

# Malaysia and Islamic Modernity

Report >  
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Due to its growing economic prosperity since the 1970s, Malaysia is often appreciated as a well-functioning model for economic development. As part of an ambitious encompassing modernization project, Islam, or more precisely a certain kind of Islamic vision has been firmly connected to a vision of the formation of a modern Asian society. It was by setting into operation Islam as a cultural force in service of the economy that Malaysia countered the potential disruption that results from rapid national change and paved the way for its sustained economic growth. This affinity between religion and creating modern society in Malaysia was discussed during the workshop 'Asian Modernity and Islam: The Case of Malaysia'.

By Sigrid Nökel & Georg Stauth

Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir has been one of the key players defining the relationship between modernity and Islam. In the public opening lecture of the workshop, Omar Farouk Bajunid (Hiroshima) addressed the characteristics of Mahathirism, relating the former prime minister's biography to the political ideology that shaped postcolonial Malaysia. In the early 1970s, Mahathir began criticizing the cultural dependency and colonial residue of the 'Look West' perspective. His 'Look East' campaign was designed to bestow recognition to the Malays and to Islam. Although he had to rely on 'Malayness' in shaping Malay nationalism, Mahathir stressed the need for competitiveness within global capitalism. However, he always gave way to political protection of Malay communities and Malay traditions in the economic sphere and in cultural discourse. Finally, he was a ruthless self-made man, which in a way contradicted his call for the upholding of Islamic values.

Impressed by the Japanese model, which combined rapid economic growth with the preservation of tradition and communal values, Mahathir attempted to mould a coherent social ideology and a rather strict religious-political programme through a new discourse on Islam and Islamic modernity. As Mahathir's perception of an Islamic state depended on a utopian view of the Japanese path towards capitalism, his campaigns to 'act Islamic' really meant to 'act Japanese'.

The Petronas Twin  
Towers in Kuala  
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Throughout the Mahathir period, culture, i.e. 'Islam' was seen as instrumental to economic and political needs and to plans for national development. According to Farouk, the instrumentalization of Islam in his various campaigns was restrained from within by the democratic constitution of the country on the one hand and by Islamic networks 'looking Middle East' on the other. Outside the nation, Mahathir's efforts to strengthen political relations with oil-rich Muslim countries facilitated the formation of Islamic networks. As an undesired consequence, these networks ultimately achieved their own cultural and political logic and restrained Mahathir's instrumentalization of Islam. Furthermore, his strategic cooperation with global capitalist players contributed to contradict his Islamic values campaign and thus limited Mahathir's authority of intervention. Islam, since the beginning of Mahathirism, became an operating attitude of the Malay majority in a state that is otherwise characterized by cultural and ethnical plurality (with the Chinese population forming a significant and economically successful minority). It became the cultural top-to-bottom force attracting people's minds to personal as well as societal change and to hard work. In short, Mahathirism developed a Malaysian Islam offering an alternative vision of Islam and modernity that hardly goes beyond pragmatically oriented state-politics.

This is not to say that the sociological and intellectual trends in Malaysian discourse from the 1960s to the 1980s suffered from an intellectual and academic drought in Malaysia as is commonly suggested, says Georg Stauth (Essen), as prove academic figures like S. Hussein Alatas and S. Naguib al-Attas as well as younger politicians and intellectuals like Anwar Ibrahim and Chandra Muzaffar. Their intellectual influence on Mahathirism and its success is exemplified by key concepts in Malaysian discourse: the 'Max Weber-Thesis on Southeast Asia', 'Progressive Islam', and of the 'Lazy Native' colonial idea critically developed by S. Husain Alatas. However, with respect to the increasing importance of religious thought since the 1970s the impact of the works of S. Naguib al-Attas was most important. In particular al-Attas' approach to 'Islamization' of knowledge, antagonistic to the idea of Progressive Islam, had a great impact on religious and intellectual debate in Southeast Asia. Corresponding to Western discourse of the 'hermeneutics of authenticity' and 'soft' and 'green' science, al-Attas' perceptions of Malay Sufism and alternative forms of construction of knowledge were considered a serious attempt to construct a 'de-westernized' world of Southeast Asian scholarship. He also had a decisive impact on the Islamic campus and 'think-tank' culture particularly in the times of the close personal and political alliance between Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim in the 1990s.

Mahathir's functional instrumentalization of these ideas had an important impact on the role of Islam as a constructive force, argued Stauth. By re-creating these ideas as elements of social engineering, thus deepening the tensions between religious thought and everyday life, Mahathir determined the conditions for connecting Islam with bureaucratic rationalization and capitalist attitudes.

Focusing on Islam as the central issue of reconstructing Malaysian society comes with the main difficulty that it would include only one segment of the pluricultural Malaysian society and exclude or neglect the cultural attitudes of other ethnic and religious minorities.\* Farish Noor (Berlin) stressed that while Islam may have been used in service of the economy, the impact of Mahathir's cultural policies on minority groups, which included forcefully imposing Islamic regulations, was no less real. In recent years, the dominating party-union UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) increasingly losing ground to the PAS (Parti Islam se Malaysia), which is second-in-line. Noor's comparative analysis of the development of these two most important parties brought to light their interrelations as well as the reasons for UMNO's shrinking credibility and concurrently, the rising popularity of the ulama-led PAS, as evidenced in recent elections. According to Noor, the success of the PAS led opposition is an unintended effect of governmental politics and its controlled creation of Islamic knowledge. While one can hardly speak of a loss of state control, the success of PAS and



Putrajaya Mosque

its more open attitude towards non-Islamic minorities represents the emergence of an autonomous Islamic discourse, challenging the official line. Most important, the contradiction between the state-based forms of micro-management of Islam on the one hand, and the normative Islam (which concerns how individuals perceive the world and how they position themselves in it in moral terms) could evolve into a new turn of total Islam (i.e. the reformulation of law and politics from below): a discursive condition which would escape full control by the state.

Although germs of political opposition can be found among Islamists, Malaysia today is commonly believed to be remarkably stable. From the angle of the relationship between Islam, state, and, culture we can identify a productive, though tenuous, interplay between different layers of Islamic intellectualism. One may ask, if this can be sustained in the future beyond any hegemonic intervention by the state and Islamic intellectualism could flourish similarly in a civil society independent from state authoritarianism. Looking from a different angle, one could ask whether Malaysia represents a new model of 'Asian Islam'. Paradoxically, while throughout Mahathir's period Islam was tentatively instrumentalized for economic and social development campaigns (epitomized in slogans like 'Look East' and 'Act Japanese'), this model is also a condition, now, of all tendencies of Islam reflecting it as a force of its own. <

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## Note >

\* Apart from Farish Noor, several others at the workshop: Claudia Derichs (Duisburg), Helmut Lukas (Wien), Alexander Horstmann (Münster), and Bernhard Trautner (Bremen/Bonn) also emphasized the exclusivist 'nature' of the Mahathirist political system and its manipulations of political discourse.

## Islam Study Group

*Islamic Culture – Modern Society: The Positioning of Islam in the Perspective of Comparative Interaction is the name and study subject of an international Study Group established at the 'Kulturwissenschaften Institut' (Institut of Advanced Studies in the Humanities) in Essen, Germany. The study group scrutinizes the effects of modernity on religious thought and ways of life in contemporary Islam, in three geographical areas. First, Malaysia as a paradigm of intertwining Islamic culture and 'Asian values', where Islam has become an important means of social engineering. Second, Europe as a space where Islam has become a challenge to national social engineering in the transition to post-nationality. Third, Egypt, where tendencies towards Islamic modernization prosper alongside non-political ones leaning on Sufism and popular religion. The study group compares these three cases and addresses current debates on the roots of monotheism and the breakthroughs leading to modernity and to the currently dominant visions of 'Modernity', 'Europe', and 'the West'.*

## Agenda >

A follow-up on the above conference will take place in Essen on 21-23 July 2004. Entitled 'Islamic institutions, communities, personalities: reinterpreting pluralism, secularity, and modernity', the conference will highlight comparative issues of Islam in different regional environments.

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