in the country.⁴¹

References to takfiri tendencies or analogies with the Khawarij tend to be more pronounced in jurisdictions that have formally curtailed Wahhabi and Salafi teachings. In Pahang, for example, official narratives

³⁷ Jabatan Agama Islam Sarawak, *Pemimpin Ditaati, Kemakmuran Dikecapi* (13 December 2024), p. 3.

³⁸ Jabatan Agama Islam Sarawak, *Kepimpinan Memayungi Ummah* (13 June 2025).

³⁹ Jabatan Agama Islam Sarawak, *Mencegah dan Menangani Fahaman Khawarij, Pelampau Agama* (27 September 2024).

⁴⁰ Khawarij thought is characterized by its tendency to denounce and rebel against rulers it deems unjust or illegitimate.

⁴¹ "Religious Affairs Minister: Rise of Khawarij, Takfiri Ideologies in Malaysia Alarming", *Malay Mail*, 14 March 2024, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/03/14/religious-affairs-minister-rise-of-khawarij-takfiri-ideologies-in-malaysia-alarming/123514>.

cast Wahhabism in terms that would lead to division and disunity among Muslims in Malaysia.⁴² In contrast, Perlis is widely linked to a Salafi-inclined religious orientation. A review of khutbahs from Perlis within the study period shows no explicit treatment of the Khawarij theme. Rather, a lot of the sermons prioritize themes of safeguarding Muslim territories and honour by referencing not only Gaza but also conflicts in Libya and Syria, indicating that sectarian categorizations carry less weight in Perlis. This variation underscores that discourses on takfir, Khawarij and Wahhabi-Salafi movements reflect differing state-level religious and institutional dynamics.

Unlike states where khutbah discourse may emphasize Islam as hegemonic political identity, Sarawak sermons present Islam as integrative civic ethic. The absence of sustained emphasis on ideological branding such as Malaysia Madani, alongside earlier incorporation of Keluarga Malaysia, suggests a pragmatic orientation prioritizing stability over federal political branding. The findings for Sarawak indicate that in a non-majority Muslim setting, Islamic sermon discourse operates less as a tool of identity consolidation and more as a mechanism of social integration.

Wilayah Persekutuan

The selected khutbah texts for Friday prayers in Wilayah Persekutuan used for this study were prepared by JAKIM. Unlike state religious departments, JAKIM (alongside JAWI) occupies a distinctive institutional position as a federal agency under the Prime Minister's Department. This structural location is not incidental. It shapes the thematic orientation of Friday khutbahs delivered in Wilayah Persekutuan, especially when national political narratives—Keluarga Malaysia (2021–22) and Malaysia Madani (2023 onwards)—are explicitly integrated. Across the 2021–25 corpus, the khutbahs reveal a patterned articulation of

⁴² Jabatan Mufti Negeri Pahang, *Tegahan Dan Larangan Menyebarkan Ajaran Salafiah @ Wahabiah Dan Seumpamanya Di Negeri Pahang*, E-Fatwa, 2014, <https://mufti.pahang.gov.my/fatwa/2014/tegahan-dan-larangan-menyebarkan-ajaran-salafiah-wahabiah-dan-seumpamanya-di-negeri-pahang>.

citizenship in which religious obedience, national loyalty and policy alignment are discursively linked.

A consistent macro-theme across the corpus is the construction of citizenship through obedience to *ulil amri*, similar to other jurisdictions. Governance was framed as part of Islamic doctrine, rejecting the secular separation of religion and politics and positioning obedience to rulers as a Qur'anic imperative. One khutbah reprimands “Western” discourse as follows:

Western imperialism has succeeded in instilling into human thought that Islam is purely a religion and should not be mixed with worldly affairs and administration. This effort is aimed at allowing them to take over the government and control their colonies according to their own desires. This has also caused many Muslims to distance themselves from discussing matters of administration, politics and government rules because they believe that Islam should not be mixed with politics.⁴³

Congregants were therefore reminded that citizenship for Muslims is not merely civic compliance but a theological duty.

This theme intensifies in the 2025 sermon *Dirgahayu Tuanku: Raja Dikasihi, Negara Diberkati*, which embeds constitutional monarchy within Islamic obedience.⁴⁴ This is no different to reminders in the other states to remain loyal to hereditary rulers as long as they remain just and fair. Citizenship thus becomes vertically structured, with obedience to God coming through obedience to the Prophet and ruler, which would eventually lead to national stability.

In addition to hereditary rulers, the khutbahs prepared by JAKIM are also linked to the slogan of the government of the day. During the premiership of Ismail Sabri Yaakob, the khutbahs adopted the language of the “family” to articulate citizenship through the *Keluarga Malaysia*

⁴³ Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, *Kewajipan Warganegara* (25 August 2023), p. 2 (my translation).

⁴⁴ Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, *Dirgahayu Tuanku: Raja Dikasihi, Negara Diberkati* (30 May 2025).

(Malaysian Family) concept introduced by the ninth prime minister after he assumed office following Muhyiddin Yassin's loss of power, itself following the latter's falling out with the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Sermons such as *Keluarga Malaysia, Keluarga Sejahtera*⁴⁵ and *Keluarga Malaysia: Teguh Bersama*⁴⁶ framed Malaysians as members of a single moral household. The metaphor displaced partisan contestation with affective solidarity.

With the premiership of Anwar Ibrahim, khutbah themes have pivoted decisively towards Malaysia Madani. The sermon *Membangun Malaysia Madani*⁴⁷ explicitly introduces the six core values—Sustainability, Care and Compassion, Respect, Innovation, Prosperity and Trust. Another khutbah includes the line, “One of the most important elements in ensuring the development of a Malaysia Madani is the unity of the community in this country.”⁴⁸ Other sermons, like *Teladan Rasulullah Dalam Bernegara*,⁴⁹ emphasize the Charter of Madinah as precedent for plural governance, with explicit references to coexistence with Jews and other groups. This produces a bounded pluralism of inclusivity, albeit one hierarchically ordered under Islamic constitutional supremacy.

The shift from “family” to “Madani” marks a conceptual movement from affective-national cohesion to ethical-civilizational citizenship. Yet, in both phases, federal slogans are normalized through Qur’anic legitimization. The rapid thematic transition suggests institutional responsiveness rather than organic theological evolution. Since JAKIM operates under the Prime Minister’s Department, the sermons function as a discursive bridge between executive vision and grassroots religiosity.

⁴⁵ Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, *Keluarga Malaysia, Keluarga Sejahtera* (12 November 2021).

⁴⁶ Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, *Keluarga Malaysia: Teguh Bersama* (26 August 2022).

⁴⁷ Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, *Membangun Malaysia Madani* (26 May 2023).

⁴⁸ Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, *Perpaduan Teras Malaysia Madani* (21 July 2023), p. 3 (my translation).

⁴⁹ Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, *Teladan Rasulullah Dalam Bernegara* (12 September 2024).

Citizenship becomes framed as alignment with nationally articulated policy goals. Similar to khutbahs in other states, political unity is recoded as religious virtue, whereas dissent risks being morally suspect. Citizenship is, therefore, not adversarial-democratic but harmony-centric and obedience-oriented.

Pahang

The Pahang khutbah corpus constructs citizenship through a markedly defensive and sovereignty-centred Islamic frame. Unlike states where citizenship themes are articulated primarily through civic harmony or plural negotiation, the Pahang texts repeatedly anchor belonging in the protection of Islam, Malay authority and the institutional centrality of the sultan. In a state that is overwhelmingly Malay-Muslim, the khutbahs do not merely assume Muslim dominance as a demographic fact but they also actively frame it as a moral and political responsibility.

Several khutbahs link national celebrations to the obligation of maintaining Islamic governance and Malay leadership. Independence as a concept is explicitly recruited to “maintain the government of this country under the authority of the Malay Muslims and preserve the privileges of the Malay race”.⁵⁰ Citizenship is not framed in neutral constitutional language but in civilizational terms. Malay-Muslim political authority is presented as integral to preserving Islam itself.

This defensive orientation becomes even more explicit in the electoral context. Voters are advised to support candidates who would “save Islam and Muslims, especially the Malays”,⁵¹ and they are warned against supporting parties that do not defend Islam or are perceived to cooperate with its enemies. Although it is not stated anywhere in the khutbah, in Malaysia’s political context, “parties that do not defend Islam” typically refers to the Chinese-led Democratic Action Party (DAP), whereas those that “cooperate with its enemies” usually refers to Pakatan Harapan as

⁵⁰ Jabatan Mufti Negeri Pahang, *Perpaduan Nikmat Kemerdekaan* (27 August 2021), p. 3 (my translation).

⁵¹ Jabatan Mufti Negeri Pahang, *Panduan Memilih Pemimpin PRU15* (18 November 2022), p. 3 (my translation)

a coalition consisting of DAP together with Malay-based (Amanah) and Malay-led (Parti Keadilan Rakyat). Such language embeds political participation within a protectionist logic in which voting is framed as a religious duty tied to communal survival. Compared with other states in which khutbahs emphasize unity, Pahang's rhetoric appears more direct and politically charged. Unlike most states where khutbahs are prepared by state religious departments, khutbahs in Pahang and Perlis are prepared under the respective Mufti Department.

At the doctrinal level, one khutbah warned against attempts to subject Islamic matters to civil judicial processes, framing interference in Islamic administration as a challenge to the constitutional and monarchical order.⁵² The specific khutbah referencing the above was delivered after the Federal Court decided Kelantan did not have constitutional authority to enact sixteen provisions of the Syariah Criminal Code because their “pith and substance” dealt with matters within Parliament's legislative domain under the Federal List.⁵³ This framing underscores an effort to defend state-level Islamic authority by recasting federal judicial review as a threat to religious sovereignty within Malaysia's dual legal system.

Interestingly, this assertive defence of Malay-Islamic primacy coexists with calls for unity and moderation. Khutbahs caution against takfiri tendencies and excessive sectarianism, urging adherence to Ahli Sunnah wal Jamaah and recognized scholarly traditions.⁵⁴ *Memperkukuh Ukhuwah dan Silaturrahim* further foregrounds reconciliation and intra-Muslim harmony.⁵⁵ But these calls for unity are largely intra-communal

⁵² Jabatan Mufti Negeri Pahang, *Kedaulatan Syariat Islam, Teks Khutbah Negeri Pahang*, Siri 02/2024 (16 February 2024).

⁵³ K. Tee, “Federal Court Rules 16 Provisions in Kelantan Criminal Enactment Unconstitutional in Muslim Duo's Challenge”, *Malay Mail*, 9 February 2024, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/02/09/federal-court-rules-16-provisions-in-kelantan-criminal-enactment-unconstitutional-in-muslim-duos-challenge/117160>.

⁵⁴ Jabatan Mufti Negeri Pahang, *Ekstremisme Atau Ketaksuban, Teks Khutbah Negeri Pahang*, Siri 01/2025 (10 January 2025).

⁵⁵ Jabatan Mufti Negeri Pahang, *Memperkukuh Ukhuwah Dan Silaturrahim, Teks Khutbah Negeri Pahang*, Siri 04/2025 (4 April 2025).

rather than inter-communal. They prioritize cohesion within the Muslim majority as a safeguard against external ideological threats. The theme of ideological encroachment is also prominent. “*Penjajahan*” (colonization) is framed as mental and cultural conquest through secularism, liberalism and unrestrained individual freedom.⁵⁶ These currents are portrayed as subtle threats to Islamic identity, suggesting that true freedom lies in obedience to divine law rather than in liberal autonomy. Citizenship is, therefore, constructed as disciplined moral submission rather than rights-based individualism.

Taken together, the Pahang khutbahs articulate a model of Muslim citizenship that is assertive and protective. While other states may highlight multicultural negotiation or civic inclusivity, Pahang’s discourse leans towards safeguarding Islamic authority and Malay political primacy. The tone—particularly during the fifteenth general election—reflects a readiness to engage explicitly with partisan political realities in the name of religious preservation. In short, Pahang constructs a form of citizenship rooted in defensive majoritarianism to ensure that political leadership remains firmly aligned with Islamic and Malay interests.

Kelantan

The thematic analysis of the khutbah corpus from Kelantan reveals not merely a moral discourse but also a structured political theology of citizenship. Across the sermons, Islamic citizenship is articulated as virtue-based and stability-oriented, anchored in constitutional Islam, moral accountability, obedience to authority, and communitarian unity. When read against democratic theory, however, the corpus exposes a productive tension. It narrows the normative space for adversarial contestation and political pluralism.

The khutbahs in Kelantan repeatedly affirm Islam as a comprehensive system governing all aspects of life, including leadership and governance matters.⁵⁷ Similar to states such as Selangor and Sarawak, this framing

⁵⁶ Jabatan Mufti Negeri Pahang, *Kemerdekaan Hakiki*.

⁵⁷ Majlis Agama Islam dan Adat Istiadat Melayu Kelantan, *Khutbah Jumaat 32/2023* (11 August 2024), p. 4.

collapses the distinction between religious and political domains. In citizenship terms, this establishes a theologically bounded public sphere. Political legitimacy is not grounded in popular sovereignty alone but in conformity to divine norms. While this strengthens moral coherence and limits arbitrary power, it also constrains plural epistemologies.

Just like the other states, the khutbahs in Kelantan affirm obedience to ulil amri while maintaining limits. For a khutbah delivered in 2022, congregants were reminded about the importance of obeying leaders in the context of battling Covid-19:

We as Muslims should never be seen by outsiders as a chaotic society because each person thinks highly of his or her own opinions, as happened at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic that hit the country, to the point where some did not listen to the advice of the imam (religious leader) on duty when they were willing to jump over the mosque fence to pray because they thought their faith was higher than the orders of Ulil Amri.⁵⁸

The broader discourse heavily emphasizes stability while discouraging actions that threaten order. In a khutbah a week before the fifteenth general election, held on 19 November 2022, those praying in Kelantan were reminded of Islam's position as the religion of the federation and the state. Muslims were told:

we are the ones who need to mobilize all our energy, thoughts and physical strength to defend the state and nation from all forms of threats to religion, race and nation, such as the threat of communist ideology and its cronies who wish to change the government or the monarchy and replace it with another foreign ideology.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Majlis Agama Islam dan Adat Istiadat Melayu Kelantan, *Khutbah Jumaat 39/2022* (30 September 2022), p. 6 (my translation).

⁵⁹ Majlis Agama Islam dan Adat Istiadat Melayu Kelantan, *Khutbah Jumaat 45/2022* (11 November 2022), p. 8 (my translation).

The normative centre of gravity leans towards preservation rather than contestation. This produces what may be termed a disciplining citizenship in which citizens are encouraged to internalize stability as a moral virtue. The cost of dissent is symbolically high as it is framed as threatening unity or sovereignty.

Unity is repeatedly valorized.⁶⁰ While social cohesion is normatively desirable, the khutbah does not strongly distinguish between destructive fragmentation and legitimate pluralism. In democratic systems, disagreement, party competition and ideological contestation are institutionalized mechanisms of accountability. But in the sermons in Kelantan and elsewhere, unity is moralized in a way that may render adversarial politics ethically suspect.

Not unlike Pahang, the assertion that Islam and Malay identity should not be separated⁶¹ reinforces a civilizational model of belonging. Institutional guardianship by religious bodies strengthens constitutional continuity but also consolidates a particular cultural imagination of citizenship. In a plural society, such fusion may raise questions about inclusivity and the equal symbolic standing of non-Malay and non-Muslim citizens.

The Kelantan khutbahs do not explicitly exclude others. However, their primary audience and symbolic framework centre Muslim-majority identity. The democratic tension lies in balancing civilizational anchoring with pluralistic accommodation. The khutbahs in Kelantan thus produce a disciplined, ethically conscious and stability-seeking citizen. Whether this citizen is equally empowered to engage in robust democratic contestation depends on how the boundaries of “disorder” are interpreted in practice.

⁶⁰ Majlis Agama Islam dan Adat Istiadat Melayu Kelantan, *Khutbah Jumaat* 23/2024 (7 June 2024).

⁶¹ Majlis Agama Islam dan Adat Istiadat Melayu Kelantan, *Khutbah Jumaat* 34/2024 (23 August 2024).

Pulau Pinang

Unlike more demographically homogeneous states, Pulau Pinang's high proportion of non-Muslim residents⁶² appears to shape a distinctively ethical-plural articulation of Muslim citizenship. Across the corpus, national belonging is framed not in ethnic or majoritarian terms but as a theological gift that safeguards religious life. Independence is described as enabling Muslims to practise Islam harmoniously, positioning sovereignty as a condition for moral and spiritual continuity. "This blessing of independence has made it easier for us to carry out the demands of religious life in peace and harmony, the needs of family, neighbour and community life with full comfort."⁶³ Citizenship is, therefore, constructed as a grateful posture towards both God and nation. The state is not depicted as adversarial or secularly detached; rather, it is understood as a providential space that permits Islamic living within a multi-religious environment. This coding category reveals a model of national belonging rooted in moral thankfulness rather than ideological supremacy.

A defining feature of the Pulau Pinang khutbahs is their explicit articulation of justice beyond intra-Muslim solidarity. In *Perteguh Ukhuwah, Membina Kesatuan Ummah Madani*, the sermon draws upon Surah al-Mumtahanah to affirm that Allah does not forbid kindness and justice towards those who do not wage hostility.⁶⁴ This scriptural grounding situates plural coexistence within orthodox theological parameters rather than presenting it as merely pragmatic tolerance. Muslims in Pulau Pinang are reminded that "Ukhuwah (Brotherhood) is not only limited to fellow Muslims but also to all citizens on the basis

⁶² The plurality in Pulau Pinang is Chinese (44.9 per cent), followed by Bumiputera (44.7 per cent) and Indians (9.7 per cent).

⁶³ Jabatan Hal Ehwal Agama Islam Pulau Pinang, *Mensyukuri Nikmat Kemerdekaan* (26 August 2022), p. 4 (my translation).

⁶⁴ Jabatan Hal Ehwal Agama Islam Pulau Pinang, *Perteguh Ukhuwah, Membina Kesatuan Ummah Madani* (28 November 2025), pp. 7–8.

of humanity and justice.”⁶⁵ This demonstrates how minority-majority dynamics influence discourse in Pulau Pinang. In a state where Muslims coexist visibly with Chinese and Indian communities, pluralism is neither abstract nor peripheral but is Islamically legitimized. Citizenship is constructed as ethical participation within diversity, not withdrawal from it.

Nevertheless, internal fragmentation is acknowledged when differences in political understanding and social divisions are said to weaken the ummah. “On social media, a culture of insulting, criticizing, and accusing without evidence is the norm.”⁶⁶ Muslims were warned against hostility, insult and suspicion, framing them as corrosive to collective strength. The repeated emphasis on unity signals a preference for stability and collective cohesion.

Compared with more demographically homogeneous contexts, the Pulau Pinang corpus demonstrates stronger plural-ethical articulation and clearer endorsement of institutional civic norms. However, like other state-produced khutbahs, it privileges stability and moral cohesion over participatory or deliberative political agency. Therefore, Pulau Pinang khutbahs cultivate what may be termed ethical-plural Muslim citizenship, which embeds Islamic devotion within national loyalty while tempering political activism through the language of unity and stability.

CONCLUSION: PREACHING CITIZENSHIP IN A POLARIZED MALAYSIA

This study set out to examine how Friday khutbahs across Malaysian states articulate norms of citizenship and what these patterns reveal about the relationship between religion, governance and political contestation. We also sought to understand the role of religious institutions in moral

⁶⁵ Jabatan Hal Ehwal Agama Islam Pulau Pinang, *Perteguh Ukhawah, Membina Kesatuan Ummah Madani* (28 November 2025), p. 7 (my translation).

⁶⁶ Jabatan Hal Ehwal Agama Islam Pulau Pinang, *Perteguh Ukhawah, Membina Kesatuan Ummah Madani* (28 November 2025), p. 4 (my translation).

cultivation that carries spiritual and bureaucratic legitimacy. When read comparatively, the findings demonstrate that khutbahs are not ideologically uniform. Rather, they produce distinct models of Muslim citizenship shaped by demographic context, political administration and institutional location. Yet across these variations, a shared architecture is evident: citizenship is framed primarily as a moral and theological duty rather than a procedural or adversarial democratic practice.

At one end of the spectrum stands Selangor, which offers the most programmatic and conceptually developed articulation of Muslim citizenship. References to the Charter of Madinah, the Federal Constitution and the Rukun Negara are not incidental; they form a coherent narrative in which Muslim identity is reconciled with democratic institutions. Sarawak, by contrast, articulates a stabilizing and integrative model. Islamic authority is not deployed to consolidate dominance but to reinforce disciplined coexistence. Wilayah Persekutuan, under the authority of JAKIM, demonstrates a different dynamic. As a federal religious bureaucracy situated within the Prime Minister's Department, JAKIM's sermons closely mirror executive narratives. Citizenship is constructed as alignment with nationally articulated visions. In a predominantly Malay-Muslim context under monarchical authority, Pahang's khutbahs articulate what may be described as a protectionist model of citizenship. Electoral participation is framed not merely as civic engagement but as a religious responsibility to safeguard Islam and the Malay community. Kelantan presents the most theologically bounded model. Under long-standing PAS governance, sermons emphasize the comprehensiveness of Islam, obedience to *ulil amri*, defence of religion and monarchy, and warnings against ideological threats. Pulau Pinang, meanwhile, reflects its plural demography through explicit theological justification for inter-religious justice and coexistence.

Nevertheless, using state-issued khutbahs as direct indicators of religious or political positioning risks attributing a level of coherence that may not hold in practice. The production of these sermons is frequently driven by the mufti, whose authority in shaping religious discourse can operate with a degree of autonomy from the state government. Where differences exist between the mufti's intellectual orientation and the priorities of the governing political leadership, the resulting khutbah

content may reflect these tensions. There are documented cases in which muftis have taken positions that diverge from, or only partially align with, state policies.⁶⁷ This indicates that khutbahs should not be read as uncomplicated expressions of official state positions or community consensus. Instead, they are better understood as outcomes of specific theological orientations and institutional practices within state religious bureaucracies.

Despite differences in emphasis, all models privilege harmony, obedience and moral self-regulation over participatory pluralism or contestatory politics. Across states, sermons consistently draw upon Qur'anic verses such as al-Nisa' 4:59 (obedience to authority) and al-Hujurat 49:10–13 (unity and diversity). Scriptural authority anchors civic instruction. The khutbah does not function as deliberative debate but as moral formation. It constructs a normative citizen-subject who is obedient, disciplined, loyal and socially responsible.

The political implications are significant. Malaysia is entering electoral cycles, with elections in Johor and Negeri Sembilan, and with Malacca and Sarawak soon after. The sixteenth general election must be held by early 2028. Since the 2022 general election and subsequent state polls, PAS has consolidated its position in the Malay heartland and emerged as a powerful opposition force. In response, the Anwar Ibrahim-led unity government has advanced the Malaysia Madani framework,⁶⁸ which seeks to combine Islamic ethical language with reform, inclusivity and institutional trust. This sets up not merely a policy contest but a

⁶⁷ For example, the Mufti of Terengganu once disagreed with the practice of reciting Qunut Nazilah prayer for the destruction of fellow Muslims, in contrast to the practice of Perikatan Nasional, of which PAS is part (<https://focusmalaysia.my/what-is-the-forbidden-act-pas-committed-in-parliament/>). Similarly, in Sabah there was a difference of opinion between the mufti and the state government over public caning (<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/01/06/sabah-govt-says-no-to-public-caning-for-islamic-offences-despite-muftis-support/162235>).

⁶⁸ See Mohd Faizal Musa, *The Evolution of Madani: How Is 2.0 Different from 1.0?*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 10/2023 (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023).

narrative struggle over whose interpretation of Islam best serves the nation's future.

Recent electoral signals underline the challenge for the unity government. The 2025 Sabah general election, for example, delivered a clear setback for Pakatan Harapan (and also Perikatan Nasional, the opposition), wiping out most of its seats and highlighting weakening federal party brands. This is a sobering preview of how national sentiments might play out. While Pakatan Harapan's parliamentary majority remains intact, its emotional and narrative basis is fragile, particularly among Malay voters, who may perceive Madani as insufficiently distinct. It is also vulnerable to criticism of prioritizing Malay-Muslim issues to shore up support rather than advancing reform substantively.⁶⁹ This reflects a strategic dilemma whereby the use of state-prepared khutbahs risks politicization, while non-engagement risks ceding Islamic narrative space and appearing disconnected from core religious constituencies.

Additionally, this competitive environment creates strong incentives for political actors to mobilize religious identity in ways that can feed polarization. Religious symbolism and scriptural interpretations can be politically weaponized by framing opponents as morally deficient, disloyal to Islam or dangerous to the Muslim community. Such strategies mirror global trends observed in religiously inflected populisms, where appeals to emotion and identity often overshadow institutional policy debates.⁷⁰

The challenge for both religious authorities and the Malaysian government is to ensure that religion enhances democratic cohesion rather than becoming a tool for exclusionary politics. Thus, the path forward requires recalibrating the function of khutbahs. Islamic authorities—state religious departments, mufti departments and JAKIM—should

⁶⁹ J. Chin, "Malaysia Enters Election Mode in 2026", East Asia Forum, 8 February 2026, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2026/02/08/malaysia-enters-election-mode-in-2026/>.

⁷⁰ I. Yilmaz and N. Morieson, "How Are Religious Emotions Instrumentalized in the Supply of and Demand for Populism?", European Centre for Populism Studies, 18 May 2021, <https://www.populismstudies.org/how-are-religious-emotions-instrumentalized-in-the-supply-of-and-demand-for-populism/>.

differentiate more clearly between destructive fragmentation and legitimate democratic disagreement. Unity must be framed as unity of purpose and ethical restraint, not uniformity of political opinion. This distinction is critical in preventing the moralization of dissent.

The mosque must be positioned as a site of de-escalation rather than mobilization. The empirical evidence suggests that Malaysian khutbahs are already inclined towards stability and anti-extremism. This is a strength. However, stability should not preclude principled engagement.

In conclusion, Malaysian Friday khutbahs construct varied but convergent models of Muslim citizenship characterized as disciplined, unity-oriented, constitutionally embedded and morally framed. Differences across Selangor, Sarawak, Wilayah Persekutuan, Pahang, Kelantan and Pulau Pinang reflect local political ecologies, yet all of them privilege harmony and obedience. As Malaysia navigates upcoming elections and ideological contestation, the role of the khutbah will be pivotal. If grounded in constitutional fidelity and ethical pluralism rather than partisan symbolism, the mosque can serve not as a battleground of competing Islamic visions but as a stabilizing moral compass for a diverse democracy.

ISEAS
PUBLISHING

30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614
<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

ISSN 0219-3213

TRS19/26s

ISBN 978-981-5361-81-0



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