

PURITAN POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: THE EVOLUTION OF SALAFISM IN MALAYSIA

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I. INTRODUCTION

Salafism in Malaysia since the 1980s has been characterised by the political engagement of its leaders, either to avoid being identified with violent extremism, to get access to patronage or in the interests of promoting specific Islamist objectives. It has evolved very differently than in neighbouring Indonesia, where most Salafis until recently have eschewed politics, though this may be changing, and where Salafi religious scholars (*ulama*) have been more closely identified than in Malaysia with ultra-conservative Saudi, Yemeni and Kuwaiti mentors. In Malaysia, Salafis on some issues are seen as more open than traditionalists, to the point that the new government, elected in May 2018 – and led by 93-year-old Mahathir Mohamed, returning as prime minister after a fifteen-year absence – gave the education ministry to a reformist Salafi.

But everything in Malaysia comes back to identity politics. Malaysian Salafism has been shaped by the competition between political parties – the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, PAS) – to represent and defend the interests of Malay Muslims. It is not clear how the new government can balance overwhelming support from non-Muslim non-Malay minorities with a need to keep different streams of Islam, including Salafis, on board.

As in Indonesia, Salafism in Malaysia is very much a minority stream within Islam. Often identified with Saudi Arabian Wahabism, which is just one variant, Salafism is characterised by a belief that Muslims must return to the Islam practiced by the Prophet Muhammad and the three generations that followed him. They believe that the faith must be cleansed of all unwarranted innovations (*bid'ah*), hence their characterisation as ultra-puritans. With regard to political orientation, Salafis are conventionally divided into three types: apolitical quietists or purists who focus on strengthening faith; non-violent activists (*haraki*) who see that the full application of Islamic law can only be achieved through political engagement; and Salafi jihadists who believe that the goal of a pure Islamic state can only be achieved through war against Islam's enemies. The three are often openly hostile toward each other.

Salafism in Malaysia has defined itself in theological terms in opposition to the religious traditionalists who control the state Islamic bureaucracy. The traditionalists, wary of growing Salafi influence, have played on fears of extremism in the region to paint Salafism as a pathway to terrorism. Religious officials occasionally have even brought the power of the state to bear against charismatic Salafi clerics whom they consider a threat. As the new government attempts to dismantle some parts of the Islamic bureaucracy, the incentive of traditionalists to raise the spectre of extremism may be stronger than ever.

The Malaysian Salafis are also divided among themselves. In Indonesia the main dividing line among Salafis is between the “quietists” who shun involvement in politics, and the “*harakis*” who are willing to use democratic tools such as elections to achieve their generally anti-democratic goals. In Malaysia, the main division is more ideological, between a more literalist interpretation of Salafi teaching and the *tajdid*, or reformist stream. Members of both have been actively engaged in politics but on different sides of the government-opposition divide, and the May 2018 election has only deepened the doctrinal differences.

This report analyses the evolution of Salafi groups in Malaysia, the reasons for their political engagement and how they are positioning themselves in a post-UMNO world. By drawing comparisons with Indonesia, it also helps illuminate both the complexity of Malaysian Muslim alliances and the diversity within Salafism itself. It is based on extensive interviews in Malaysia with Salafi and traditionalist leaders in August-September 2018.

II. BACKGROUND

The development of Salafism in Malaysia goes back to the colonial era, when the division between traditionalists and reformists first emerged. The current movement and its various factions, however, are a direct result of domestic political polarisation in the 1980s that sent quietists into UMNO while activists found a home in a newly energised and Islamised PAS. Unlike Indonesia, where at the height of Soeharto's New Order political Islam was suspect but apolitical clerics were free to expand their educational networks, in Malaysia, the quietists sought political engagement as a way of refuting suspicions of subversion.

A. *Kaum Muda vs Kaum Tua*

The story of Salafism in Malaysia begins with the challenge of young Muslim scholars (*Kaum Muda*) to an older generation (*Kaum Tua*) in the Malay sultanates in the early 20th century when what is now Malaysia was under British colonial rule. The sultans and the *Kaum Tua* had worked out an arrangement with the British authority that left customary and religious matters in their hands and allowed the ulama to control the implementation of shari'a in Islamic courts, mosques and madrasahs.¹ They practised a form of Sunni traditionalism imbued with Sufi elements. It was based on the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence, one of four schools of Islamic law, that had spread widely in the Malay archipelago by late thirteenth century through the influence of Muslim migrants from Yemen and India.²

Their authority was soon challenged by urban Muslim intellectuals from the coastal trading centres of Penang, Singapore and Malacca. They had travelled and studied in the Middle East and were caught up in the intellectual currents there: the Islamic modernist movement (*tajdid*) centred in Egypt, and Wahhabism, centered in Saudi Arabia.³ Both shared the same concept about the oneness of God (*tawhid*) and aimed to rid Islam of "irrational superstitions" and "blind emulation" (*taqlid*) of medieval Sunni ulama – but with a major difference. Wahhabis saw purification as looking back to the seventh century; the *tajdid* reformists, looked forward, seeing purification as a means of lifting Muslims from backwardness and challenging the West.⁴ Both promoted a return to Qur'an and sunnah as the principal sources of Islamic law, but while *tajdid* favoured a rational interpretation of the scriptures, Wahhabis preferred a literalist one.

The reformist *Kaum Muda* challenged traditional practices and pushed for educational reform as a way to strengthen Muslim Malay capacity to compete with an influx of Indians and Chinese, brought in by the British. Initially, the *Kaum Muda* ulama tried to challenge the old guard by

1 Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, "Towards a History of Malaysian Ulama", *Southeast Asia Research*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2008, pp. 117-140.

2 R. Michael Feener, "South-East Asian Localisations of Islam and Participation within a Global Umma, c. 1500–1800", in D. Morgan & A. Reid (Eds.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, Cambridge, 2010, pp. 470-503. Malaysian and Indonesian traditionalists follow the Ash'arite theological school, named after its ninth-century pioneer Abu Hasan al-Ash'ari, that combines scriptural arguments and philosophical reasoning. One of their main disagreements with Salafis pertains to God's physical attributes as mentioned in the Qur'an (e.g. God's hand). Ash'arites believe that it should be interpreted metaphorically whilst Salafis take it literally, hence Salafis are often dubbed *mujassim* (those attributing to God the body and form). In terms of jurisprudence, traditionalists acknowledge the four canonical schools of Islamic law (known as *mazhab*) namely Shafi'i, Hanbali, Maliki and Hanafi, but in reality, they mostly practice the Shafi'i mazhab.

3 Farish Noor, *The Malaysian Islamic Party PAS 1951-2013*, Amsterdam, 2014, pp. 20-25.

4 The early 20th century Islamic reformism, also known as Salafiyah, was pioneered by the Egyptian thinker Mohammad Abduh (d. 1905) and inspired various anti-colonial movements in the Muslim world. Wahhabism began in the 18th century as a local Islamic purification movement that spread through the Arabian Peninsula via an alliance between a cleric, Muhammad bin Abd al Wahab and Muhammad bin Saud, whose successors later founded the modern Saudi state. Advocating an exclusivist theological purity, Wahhabis gained notoriety in the Islamic world for their harsh approach in eradicating bid'ah including by demolishing Prophet Muhammad's grave on the basis of preventing idolatry (*shirk*). For a comprehensive background of Salafism, see Henri Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*, Columbia, 2015.

joining the colonial religious structure as muftis and kadis (Islamic judges) but there was so much resistance that they decided to just focus on expanding their own madrasahs.⁵ Alumni of these schools would go on to be the leaders of various Islamic anti-colonial movements including PAS, established in 1951 by UMNO's Islamist faction. After Malaysia became an independent federal state in 1957, traditionalist ulama continued to hold power, but PAS attracted a number of Salafis into its ranks.

B. Malay vs Chinese and UMNO vs PAS

The early years of the new state came to be defined by competition between ethnic Malays and Chinese, culminating in race riots in 1969 in which many of the attackers were young Malay thugs and most of the victims were Chinese. The riots led directly to the consolidation of Malay political power and the introduction of pro-Malay policies, including support for new Islamic institutions that would not only reaffirm the importance of Islam to Malay identity but bolster the position of UMNO vis-à-vis PAS.

An alliance between the two parties, based on the common goal of defending Malay interests, had fallen apart by the late 1970s. The effort to outdo PAS for control of the Islamist vote was led by Dr Mahathir Mohamad, first as deputy prime minister in 1976, then as prime minister in 1981; the chief firebrand of PAS, though not its head, was Hadi Awang from Terengganu, who in a 1981 speech characterized the PAS fight against UMNO as a jihad against infidels.⁶

At the same time these internal developments were taking place, a global wave of Islamic revivalism that helped spur and was in turn strengthened by the Iranian revolution was sweeping Malaysia. In Malaysia, it gave rise to the Muslim Youth Movement (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, ABIM), led by a charismatic young activist named Anwar Ibrahim, and the Islamic Representative Council (IRC).⁷ Under Anwar's leadership, ABIM grew into a large movement through its network of *usrah* (study circles) among Malaysian university students at home and abroad that used tracts from Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi, and Shi'a sources as study materials.⁸ Anwar and other ABIM members were active in the Saudi-linked World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY); the Saudi connections did not initially preclude their admiration of the Iranian revolution as they drew inspiration from all sorts of Islamic movements.⁹ The impact of the Iranian revolution also led to the emergence of new, younger leaders in PAS who had a much more explicit Islamist agenda than their elders. In 1984, to the shock of many of Anwar's colleagues, Mahathir recruited Anwar into UMNO in an effort to undercut PAS and promote a modernist-developmental Islam.¹⁰

PAS's jihad rhetoric and its increased mobilisation in Terengganu, Kelantan, and Kedah so alarmed the government that in 1984, it banned mass gatherings in all PAS strongholds. A number of PAS figures were detained for allegedly preparing an armed jihad. Government

5 Madrasah al-Iqbal in Singapore (established in 1908), Madrasah al-Hadi in Malacca (1915) and most famously Madrasah al-Mashoor in Penang (1919). Noor, op. cit., p. 23.

6 Joseph Liow, *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia*, Oxford, 2009, p. 38.

7 IRC was organised by Malaysian students exposed to Muslim Brotherhood educational program (*tarbiyah*) while studying in the U.K.; similar groups were also formed by Malaysian students in Egypt, the U.S., and other countries. Their members generally had a modernist outlook and many joined PAS when they returned to Malaysia. See Mohamed Hatta Shaharom, *Istiqamah Jalan ke Arah-Nya*, Kuala Lumpur, 2018.

8 Maszlee Malik, "Salafism in Malaysia: Historical Account on Its Emergence and Motivations", *Sociology of Islam*, Vol. 5, 2017, pp. 303-333.

9 IPAC, "The Anti-Shi'a Movement in Indonesia", Report No. 27, 27 April 2016. Indonesian Muslim student activists in late 1970s were also inspired by the Iranian revolution. Most were not aware of the difference between Sunni and Shi'a; some decided to learn more about Shi'ism and converted after the revolution. Starting in the 1980s Indonesian Islamic NGOs received support from Saudi donors to publish pamphlets and magazines explaining Shi'a deviancy. Indonesia was not the only beneficiary; the Saudi-sponsored anti-Shi'a campaign was worldwide, designed to diminish Iranian influence.

10 Liow, op. cit., pp. 43-48.

accusations of PAS extremism combined with increasing hostility between Muslim supporters of UMNO and PAS prompted violent escalations, including in Memali, Kedah in November 1985. Memali was triggered by suspicions that Ibrahim Libya, a local PAS leader, was storing guns and training militants in his madrasah compound. When security forces laid siege to the compound to arrest him, his followers fought back mostly with traditional weapons, killing four policemen. Government forces retaliated, killing fourteen civilians, while some 160 people were arrested.¹¹

C. Impact on Salafism

There is no indication that Ibrahim was a Salafi, but the political polarisation had become so intense that quietist Salafis who did not want to be involved in politics were compelled to work within the state system or at least pursue non-confrontational *da'wah* (religious outreach) to avoid being seen as extremists. They included several Salafi scholars who had studied at Medina Islamic University in Saudi Arabia.¹² It is important to note that the relatively few Malaysians who studied at Medina Islamic University from the 1960s to the 1980s did not have a homogenous political orientation because at the time, not all lecturers there were quietists. Many were foreigners, including some Muslim Brotherhood figures from Egypt and Syria.¹³ One Malaysian drawn to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was Hadi Awang of PAS.¹⁴

Some alumni of Saudi universities became lecturers at major universities such as Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), and the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) that was established in 1981 with Saudi and Kuwaiti funding. During Anwar Ibrahim's term as Minister of Education (1986-1991), the influence of purist and reformist Salafis grew through Saudi-educated academics and former ABIM activists who worked in education sector. For example, Radzi Othman, a USM lecturer and alumnus of Medina University, reportedly played a major role in incorporating the Salafi interpretation of *tawhid* into school textbooks.¹⁵ From the outset, the curriculum of IIUM was heavily influenced by reformist thinker Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, a professor at Temple University in the U.S. who had translated the writings of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and became a trusted adviser of Anwar and ABIM.¹⁶ When Anwar became IIUM president (1988-98) and the Saudi academic Dr Abdul Hamid Ahmad Abu Sulayman its rector (1989-99), the curriculum was further restructured to downplay instruction in the four *mazhab* in favour of a holistic approach based on the principal

11 Ibid, p.152. As of 2016, some of the most vocal opponents of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Baling, Kedah were former students of Ibrahim Libya's.

12 Two examples are Husein Yee, a Malaysian Chinese convert to Islam, and Abdullah Yasin an Indonesian preacher who became a close friend of Anwar Ibrahim. In 1980, Yee became an adviser to the Malaysian Islamic Welfare Organisation (PERKIM), a government-sponsored *da'wah* organization, and built on his good relationship with the government to establish his own *da'wah* NGO, Al-Khadeem, in 1984. Yasin, who worked as religious adviser for the Saudi embassy in Kuala Lumpur, was initially rejected by various state-level religious affairs departments for teaching *mazhabs* other than Shafi'i. He then decided to only teach Qur'an and Sunnah to avoid confrontation. Thanks to his links to WAMY through Saudi embassy, he was asked to teach Islam to ABIM cadre and at Yayasan Anda, a private school founded by Anwar Ibrahim. Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "The Extensive Salafization of Malaysian Islam", ISEAS Trends in Southeast Asia, No. 9, 2016.

13 Michael Farquhar, *Expanding the Wahhabi Mission: Saudi Arabia, the Islamic University of Medina and the Transnational Religious Economy*, London School of Economics and Political Science, Dissertation, 2013.

14 Hadi Awang was drawn to Brotherhood leader Said Hawwa, who ran his own study circle while living in Medina from 1966 to 1971. See Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, "Salafi Ulama in UMNO: Political Convergence or Expediency?", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2014, pp. 206-31.

15 Malik, op. cit., p. 320. The Salafi doctrine of *tawhid*, known as "tawhid 3", consists of: a) the oneness of Allah's lordship (*tauhid uluhiyah*) or belief that God is the sole creator of the universe; b) oneness of worship (*tauhid rububiyah*), worshipping Allah alone and avoiding polytheism; and c) and oneness of Allah's names and attributes (*tauhid asma wa sifat*), believing literally in all God's attributes as mentioned in Qur'an.

16 Tasnim Abdul Rahman et. al., "Transforming Islamic Values in Malaysia: The Role of al-Faruqi", *Revelation and Science*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2015, pp. 27-33.

sources of Islam. It also introduced more Salafi literature on *tawhid*.¹⁷

Other quietist Salafis in the 1980s sought UMNO patronage without formally joining the party, just to facilitate establishment of schools or ensure that they could carry out *da'wah* unhindered.¹⁸ The more politically inclined Salafis joined PAS, but quietist Salafis saw them as party loyalists whose top priority was winning elections, not Salafi propagation. Some considered Hadi Awang too willing to compromise with traditionalist ulama and even with Shi'a – all for the sake of winning votes for the party.¹⁹

In short, during the first Mahathir era, which lasted until 2003, most Salafis were quietists with government patronage. Those who wanted to openly criticise the government did so through PAS. For young Salafis who started their *da'wah* career in late 1990s, the stark choice between apolitical *da'wah* and party politics was too limiting. This new generation of technologically savvy and highly educated Salafis not only wanted to spread a pure Islam but also make their voices heard on social issues affecting the Muslim community – without being subject to the dictates of any political party.

III. THE EMERGENCE OF NEO-TAJDID AND SALAFI INTERNAL DYNAMICS (2000-2009)

Three related elements revived Salafi *da'wah* in the 2000s: a neo-*tajdid* movement led by the maverick ustaz Mohammad Asri Zainul Abidin (better known as Dr Asri or Dr MAZA) that appeared to be free of partisan politics; the emergence of purist Salafi groups led by Middle Eastern ulama and local graduates of Saudi and Pakistani universities; and a new breed of preachers known as “protaz” (professional ustaz) who came from a secular educational background but learned Islam informally. Initially all these groups tried to foster a unified front against their traditionalist detractors, but a rift quickly emerged between *tajdid* and quietist leaders.

A. Dr Asri and the Neo-Tajdid Movement

Discontent with the politicisation of Islam in Malaysia, combined with reform movements elsewhere in the region brought about by the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the fall of Indonesian president Soeharto, gave an opening to young Salafis to promote a new *tajdid* movement free of PAS or UMNO links. In the 1999 election, PAS successfully exploited UMNO's plummeting popularity. It took over the state of Terengganu in addition to maintaining its hold on Kelantan, and then used the two states to showcase its “true Islamic state” project, including, in 2002, by enacting an Islamic penal code (*hudud*). The *hudud* enactment – though never been fully implemented because it clashed with Federal Constitution – was significant in light of Mahathir's claim in 2001 that Malaysia was already an “Islamic state”.²⁰ PAS disputed Mahathir's statement on the grounds that the modern shari'a legal system as developed by his government did not incorporate punishments like stoning to death and limb amputation; hence the *hudud* enactment was its way to outdo UMNO on its Islamisation program.

ABIM and IRC (renamed Jamaah Islah Malaysia or JIM in 1990) remained popular but faced a more competitive environment as their student constituencies had benefited from the pro-Malay New Economic Policy (NEP), and various political and religious groups sought to recruit

17 We are grateful to Joseph Liow for raising this point. See also Abdul Hamid, op. cit., pp. 15-16.

18 Malik, op. cit., p. 317.

19 Hadi Awang, for instance, attended the Inter-Mazhab Dialogue (*taqrib al mazhab*) conference in Iran in December 2016. See “Abdul Hadi Pertahan Tindakan, Sedia Letak Jawatan” sinarharian.com.my, 23 December 2016. The late Nik Aziz, former PAS leader and Chief Minister of the predominantly traditionalist state of Kelantan from 1990 to 2013, criticised traditional celebrations such as the Prophet's birthday (*maulid*) but did not officially forbid them. IPAC interview with Nik Aziz's former staff member, Kuala Lumpur, 4 September 2018.

20 Helen Ting Mu Hung, “The Politics of Hudud Law Implementation in Malaysia”, ISEAS Working Paper, No. 04, 2016.

them.²¹ PAS used its professionals to try and attract educated urban Muslims while its ulama wing focused on wooing conservative rural voters. The emergence of neo-*tajdid* intellectuals, who focused solely on teaching Islam, appeared to many in the devout Muslim middle class as a welcome apolitical alternative.

Dr Asri was one of them.²² The Penang-born cleric was trained in Arabic and Islamic law at the University of Jordan. In 1999, he and several Salafis in Penang established Ibnu al-Qayyim Institute as their *da'wah* centre. As he interacted more with Saudi-influenced clerics, his interest in Salafism increased.²³ While at IIUM, he expanded contacts with Salafi organisations in the Kuala Lumpur-Selangor area, particularly al-Nida and Darul Ta'lim.²⁴ He also reconnected with an old friend from Jordan, Maszlee Malik, a teacher at al-Nida and assistant professor of Islamic studies at IIUM who was also part of the "protaz" network.²⁵ All of these men attended each other's study groups at various residential complexes and universities; they were also active bloggers and contributors to online forums.²⁶

Salafi *da'wah* in Selangor became even livelier with the arrival in 2003 of a quietist Syrian Salafi, Sheik Aiman Al Daqqaq, who reportedly had close links to the Saudi establishment.²⁷ The elderly sheik was personally close to Asri, but to his own students he emphasised the superiority of purist Salafism over other Salafi strands including *tajdid*.²⁸

Differences between purist and *tajdid* also emerged in Perlis, the only state in Malaysia where the Kaum Muda's legacy prevailed, in the early 2000s.²⁹ Starting in mid-1990s, the Perlis government in cooperation with Saudi government had sponsored a number of local students to study in Medina. One was Fathul Bari Mat Jahya, the son of the then Mufti of Perlis. When he and his friends came back from Medina around 2003, they realised that although Perlis reformists were Salafi in the sense that they rejected strict obedience to a particular *mazhab*, in terms of daily rituals they were still influenced by an Indonesian cleric known as Hassan Bandung,

21 Launched in 1970, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was aimed to reconstruct the economy after the 1969 race riot, to mitigate the resentment of Malays and other indigenous ethnic groups (*bumiputera*) against Malaysian Chinese (*non-bumiputera*). The NEP favoured the former in many sectors including business and education. By the time it was lifted in 1990, it had generated a new Malay Muslim middle class that embraced modern piety, as expressed in increasing Islamic consumerism and activism. By the late 1990s, ABIM and IRC had to compete not only with PAS and UMNO but also with transnational Islamic organisations such as Hizbut Tahrir and Jamaah Tabligh. Johan Fischer, "Middle Class Projects in Modern Malaysia", *Asian Anthropology*, Volume 16, Issue 1, 2017, pp. 54-69; Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, "Hizbut Tahrir Malaysia: the Emergence of a New Transnational Islamist Movement in Malaysia", *Al-Jami'ah*, Vol. 47, No. 1, 2009, pp. 92-110.

22 Born in Bukit Mertajam, Penang in 1971, Asri was raised by parents who had learned from local Kaum Muda ulama. After finishing high school at the renowned Kolej Islam Klang in Selangor, he received a Malaysian government scholarship to study at the University of Jordan in and graduated in 1997. In Jordan, he frequented off-campus lectures by a well-known Muslim Brotherhood cleric and briefly participated in the PAS youth wing there. When he returned to Penang in 1997, he joined a Salafi study circle led by Dr Radzi Othman.

23 "Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin – Debat Dengan Astora 07", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEU5Foid0WI>, 1 January 2010.

24 Al-Nida was established by Shafwan Badrie and Abdullah Yasin in 2001. Darul Ta'lim was founded and fully subsidised by a Kuala Lumpur businessman in 1998, with Pakistani and Saudi alumni as the teachers.

25 Maszlee was also a long-time member of JIM, which was renamed IKRAM in 2009.

26 Two of these blogs were hafizfirdaus.com and purify-educate.blogspot.com. A protaz association called Muslim Professionals Forum (MPF) was established by a group of Muslim doctors in August 2004 with an aim to counter both Islamic extremism and liberalism. After Asri became a lecturer at Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang he continued to give monthly lectures in Klang Valley's affluent neighbourhoods. His followers funded and managed Pro-Media Tajdid, a media team dedicated solely to the dissemination of Asri's videoed lectures and those of other *tajdid* teachers. As of November 2018, its Youtube channel had over 38,000 subscribers and 10 million views.

27 <https://www.facebook.com/dr.fathulbari/videos/kisah-syaikh-aiman-al-daqqaq-difitnah-sebagai-terrorist/1028239583887536/>

28 IPAC interview with a former student of Aiman al-Daqqaq, Kuala Lumpur, 5 September 2018.

29 Perlis is the only state in Malaysia that does not stipulate the Shafi'i school as its official or preferred *mazhab*.

whom they considered not Salafi enough.³⁰ Fathul Bari and friends found support from another outsider, Singaporean quietist, Rasul Dahri, who by then often came to teach about the “correct” way of praying.³¹ This stirred up the quietist-reformist feud. The former wanted to bring what they saw as narrow “anti-*mazhab*” Salafism of Perlis into line with the Salafi method (*manhaj*) in theology and jurisprudence as taught in Saudi Arabia, whereas the latter accused the former of fanatic obedience to Saudi ulama.³²

Some Salafis tried to bolster the unity of *sunnah* groups – a code word for non-traditionalists – although their efforts sometimes had the opposite effect.³³ Maszlee and Asri both antagonised fellow Salafis by accusing them of being too exclusive and overly loyal to their own ulama. Salafis in PAS took particular umbrage, and an UMNO politician, Shahidan Kassim, moved in to exploit the growing hostility.³⁴

Shahidan Kassim had been Chief Minister of Perlis since 1998. He needed a popular religious figure to outflank PAS ulama and to boost his own pious credentials against UMNO rivals who were challenging his leadership with corruption allegations.³⁵ Meanwhile Asri’s group badly needed political backing amidst a traditionalist backlash that had been building since November 2005, when the pro-UMNO *Utusan* daily newspaper ran a headline entitled “The Contagious Wahhabi Ideology”. The article quoted a prominent traditionalist scholar as saying that the “extreme” Wahhabi ideology was spreading among the educated middle class and that “the ability of Wahhabi’s extremist influence to overthrow the Ottoman Empire should be a reminder to the government of this country.”³⁶ Intent to poach Asri for his political agenda, Shahidan suddenly became a self-appointed *sunnah* spokesperson, telling various media that neither Asri nor the reformist groups in Perlis were Wahhabis.³⁷ Then on 1 November 2006, the Perlis Sultan – on Shahidan’s advice – appointed Asri as Mufti. This was a breakthrough for the Salafis and the beginning of a short two-year “golden period” in Salafi influence, with many seminars on Salafi thought and an increased number of visits from Saudi ulama.³⁸

30 Maszlee Malik and Hamidah Mat, “The Historical Development of “Sunnah” Reform Ideology in the State of Perlis, Malaysia”, *SAGE Open*, July-September 2017, pp. 1-12. Hassan Bandung reportedly visited Perlis in 1916 and in the 1920s and his writings heavily influenced Perlis Kaum Muda. He also had a large following in Johor in Singapore. Some younger Salafis in Indonesia and Malaysia claimed that Hassan’s views on fate (*qadar*) and the use of philosophical reasoning in interpreting the scriptures resembled those of traditional Ash’arite school. More on Hassan’s theological thoughts, see Howard Federspiel, “The Persatuan Islam”, Dissertation, McGill University, 1966.

31 He used as a text *The Prophet’s Way of Praying* written by Sheik Nashirudin al-Albani.

32 Purists and tajdid disagree on the extent of the Salafi position against *taqlid*. *Tajdid* refuses “fanatic” allegiance to any *mazhab* whereas purists still allow their followers to choose one particular *mazhab* as long as they understand its textual basis in Qur’an and Sunnah, as Saudis do in following the Hanbali school. Kaum Muda and Saudi-Salafis also had minor differences in the technicalities of daily prayers, for example.

33 In Malaysia and Indonesia, reformists and purist Salafis often refer to themselves as “*da’wah sunnah*” groups for two reasons: to avoid the negative image that comes with the Salafi/Wahhabi label and to suggest that their teaching is entirely based on the Prophet’s tradition (*sunnah*) rather than local cultural traditions.

34 In early 2006 Maszlee wrote a series of articles stressing the need for *da’wah* groups to shift from narrow “*jama’ah* centrism”, meaning a focus on their own exclusive group, to “*ummah* centrism” or taking the broader Muslim community into account. He especially cited a book written by a prominent PAS leader entitled *Taadud Jama’ah* (Organisational Polygamy) as an example of *jama’ah* centrism, which prompted uproar from PAS Salafi activists. While some Salafi members of PAS initially supported Asri in the hope that he would join the party, its traditional ulama staunchly opposed him. By 2006, he and his colleagues had outraged even the PAS Salafis by comments on multiple occasions that PAS concept of an Islamic state concept was influenced by Shi’ism. For a sample of PAS rebuttal to Maszlee, see Nasrudin bin Hassan at Tantawi, “Pemikiran Ummah Centric Semakin Kusut, ustaznasrudin-tantawi.blogspot.com, 8 May 2006.

35 At the time, UMNO-Perlis was suffering from internal leadership crisis. Just before the 2004 election, Shahidan’s main challenger Radzi Sheikh Ahmad apparently accused him of corruption and nepotism. In September 2006, a mysterious email titled “The Reasons Why Datok Seri Radzi Must Become Perlis Chief Minister” (*Dalil Kenapa Dato Seri Radzi Wajib Jadi MB Perlis*) was leaked to an online portal called “UMNO-reform”. See “Pergolakan UMNO Perlis Umpama Api Dalam Sekam”, *malaysiakini.com*, 31 December 2007.

36 “Fahaman Wahhabi Menular – Dikatakan Semakin Berkembang di Kalangan Cerdik Pandai Muda”, *utusan.com.my*, 27 November 2005.

37 Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, “Fikrah Merentasi Jamaah”, *drmaza.com*, 15 September 2007.

38 Malik and Mat, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

Asri's rise led to increased interaction between quietist and pro-*tajdid* Salafis but it also brought their disagreements to the fore. For example, during the inaugural National Sunnah Convention in Perlis on 24 November 2006, participants disagreed over the status of Sayyid Qutb, Hasan al-Banna and other iconic *haraki* clerics. In his presentation, Asri advocated an inclusive definition of Salafism using the term "reformist current" (*arus tajdid*), which would include reformists, purists, *haraki* and *ikhwani*.³⁹ In response, Rasul Dahri's camp invoked a well-known fatwa of Saudi official ulama against Hasan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, branding him and others as extremists (*khawarij*) for rebelling against legitimate Muslim rulers.⁴⁰ In October 2007, six months before the 2008 election, Shahidan convinced Asri to try and reconcile the differences by forming a new national ulama association that would bring together some 200 clerics. If he succeeded, it would have strengthened UMNO's position vis-à-vis PAS.⁴¹ But if in the past, senior Salafi ulama had sought political protection, they now preferred to stay away from state sponsorship, and the plans fell apart.⁴²

Asri may have failed to unite the *tajdid* and the quietists, but he used his position to popularise his ideas to the broader public through a weekend newspaper column, his blog and other media. His commentaries on contemporary issues provided a third voice in the debate between liberal and conservative traditionalists over the meaning of "Islam Hadhari" (civilisational Islam). This was a concept coined by Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi in 2004, shortly after he replaced Mahathir in the top job, to promote a positive image of Islam in Malaysia. That image of pious but progressive Islam had been tainted, first by the emergence of Jemaah Islamiyah cells in Malaysia in the early 1990s – evidence that extremism had penetrated the country – and then by the strict implementation of *shari'a* in PAS-ruled states. Liberals wanted Islam Hadhari to embrace pluralism and good relations with non-Muslims. PAS and a large coalition of Islamic and Malay NGOs responded by intensifying their campaign against apostasy and in favour of greater powers for the state Islamic bureaucracy.⁴³

In trying to position himself in this debate, Asri renounced the Salafi-wahhabi label and portrayed himself as "a modernist who wants to shake things up".⁴⁴ In January 2007, he issued a groundbreaking opinion on the illegality of spying on *khalwat* (the act of unmarried men and women being alone in a place that could lead to adultery) at a time when state religious

39 *Ikhwani* refers exclusively to Muslim Brotherhood members while *haraki* denotes those who combine Salafi tenets with Brotherhood activism.

40 Asri initially cited Sheik Ibn Jibrin, a cleric with the Saudi fatwa council, who praised Qutb and al-Banna. Rasul Dahri replied that it was an old opinion; Ibn Jibrin had changed his view after getting advice from Sheik Rabi al-Madkhali, the prominent quietist Salafi cleric who wrote four books about the heresy committed by al-Banna and his colleagues. Al-Banna was said to be a member of a Sufi order in his youth and had incorporated Sufi elements, which Salafis labelled as *bid'ah*, into the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Madkhali and other purist clerics alleged that Qutb acknowledged the Ash'arite school of theology because it was widely accepted in the Muslim world. Rasul Dahri, "Ikhwanul Muslimin yang Dijarah Akidahnya", March 2008, ikhwanulmusliminatauikwanulmuflisin.blogspot.com; Abu Ihsan al-atsary al-Meydany, "Membongkar Kesesatan dan Penyimpangan Gerakan Dakwah Ikhwanul Muslimin", al-manhaj.or.id, 5 November 2005.

41 "Perlis Pelopori Pembentukan Gagasan Ulamak Sunnah wal Jamaah", *Bernama*, 16 October 2007, retrieved from <http://drmaza.com/home/?p=87>

42 Among other things, they could not agree on how to distribute resources fairly among all groups; given Asri's central role, some suspected that more resources would be given to his institute, al-Qayyim. Since a single Salafi organisation seemed an impossible goal, a number of new Salafi NGOs emerged between 2008 and 2010, including al-Mizan Institute in Negeri Sembilan and Ibn Hajar Institute in Malacca. IPAC interviews with members of Salafi community in Malaysia, August-September 2018.

43 In early 2005, the Malaysia Bar Council used Islam Hadhari momentum to propose the formation of a state Interfaith Commission (IFC) that would allow representatives of all religious groups to discuss socio-religious problems. The Badawi government initially endorsed it but eventually pushed it back due to protests from PAS and large a coalition of Islamic and Malay NGOs that perceived it as a threat to the existing Islamic authorities and a sign that Islamic Hadhari empowered liberal and Christian groups. Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid and Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, "Islamist Conservatism and the Demise of Islam Hadhari in Malaysia", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol.25, No.2, December 2014.

44 "In Asri UMNO Sees the Next Anwar" in malaysia-today.net, 21 June 2010.

authorities were making more and more *khalwat* raids in the name of enacting Islam Hadhari.⁴⁵ In March 2007, the Perlis Mufti Office defended the right of new Muslim converts to retain their last names instead of changing it to bin or binti Abdullah as commonly expected in Malaysia. Traditional ulama resented the ruling but Chinese Muslim converts welcomed it, wishing to retain their cultural heritage instead of “becoming Malay”.⁴⁶ In the high-profile case of Lina Joy, a Christian convert whose appeal to remove the word ‘Islam’ in her identity card was rejected by a Federal Court in May 2007, Asri blasted the court’s ruling not on the basis of religious freedom, but because forcing “apostates” to remain Muslims on paper was similar to “keeping a very dangerous cancer in the body of our *Ummah*”.⁴⁷ In other words, he came up with religiously conservative arguments to support a progressive stance. His fatwas earned him praise from liberal Muslim figures including Marina Mahathir, then on the board of Sisters in Islam, who named him her second favourite figure after her father.⁴⁸

Asri’s term as mufti did not last long. He declined the Sultan’s offer to extend his term that ended in November 2008. A local media source quoted him as saying that he quit in part to “protest” the sacking of Shahidan Kassim, even though Shahidan had delivered an UMNO victory for Perlis in the March elections, when the neighbouring states of Kedah and Perak both fell to the opposition.⁴⁹ As he returned to being an independent preacher, PAS and UMNO both saw an opening to poach him.

IV. SALAFIS AND THE STATE (2009-2016)

As post-Mahathir competition between PAS and UMNO to represent Muslim Malays intensified, Salafi clerics were pushed further into politics. Two factors were involved. One was pressure from traditionalists, unsettled by the growing popularity of Salafist clerics, to portray Salafism/Wahhabism as a gateway to violent extremism. As several Salafi clerics were arrested on accusations of terrorism and illegal proselytising, Salafis came to realise that their popular acceptance did not matter as long as traditionalists still controlled state religious institutions and security agencies. The other factor was doctrinal. Quietist Salafis generally reject democracy as un-Islamic, but in Malaysia, both *tajdid* and quietists agreed that the changing circumstances meant that gaining political power was a survival strategy. The question was which party, as both PAS and UMNO had shown interest in recruiting them. Quietists chose UMNO partly because supporting a governing party was technically in line with Salafi doctrine of obedience to the ruler – although later events would suggest that the doctrine was not immutable.

A. Traditionalist Backlash

The Salafis’ rising popularity did not go unchallenged. Two young traditionalist clerics became the symbol of the anti-Wahhabi movement in mid-2000s: Zamihan Mat Zin, a former staff of the federal Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM), and Mohd Rasyiq Alwi aka Abu Syafiq, an independent preacher.⁵⁰ They had numerous heated exchanges with Asri, Rasul Dahri and other Salafis, but their enmity reached a new level in 2009-2010 when the police and officials of

45 “Soal Jawab: Akidah Luntur Punca Masyarakat Islam Mundur”, *Berita Harian*, 14 January 2007.

46 “Muslim Converts in Perlis Need Not Change Father’s Name”, *thestar.com.my*, 11 March 2007.

47 Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, “Apostasy: Between Emotions and Reality”, *drmaza.com*, 22 July 2007.

48 “Anything but Politics: 30 Mins with Marina Mahathir”, *malaysiakini.com*, 17 February 2007.

49 “Asri Akui Letak Jawatan Mufti Perlis Tanda Protes Kerajaan Negeri”, *mstar.com.my*, 7 October 2008. PAS won in Kedah and came second in Perak, where the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) won. Asri noted that he and Shahidan had worked hard to improve UMNO’s image in Perlis through their frequent visits to mosques and religious study sessions to improve the piety of individual members of UMNO government. Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, “Islam Tulen Boleh selamatkan UMNO”, *drmaza.com*, 4 October 2009.

50 JAKIM was formed in 1997 to supervise the development of Islamic legislations and policies.

Islamic Departments (Jabatan Agama Islam) in various states rounded up “Wahhabi” clerics.

Both Zamihan and Abu Syafiq had academic credentials to match the Salafi scholars.⁵¹ Through their blogs and lectures, they gave in-depth rebuttals to Salafi teachings as no traditionalists had done before. Instead of debating *bid'ah*, for example, they attacked Salafi theological foundations.⁵² Their anti-Salafi stance did not make them moderates, however: they strongly opposed liberalism and took ultraconservative stances on issues like apostasy and Islamic penal code (*hudud*).

The power of these young traditionalists lay in their ability to influence state Islamic officials and counter-terrorism agencies. Zamihan since 2006 had been assisting the police in the rehabilitation of terrorist detainees and advising them on the ideological roots of terrorism.⁵³ Traditionalist influence was particularly strong in Selangor, where several Salafi leaders were barred from teaching. The anti-Salafi campaign reached a peak on 2 November 2009 when 25 officials of Selangor’s Islamic Department, escorted by 35 policemen, raided a private house in Ampang Jaya, Selangor, and arrested Asri in the middle of a lecture for preaching without a permit, despite his having taught there for years.⁵⁴ He was released the following day.

Many observers including Asri himself connected his arrest to his planned appointment to the national Islamic Da’wah Foundation (YADIM).⁵⁵ It all started in October 2009 when the new prime minister Najib Razak offered Asri the post of YADIM president, part of UMNO’s concerted effort to court him at a time when PAS was trying to do the same. The problem was that YADIM’s top position was traditionally given to UMNO politicians or those from big Islamic organisations. On 12 October, 17 NGOs including ABIM sent a memorandum to Malaysia’s king protesting the appointment on the grounds that his “extreme approach” had created divisions in society.⁵⁶ While the appointment was aborted, Asri was flooded with expressions of sympathy from politicians of all parties. Leaders of PAS – which, as part of the Pakatan Rakyat coalition, had taken power in Selangor in 2008 – alleged that the Najib government deliberately tried to create friction there by exacerbating the traditionalist-Salafi divide. Najib denied any intervention and criticised the “puzzling” arrest.⁵⁷

The political position of Salafis took a turn for the worse in January 2010, when Sheik Aiman al-Daqqaq was arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA) along with 50 of his students for alleged links to a Nigerian Al-Qaeda operative.⁵⁸ Aiman’s students were soon released except for eleven foreigners and one Malaysian: Ust Azhari Murad of the quietist Salafi NGO Darul Ta’lim. Aiman’s Malaysian students came forward to testify that as a true Salafi, he forbade any kind of rebellion against the government, let alone terrorism.⁵⁹ But not a single Malaysian politician stood up for the Syrian sheik.

In February 2010, a month after Aiman’s arrest, Fathul Bari, who was one of his students, was

51 Zamihan graduated from Mu’tah University of Jordan and subsequently got a PhD from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM); Abu Syafiq studied at al-Azhar University in Cairo.

52 Zamihan and Abu Syafiq especially attacked Salafi’s “tawhid 3” concept, which they accused of resembling the Christian Holy Trinity. Its third component, Oneness of Allah’s Names and Attributes (*tauhid asma wa sifat*), especially became a source of contention. Salafis interpret all Qur’anic verses describing God’s physical attributes (e.g. God’s hand) literally, whereas traditionalists believe the verses should be understood metaphorically or else it would mean that God resembles the human’s form.

53 “Ayob: Saya Bukan Anak Murid Zamihan”, *sinarharian.com.my*, 27 November 2017.

54 “Former Perlis Mufti Detained”, *thestar.com.my*, 2 November 2009.

55 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wP17qZ7pxdE>

56 “Memorandum Bantahan Terhadap Pelantikan Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin Sebagai YDP YADIM”, *mstar.com.my*, 1 November 2009.

57 “Najib Puzzled by Asri’s Arrest”, *thestar.com.my*, 3 November 2009.

58 “Malaysia Suspects Linked to Bomber”, *al-jazeera.com*, 28 January 2010.

59 “Malaysia Arrests 10 ‘Terrorists’ Linked to Syrian Preacher: Witness”, *dailystar.com*, 29 January 2010. This was Umar Farouk Abdulmutalab, who planned to blow himself up on a Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Detroit on Christmas Day 2009.

arrested by Negeri Sembilan's Islamic Department for preaching without authorisation. He was supposed to lecture at Ma'had Ittiba' al-Sunnah, one of the oldest schools in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan that had once hosted the founders of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and whose teachings had been described as "deviant" by the state mufti office.⁶⁰

Zamihan used this new development to prove his point that Salafism/Wahhabism could lead to terrorism. In early June, he gave a closed-door briefing to security officials and heads of universities about how Jemaah Islamiyah was inspired by Salafi-Wahhabism and how it was spreading in Malaysian universities, citing Aiman al-Daqqaq's activities as evidence. He reportedly named several public figures including Asri, Shahidan Kassim and Fathul Bari as Wahhabis.⁶¹

Shahidan Kassim, the former Perlis Chief Minister, exploited the anti-Salafi purge to convince Asri, Fathul Bari and other young Salafis to join UMNO. He and others in the party apparently believed that having Salafi ulama could help undermine PAS – for example by criticising *bid'ah* practices in PAS stronghold states and thus refute its claim to Islamic purity.

B. UMNO-Salafis vs *Tajdid*

The decision to enter UMNO created deeper divisions between *tajdid* and quietist Salafis. The quietist camp, led by Fathul Bari and UKM lecturer Fadhlán Othman, felt that joining UMNO was the only way to save their *da'wah* programs. As Fathul Bari stated:

I myself used to be anti-democracy. Even in 2008, I told my people in Perlis that elections are *haram*, let's just obey whoever the government is. But after I got invited to many places outside Perlis...I got to know a wider variety of people, professionals, government, and police...it opened my eyes to the complexity of social problems. I realised that politics can be a good platform for *da'wah* too. And because of all the slander that befell us at the time, we believed it was imperative for Salafis to join the government, which happened to be led by UMNO. We then asked the blessing of the mufti of Jizan, Saudi Arabia when he came to Malaysia. He said that participating in formal politics is allowed as long as it has a noble purpose.⁶²

In other words, Fathul Bari's group reinterpreted Salafi quietism from "apolitical obedience" to "active political support" for the ruling government.

Asri, on the other hand, was hesitant to take sides partly because Mahathir advised him to remain politically neutral if he wanted to maintain his influence as a religious scholar. Indeed, Asri became closer to Mahathir after his program with Shahidan faltered in Perlis.⁶³ But because of the mounting pressure on Salafis, Asri looked for a middle way: supporting political engagement without becoming involved himself. On 25 June 2010, Shahidan held a ceremony with representatives of "UMNO's Young Ulama" (Ulama Muda UMNO), symbolically handing over their membership forms to Prime Minister Najib Razak. Shahidan also announced that Asri had agreed in principle to join UMNO but in the end he never did – which left the purists

60 Wan Ahmad Arshad, *Tokoh Ulama Silam "Dato' Haji Abdullah Sijang"*, Negeri Sembilan, 2007. Mahad Ittiba' al Sunnah was founded by a respected Kaum Muda cleric and often invited external preachers from Indonesian modernist organisation, Muhammadiyah, as well as Malaysian quietist clerics like Hussein Yee. The school's reputation was tainted in early 2000s when some former JI extremists revealed that the school used to host Indonesian jihadists including JI founders Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir after they fled Indonesia to escape arrest; they then recruited some Malaysian students to train in Afghan militant camp. See Nasir Abas, *Membongkar Jamaah Islamiyah*, Jakarta, 2005.

61 "Asri, Juanda Cite Malice and Slander in Accusations", *thestar.com.my*, 24 June 2010.

62 IPAC interview with Fathul Bari, Kuala Lumpur, 4 September 2018.

63 Asri and Mahathir spent some time together while staying in London in late 2008; they realised that they shared similarities in terms of rationalist and reformist approach to religion. In April 2010, Mahathir gave a speech at Asri's book launching. "Dr M Launches Book by ex-Perlis Mufti Asro", *malaysiakini.com*, 21 April 2018.

feeling betrayed. To disassociate themselves from Asri, Fathul Bari and colleagues changed their organisation's name from Ulama Muda UMNO to Malaysian Young Islamic Scholars (Ulama Muda Malaysia, iLMU). It is important to note that even at its height, iLMU only had 40 members. Many quietists still thought that joining political parties would only create friction and therefore preferred grassroots *da'wah*.

The rivalry between iLMU and *tajdid* grew bitter as both sites debated the merit of taking part in an anti-government rally set to be held on 9 July 2011. The "Bersih" (Clean) movement had begun in November 2007 as a protest movement against rigged elections and was initiated by several NGOs and opposition parties. The first demonstration had attracted 10,000 to 30,000 protestors; the 9 July protest was known as Bersih 2.0. On 22 June, Asri encouraged his followers to take part, as long as they could commit to maintaining public order. Citing a *hadith*, he stated that Islam condones demonstrations if they are aimed to free people from oppression.⁶⁴ iLMU refuted him, saying that demonstrations are *haram* (forbidden) and that Islam requires unequivocal obedience to the rulers based on the following hadith:

Listen and obey (the Amir's order) even if an Ethiopian slave is made Amir over you whose head is (the size of) a raisin.

The proper Islamic way to criticise the government, according to UMNO Salafis, is by giving advice in private, not through street protests.⁶⁵

Asri labelled iLMU members as "literalists" who used religious texts to defend UMNO at all costs.⁶⁶ Others slammed Fathul Bari and his colleagues for being UMNO's attack weapon against PAS. Meanwhile pro-UMNO Salafis called Asri an extreme Qutbiyyun pretending to be a Salafi.⁶⁷

Some pointed out Asri's inconsistency. Just before the first Bersih rally in 2007 and with the support of the Perlis government, he had published a booklet that effectively outlawed participation in demonstrations.⁶⁸ By 2011-2012, however, the Salafi political constellation had changed. The *tajdid* group had become more inclined to PAS and its opposition partners in the Pakatan Rakyat coalition, led by Anwar Ibrahim. Asri explained his change of heart as follows:

The first time...[I became Mufti] not many voiced a desire for open-minded thinking. UMNO during the time was more open than PAS was. Many of my suggestions on matters such as *khalwat* were staunchly opposed by PAS. Largely, I was supported on many counts by UMNO. But with changing times the roles have become reversed. UMNO is now more conservative, and PAS has opened up a bit more, especially their religious scholars, perhaps due to their Pakatan counterparts.⁶⁹

The quietists, on the other hand, were backing UMNO in the hope of influencing national policies, including on counter-terrorism, which became an arena for competing with traditionalists for resources and influence. The competition took an alarming turn when both started to target minority Islamic groups such as Shi'a to prove their commitment to eradicate all extreme "heretical" sects in the name of protecting the country against terrorism.

64 Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, "Bersih Wajib Berjalan dengan Bersih", drmaz.com, 22 June 2011.

65 IPAC interview with Fathul Bari, Kuala Lumpur, 4 September 2018.

66 Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, "Mengapa Saya Kritik Aliran Literal dalam UMNO", sinarharian.com.my, 27 September 2012.

67 Abu Amru Mohd Radzi bin Othman, "Surat Kepada Datuk Dr Asri Zainul Abidin Mantan Mufti Perlis", loluconagama.wordpress.com, 19 September 2012. Qutbiyyun means the followers of Sayid Qutb, an Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood ideologue who steered some followers to violence by declaring jihad against the so-called apostate government. He was executed in 1966.

68 The booklet was titled *Sunnah Mengenai Adab Perbezaan Pendapat Antara Rakyat Dengan Pemerintah*.

69 "Perlis Mufti Speaks His Minds", thesundaily.my, 20 October 2015.

C. *Salafis vs Traditionalists in Counter-terrorism*

Counter-terrorism became the locus of competition between Salafis and traditionalists because each wanted to promote its own version of the security threat facing Malaysia. For traditionalists, the main threats were Salafism, liberalism, and Shi'ism (threats to Islamic orthodoxy being identical to national security threats). Salafis also focused on Shi'a but they were even more concerned to ensure that they themselves were not seen as deviant – let alone prone to violent extremism.

After the arrest of Aiman al-Daqqaq and his students, Salafis were hard-pressed to dispel the perception of Salafism as a gateway to terrorism. They specifically rejected the term Salafi jihadism and insisted that terrorists should just be called *khawarij*; in addition, they sought to rebrand themselves simply as *ahlus sunnah wal jamaah*, a generic term for Sunnis. They tried to promote this view through public seminars. The first one was held in March 2010 by Salafi NGO al-Nida in cooperation with Universiti Malaya. Since joining UMNO, Salafis had been able to gain resources to widen their anti-terrorism campaign. They were also now able to access state mosques and schools.

Traditionalists, however, still occupied strategic positions. Senior traditionalist academic Uthman el-Muhammady received the Friends of the Police Award in 2011 for his contribution to counter-terrorism efforts.⁷⁰ In 2012, Zamihan was seconded to Home Affairs Ministry to be the religious officer of its Security and Public Order Bureau.⁷¹ In 2013, he formed a new NGO called Pertubuhan Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaah (Aswaja) to reclaim the term from Salafis and to organise traditionalist-led anti-extremism campaigns, often in cooperation with the Special Branch's E8 division that handles counter-terrorism.

Anti-Shi'ism was central to the Salafi vs traditionalist rivalry. Shi'a had long been the target of state-sponsored discrimination in Malaysia, but the issue got a new political spin in December 2013 as Home Minister and UMNO Deputy President Ahmad Zahid Hamidi publicly accused PAS Vice-President Mat Sabu of being a Shi'a. Zamihan supported his boss by stating that he had ten proofs of Mat Sabu's Shi'ism. Asri, a staunch opponent of Shi'ism but friend of PAS at the time, jumped in, accusing Zamihan of hypocrisy: he said that Zamihan was a covert Shi'a because he often quoted Jordanian cleric Hasan al-Saqqaf who had been declared as "inclined to Shi'ism" by a JAKIM researcher.⁷²

Zamihan hit back in October 2014 when his effort to mainstream the term "Salafi jihadism" as the synonym for terrorism succeeded with the release of National Fatwa Council's ruling that categorised the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a Salafi jihadi group. The council also decided that "Shi'ism and Salafi-Wahhabism were not in accordance with the mainstream [creed of] *ahlus sunnah wal jamaah*" in Malaysia.⁷³ The fatwa caused distress among Salafis as they worried that ordinary Muslims would not be able to tell the difference between pure Salafism and Salafi jihadism.

Their concerns were partly alleviated in September 2015 when Fathul Bari became a board member of the newly passed Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA).⁷⁴ The board, consisting of five to eight members, was tasked with reviewing the evidence against terrorism suspects to see

70 This was the same Uthman el-Muhammady who first raised the Wahhabi "contagion" issue in 2005.

71 At the same time, Salafi-inclined scholars like Maszlee also worked on terrorist rehabilitation in their capacity as Islamic academics.

72 "Terkini! Dr MAZA Belasah Hebat Pegawai Agama KDN, Ustadz Dr Zamihan Mat Zain, Ini Buktinya", sedakasejahtera.blogspot.com, December 2013.

73 "Isu Umat Islam Malaysia yang Berjuang Atas Nama ISIS", e-fatwa.gov.my, 22 October 2014.

74 As a replacement of the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) that was revoked in 2011, POTA was meant to focus narrowly on terrorism prevention and its implementation was shifted from the Ministry of Home Affairs to the Prevention of Terrorism Board whose members were to be selected by the King.

if continued detention was justified.⁷⁵ Both quietist and *tajdid* were relieved to have a say on who should or should not be considered a terrorist. As it turned out, Shi'a would be their first target.

Since Asri was reappointed as Perlis Mufti in May 2015, countering Shi'ism had been high on his agenda. He suspected a new charitable organisation called Perlis Hope of covertly propagating Shi'ism to schoolchildren and argued that Shi'a aimed to establish a "mullah country" or *wilayat al-faqih*, endangering democracy and national security.⁷⁶ On 21 October 2015, officials of Perlis Mufti Office and a group of policemen raided the house of Amri Che Mat, founder of Perlis Hope. On 7 October 2016, the Perlis Mufti invited Awaluddin Jadid, chief of the Special Branch's E2 division that handles threats posed by heterodox sects to discuss the Shi'a threat.⁷⁷ Amri vanished a month later, reportedly abducted from his car. At a hearing of the Malaysian Human Rights Commission in April 2018 into his disappearance, Asri brought up the photographs of the Karbala prayer stone and Shi'a books allegedly retrieved from Amri's house that he previously posted on his Facebook page, and argued that there was a link between Shi'ism and violence, but shed no light on the missing activist.⁷⁸

Amri's family pointed fingers at both Asri and Awaluddin for the abduction, although both strongly denied any responsibility.⁷⁹ Amri's disappearance by no means slowed down the anti-Shi'a campaign; it had the opposite effect. Awaluddin continued to focus on Shi'a expansion and the dangers it posed, claiming that foreign funding had helped Malaysian Shi'a recruit over three million people and that they had infiltrated courts, political parties, and educational institutions. Some traditionalists attributed Awaluddin's diatribe against Shi'ism to Salafi influence, and the latter's efforts to divert attention from themselves.⁸⁰

D. Malaysia-Saudi Arabia Relations

Prime Minister Najib Razak managed to further taint the UMNO-linked Salafis through the Saudi links to a massive corruption scandal. The case began to unfold in the media in July 2015, involving the transfer of some US\$700 million from a sovereign wealth fund called 1Malaysian Development Berhad (1MDB) into the Prime Minister's personal bank accounts while more than US\$4.5 billion was diverted to other players in Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.⁸¹ Building on links arranged by one of the key players in the scandal, Najib also began to deepen Malaysian-Saudi ties.⁸²

Fathul Bari was quick to come out in defence of Najib. When the first media reports appeared,

75 A suspect can be detained under POTA for two years with a possible extension of two more years. In practice though, the board's decision-making is not the same as a fair trial as it is still conducted behind closed doors; POTA also shields the board's decisions from being revoked through judicial review. "Malaysia Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015", http://www.federalgazette.agc.gov.my/outputaktap/aktaBI_20150604_Act769%28BI%29.pdf

76 Zurairi AR, "A Missing Journalist, Terrorists, and Us", malaymail.com, 14 October 2018. Salafis are anti-Shi'a for political and theological reasons. Salafis believe that Shi'a had deviated from Islamic consensus since its beginning in the 7th century, when early Muslims disagreed over who should be Prophet Muhammad's successors. What would come to be known as Shi'a believed the Prophet's descendants possess the divine right to take his position as a political and religious leader; whereas Muhammad's companions preferred the appointment of Caliphates based on leadership qualities. Salafis – and other Sunnis – argued that early Shi'a doctrines were in fact crafted by a Jewish rabbi, Abdullah bin Saba, who tried to take down the third Caliph, Uthman bin Affan. Salafis particularly attacked the alleged polytheistic practices of Shi'a, especially their veneration of Prophet Muhammad's family. But it was the Saudi-Iran rivalry after 1979 that gave rise to more elaborate arguments emphasising the "terroristic" characteristics of Shi'ism.

77 <https://www.facebook.com/muftiperlis/posts/kunjungan-hormatdato-awaludin-jadid-ketua-penolong-pengarah-bahagian-ekstremis-s/1682795585371262/>

78 "Perlis Mufti Posts Photos of Raid on Amri House", thestar.com.my, 24 January 2018; "Amri Che Mat Day 9: The Mufti and the Muslims of Perlis", write2rest.blogspot.com, 13 April 2018.

79 "Menyusup Macam Pelesit", *Harian Metro*, 9 August 2017.

80 IPAC interview with a member of Aswaja, 27 August 2018.

81 Bradley Hope and Tom Wright, *Billion Dollar Whale*, New York, 2018.

82 Noorshahril Saat, "Malaysia Capitalizes on Saudi King Salman's Visit", ISEAS Perspective, No. 14, 2017.

he wrote an article advising Muslims to not judge their leader too quickly pending investigation, citing Qur'anic verses and hadith about the sin of making false accusations.⁸³ On 27 January 2016, the Malaysian attorney general closed the probe against Najib on the grounds that he was able to prove that the millions in his private account was a donation from a member of Saudi royal family, not stolen from 1MDB project.⁸⁴ On the same day, a Saudi official confirmed this account, saying that the donation was aimed to help Najib win the 2013 election, and that it was part of Saudi's global effort to undermine Muslim Brotherhood's influence, including in Malaysia where PAS was said to be its affiliate.⁸⁵

Fathul Bari, who once served as a religious adviser at the Saudi embassy, did not make any public comment on the alleged "gift" to the prime minister. But he did endorse Malaysian pivot to Saudi Arabia, and some Salafis believed his presence in UMNO contributed to deepening bilateral ties.⁸⁶

During the February 2017 visit of King Salman bin Abdul Aziz, Fathul Bari was appointed as the communication facilitator between the Saudi King and his Malaysian counterparts.⁸⁷ The visit marked a new high in Malaysia-Saudi relations: the Saudi national oil company Aramco signed a \$7 billion investment deal with Malaysia's state oil company Petronas to expand its oil and gas refinery project in Johor (where the opposition was castigating the government for a \$100 billion housing development project that attracted enormous Chinese investment and had the potential to cause an influx of Chinese workers and buyers).⁸⁸ In addition, the Saudis tripled the number of scholarships for Malaysians to attend Saudi universities, from 100 in 2016 to 300 in 2017.⁸⁹

Security cooperation also received a special attention during the meeting. Following King Salman's visit, both countries agreed to deepen counter-terrorism cooperation through the establishment of King Salman Centre for International Peace in Putrajaya, Malaysia, with Fathul Bari playing a major role.⁹⁰ In April 2017, the Malaysian defence minister stated that the Saudi-sponsored counter-terrorism research centre was ready to operate at a temporary office in Kuala Lumpur, but the the plan was fiercely challenged by the opposition on multiple grounds.⁹¹

83 Fathul Bari, "Jangan Mufli Kerana 1MDB", drfathulbari.com, July 2015. The relationship with the Saudis was in part designed as a way to deflect public criticism of Malaysia's over-reliance on Chinese investors.

84 "Malaysia Closes Investigation into Prime Minister Najib Razak's Funds", nytimes.com, 27 January 2016.

85 "Saudi Gift to Malaysia PM Najib Razak 'for Election Campaign'", bbc.com, 27 January 2016.

86 One of his Salafi colleagues commented: "during Najib's term, especially when Fathul Bari was his adviser, Malaysia-Saudi relations got stronger. Maybe it was not directly related, but one of the contributing factors was Fathul Bari himself as a Medina graduate who propagated Salafism here. Before, there was also a Medina alumnus, Abdullah Zain, who became the PM's religious adviser during Badawi era, but he wasn't as vocal as Fathul Bari in promoting Salafism, that's why the Saudi government didn't pay much attention. But Fathul Bari was very close to the embassy". IPAC interview with a quietist Salafi in Kuala Lumpur, 5 September 2018.

87 "Hubungan Arab-Malaysia Lebih Kepada Brotherhood Kata Fathul Bari", suara.tv, 5 March 2017.

88 "Malaysia Bars Foreigners from Johor's US\$100b Forest City Projects that Drew Chinese Buyers", straitstimes.com, 27 August 2018.

89 "Saudi Arabia to Triple Scholarships for Malaysian Students", malaysiakini.com, 27 February 2017. In May 2017, Kelantan's Islamic Department facilitated an agreement between the state's International Islamic College of Sultan Ismail Petra and Medina Islamic University to sponsor 25 Kelantanese to study in Medina every year. The agreement went ahead despite resistance from PAS traditionalist members. "Nafi Kerjasama untuk Bawa Fahaman Wahabi", sinarharian.com.my, 17 June 2017.

90 Noorshahril Saat, op. cit.

91 The leaders of Amanah, a moderate splinter of PAS, worried that Malaysia would be dragged into Middle East conflicts, given the Saudi dispute with Qatar and its military intervention in Yemen. See "Amanah: Saudi Centre May Drag Malaysia into Mid-East Conflicts", freemalysiatoday.com, 15 November 2017. Former Prime Minister Mahathir, now the head of a new party, Malay United Indigenous Party (BERSATU) asserted that Saudi Arabia was not a suitable partner to fight terrorism because the country itself was involved in an active war. See "Mahathir: Saudi Arabia Not Appropriate Partner to Counter-terrorism", freemalysiatoday.com, 16 July 2016. Marina Mahathir was concerned that Saudi involvement in Malaysia's security affairs would worsen the "Arabisation" phenomenon believed to be growing in Malaysia due to the spread of literalist ideology, threatening traditional Malay culture and freedom of expression. See "Worries about Arabisation Grow as Saudi Ties Strengthen", reuters.com, 21 December 2017.

The concern that the Najib government was becoming too close to Saudi Arabia ideologically was exacerbated by its decision in early 2017 to give asylum to Zakir Naik, a controversial yet highly popular Indian preacher wanted by India on suspicion of inciting terrorism.⁹² In mid-2016 Naik had fled to Saudi Arabia to evade arrest and now the Najib government was offering him a safe haven. By this time, Najib's popularity was already in free fall. Defending the interests of a foreign country that many believed to have helped him cover up his corruption would not improve his image. As the campaign season for the 2018 election was approaching, the government decided to postpone the launching of the King Salman Centre.

V. SALAFIS AND THE 14TH GENERAL ELECTION (2017-2018)

The campaign leading up to Malaysia's 14th General Election (GE-14) in 2018 revived old rivalries between quietist and tajdid Salafis and created new ones within quietist ranks. The tajdid camp gave solid support to Pakatan, the coalition led by Anwar that included Mahathir's new Malaysian United Indigenous Party (Bersatu); some even joined Mahathir's party and ran for office. iLMU members continued to support UMNO despite popular resentment towards Najib, which left the disillusioned quietists to leave the organisation.

A. Purist Internal Rift

Years after the establishment of iLMU, many quietist Salafis still preferred to work as independent preachers as they believed political neutrality was the key to winning the hearts of ordinary Muslims. In September 2016, these non-partisan Salafis established a Salafi umbrella group, Gabungan Ahli Sunnah wal Jamaah Malaysia (GASMA). Senior cleric Shafwan Badrie served as its founding president and Ismail Omar, an UMNO sympathiser, was its chairman. It was a clear division of labour: iLMU concentrating on *da'wah* in the government and GASMA focusing on the grassroots. However, disagreement arose over strategy for the 2018 election. The quietists largely agreed that as imperfect as it was, UMNO would bring less harm than Pakatan because the latter contained non-Muslim and liberal elements purportedly seeking to advance the interests of LGBT, Christians and Shi'a.

Non-partisan quietists initially planned to hold a big Salafi gathering to discuss how to play the political game without jeopardising their integrity by supporting an unpopular leader. But before they could do so, in March 2018, Fathul Bari and his iLMU colleagues suddenly published a book titled *Malaysia General Election: Between Democracy and Religious Obligations*, which combined Islamic verses and fatwas of Saudi sheiks to suggest that overthrowing the existing prime minister including through ballot box was prohibited because it would lead to chaos, and that those who dare to do so would count as *khawarij*, "the dogs of hellfire".⁹³ The book was not welcomed by other purists who felt that it merely "exploited the Salafi doctrine of obedience to the ruler solely for their own party's interests".⁹⁴

GASMA chairman Ismail Omar had another idea: bringing in Zaitun Rasmin, the Indonesian Salafi *haraki* leader who had played a major role in ousting Jakarta's ethnic Chinese governor through Islamist-majoritarian arguments.⁹⁵ In April 2018, Ismail invited Zaitun to give a keynote speech on Islamic Politics at GASMA's national congress. The UMNO-backed *Utusan* daily published an exclusive interview with Zaitun, in which he repeated the anti-Ahok

92 Darshini Kandasamy, "Malaysia Can't Decide if Zakir Naik is a Preacher or a Terrorist", *foreignpolicy.com*, 22 August 2018.

93 Ust Idris bin Sulaiman et. al, *Pilihan Raya Malaysia: Antara Demokrasi dan Tuntutan Agama*, Selangor, 2018, p. 112.

94 IPAC interview with a quietist Salafi in Kuala Lumpur, 5 September 2018.

95 Zaitun Rasmin was a long-time friend of Ismail Omar; they had invited each other to their respective schools and pioneered a regional ulama conference. "Deklarasi Mukhtar Ulama dan Dai Asia Tenggara", *nahimunkar.org*, 30 November 2014.

Islamist mantra:

The leader of a Muslim-majority state must be a Muslim who is committed to preserving Islamic values so that society's righteousness and morality can be upheld. It is prohibited to elect or let a non-Muslim be elected, moreover if he/she is against Islamic shari'a.⁹⁶

Finally, Pakatan won and put an end to Barisan Nasional's 60 year-old rule but the Malay votes were split: one pollster estimated that only 25 per cent of Malays supported Pakatan, roughly 35 per cent voted for Barisan Nasional, and 33 per cent for PAS, whereas 95 per cent of Malaysian-Chinese and 75 per cent of Malaysian-Indians chose the Pakatan coalition.⁹⁷ The winning coalition thus still had the huge task of convincing the Malay people that their interests would not be compromised. The support of prominent *tajdid* Salafis would come in handy.

B. *Tajdid and Pakatan Harapan*

Salafi reformists supported Pakatan for idealistic and pragmatic reasons: like many Malaysians they wanted to see a cleaner government. More importantly, they believed that it could help them advance their politico-religious agenda: a gradual Islamisation to create a society that is modern and yet preserves Islamic orthodoxy. While Pakatan may have had the support of secular and progressive voters, its leaders also had to make choices about how to deploy their Salafi supporters – if only to strengthen their political hand in the future.

In early 2018, some *tajdid* Salafis joined Mahathir's Bersatu party, including Maszlee Malik and Abu Hafiz Salleh Hudin, a member of Asri's al-Qayyim Institute. After the election, Maszlee was appointed as education minister, with some *tajdid* intellectuals acting as his advisers. The new minister of religious affairs and Amanah leader Mujahid Yusof Rawa was also a good friend of Asri's and had publicly praised his progressive fatwas over the years. Mujahid would enlist the help of Asri and other modernists to promote the concept of *maqasid shari'a* (the foundational goals of shari'a), as a comprehensive and humanist alternative to a blanket implementation of *hudud*.⁹⁸ Mujahid's idea went directly counter to a bill proposed by PAS known as "RUU 355" that would allow shari'a courts to apply harsher punishments for shari'a offences and effectively implement the dormant *hudud* regulations in Kelantan and Terengganu.⁹⁹

Pakatan's victory not only halted RUU 355 deliberations but also gave a new hope to various minority groups. A gay rights activist Numan Afifi was appointed as press officer for the Youth and Sports Minister, although public pressure forced him to immediately quit. In August, Mujahid Rawa met with transgender figure Nisha Ayob.¹⁰⁰ In the same month, the cancellation of the King Salman Research Centre was announced by the same Mat Sabu, now Defence Minister, who had been suspected of being Shi'a. Then in October, the first non-Muslim attorney general, Tommy Thomas, revoked the ban on the books written by Faisal Tehrani, a famous author previously banned by JAKIM for allegedly promoting Shi'ism.¹⁰¹ The *tajdid* group continued to air their

96 "Fitnah Undang Malapetaka", utusan.com.my, 7 May 2018.

97 "Merdeka Center: Only 25% Malays Voted for Pakatan Harapan", thecoverage.my, 14 June 2018.

98 *Maqasid Shari'a* is the common ground among *mazhab*, and it encompasses five points: preserving faith, soul, wealth, mind, and offspring. In July 2018, Mujahid remarked that the first point of the *maqasid* means preserving everyone's faith, not only Muslims but also non-Muslims. The statement invited criticism from conservative Muslim groups.

99 Ting Mu Hung, "The Politics of Hudud Law Implementation in Malaysia," op.cit. First proposed as a private bill by Kelantan Chief Minister Hadi Awang in 2014, RUU 355 became a highly divisive issue that contributed to PAS's withdrawal from the Pakatan coalition in 2015 and to the emergence of the Amanah splinter in 2016. UMNO immediately saw an opportunity to approach PAS by supporting a watered-down version of the bill to be tabled to the federal parliament in November 2016. Zamihan's Aswaja group and JAKIM supported the bill, whereas Asri's supporters along with secular and progressive Muslim groups opposed it.

100 "Mujahid Meeting was over LGBT Discrimination", thestar.com.my, 11 August 2018. The minister had to insist that they only talked about discrimination, not same-sex marriage.

101 "AG Drops Bill to Appeal Ban on Faisal Tehrani's Books", malaymail.com, 29 October 2018.

suspicion of Mat Sabu; they were also wary of liberal influence in the new government. But overall, they were content with Mahathir as the prime minister, Maszlee Malik as the education minister, and Asri as a religious consultant to the Council of Eminent Persons (CEP), a special advisory council set up by Mahathir.

Reformists nevertheless selected their partners in Pakatan carefully. Asri, for example, was eager to back up Mujahid Rawa's effort to advance *maqasid shari'a* and *fiqh waqi'* (contextual jurisprudence) not just for pragmatic reasons but because he genuinely believed in their value.¹⁰²

Some Pakatan supporters were concerned that Salafi orthodoxy might creep into state policies through their representatives in the government. Some specifically questioned Maszlee Malik's commitment to inter-ethnic and interfaith harmony not least because he supported Zakir Naik, the firebrand Indian preacher.¹⁰³ As soon as he was appointed, Farouk Musa, his former "protaz" colleague who later switched to the progressive Islamic Renaissance Forum (IRF), commented that if Maszlee defended Naik based on freedom of speech, then he should also allow Shi'a Muslims to operate freely including in the education sector.¹⁰⁴ The skepticism within Pakatan over Maszlee increased on 26 June as he announced that due to financial constraints, he would review funding for the construction of eight of ten new Chinese schools whose funding had been approved by the previous government.¹⁰⁵ Democratic Action Party (DAP) politicians blasted his proposal, accusing him of betraying Pakatan's campaign promise to support Chinese independent schools, yet he received compliments from fellow Salafis including his political opponent, Fathul Bari.¹⁰⁶ Maszlee responded that the government was still funding the construction and relocation of eight other Chinese schools and that he was not going to halt the funding of the other eight but merely postpone it.

Asri, meanwhile, resurrected an old spat with DAP's deputy secretary general, Ramasamy Patanisamy, over Zakir Naik. Ramasamy, a Malaysian of Indian descent, had been a vocal critic of Zakir Naik; he criticised the Najib government for allowing him to stay at the expense of Malaysia's diplomatic ties with India. Ramasamy's sentiment was shared by the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf), a Hindu advocacy group.¹⁰⁷ In April 2017, Asri had responded by posting a controversial poem condemning certain "cow worshippers" for trying to "trouble our preacher, to give him to a cruel government that prays to fire, the burner of widows in another continent, which teaches people to make castes".¹⁰⁸ Hindraf reported Asri to the police for hate speech but nothing happened. On 10 July 2018, an old photo of Ramasamy sitting side by side with Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighters was circulated online. Asri urged the police to investigate the DAP leader, whom he called "a terrorist accusing others as terrorists".¹⁰⁹ On 30 July, Mujahid Rawa facilitated a truce between the two. Nevertheless, Asri continued to warn the Pakatan government that it should apply the terrorist label not just to Muslim

102 Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, "Enakmen Jenayah Syariah Kelantan", drmaza.com, 23 March 2015. In his past criticism of PAS's hudud laws in Kelantan, Asri often remarked that while it had some divine basis in Qur'an, the details of these punishments were merely the result of human reasoning and as such they might not conform to the foundational goals of shari'a. He argued that the law is heavy on "private sins" like adultery and *khalwat* but loose on the more significant "public sins" especially corruption. He also argued that it should be promoted gradually through education and establishment of a just legal system rather than being forced on the society by a self-interested political party.

103 "Strong Support for Petition amid Concerns over Incoming Minister's Salafist Leanings", freemalaysiatoday.com, 19 May 2018.

104 "Former Associate Not Surprised by Protests over Maszlee as Education Minister", freemalaysiatoday.com, 20 May 2018.

105 "Maszlee Clears Air over 10+6 Chinese Primary School Plan", thesundaily.my, 11 July 2018

106 "Chinese Schools Funding Stirs Debate", thestar.com.my, 27 July 2018.

107 In 2007, Hindraf held a big rally in Kuala Lumpur; over 30,000 people protested what they called a government persecution of Hindus following high profile forced conversion cases and the demolition of several Hindu temples to give way for construction projects. But support for Hindraf has dwindled since.

108 "In Poem, Perlis Mufti Blasts 'Cow worshippers' for Seeking Preacher's Expulsion", malaymail.com, 21 April 2017.

109 "Ramasamy Denies Tamil Tigers Link, Explained Picture Shared by Asri", freemalaysiatoday.com, 10 July 2018.

extremists but to Hindu radicals as well.¹¹⁰

Then on 6 August, Maszlee made another controversial statement suggesting that Pakatan needed to delay implementation of its pledge to recognise the certificates issued by independent Chinese schools.¹¹¹ He and others in the party feared that pushing for such a big change in such a short time could incite a backlash. But the racial dimension of education in Malaysia is always highly charged, and in this case, Maszlee's statement alienated several DAP politicians.¹¹²

The Pakatan alliance was thus highly fragile from the beginning, and its opponents from UMNO, PAS, Malay advocacy groups and traditionalist ulama who see their interests threatened by Pakatan's reform agenda were already finding common ground by late 2018.

C. *Traditionalists and UMNO Salafis vs. the Pakatan Government*

Pakatan's rise to power brought traditionalists and UMNO salafis closer, especially in their campaign against liberalism and pluralism, though it remains an uneasy tactical alliance. From the first day that the Pakatan government took office, Malay traditionalists began scrutinising its policies, which they believed would inevitably erode Malay special rights and undermine the authority of traditional ulama.

The new government caused a traditionalist uproar when it proposed to suspend JAKIM not only as part of its cost-cutting program but also in Mahathir's words, to "ensure that it would not portray Islam as a cruel and inconsiderate religion".¹¹³ On 7 August, Mujahid announced the suspension of the JAKIM-affiliated Institute of Strategic Islamic Research Institute Malaysia (IKSIM) on corruption allegations, which IKSIM strongly denied.¹¹⁴ Both bodies were dominated by traditionalists who saw the suspensions as an attack on themselves:

Liberals and literalists have one thing in common. Even though the liberals are too permissive and the literalists are too narrow-minded, they agree on one thing: disrespecting the traditional ulama authority.¹¹⁵

The Pakatan government's plan to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) drew the traditionalist leader Zamihan together with UMNO and PAS leaders and Malay advocacy groups in anti-ICERD protests.¹¹⁶ On 23 November, the government dropped plans for ratification.¹¹⁷

Meanwhile, the ongoing traditionalist effort to link Salafism and extremism was given a boost on 6 October 2018 when the Special Branch raided Dar al-Quran wal Hadeeth, a Yemeni-linked Salafi madrasah in Perlis, alleging that it was spreading Salafi jihadi ideology.¹¹⁸ An anonymous source quoted by *Utusan* daily said that the group was "protected by some influential individuals" in Perlis – a veiled reference to Asri and Fathul Bahri, who refrained from making any public statement (he continues to sit on the POTA board).¹¹⁹ Asri, on the other hand, lambasted the

110 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckrw2CNINAk>

111 Unlike the state-run Chinese schools, independent schools do not adopt the national curriculum nor teach the national Malay language.

112 "Wong Puzzled Why UEC Recognition Can Only Come about within Next 5 Years", *theborneopost.com*, 9 August 2018.

113 "PM: New Committee to Review JAKIM's Role", *malaymail.com*, 30 May 2018.

114 "RM 7.43mil of IKSIM's Expenditure Unaccounted for: Mujahid". *nst.com.my*, 7 August 2018.

115 IPAC interview with an IKSIM fellow, Kuala Lumpur, 27 August 2018.

116 The government's plan to ratify the ICERD was first announced by Mahathir during the United Nations General Assembly on 29 September 2018. PAS, UMNO and other Malay Islamic advocacy groups quickly framed it as a threat to Malay special rights, claiming that it was a ploy by DAP to abolish article 153 of the constitutions that grant special status to Malay *bumiputera*.

117 "Govt Not Ratifying ICERD", *thestar.com.my*, 24 November 2018.

118 "Special Branch Detain 7 Foreigners, 1 Malaysian with Salafi Jihadi Links", *thestar.com.my*, 6 October 2018.

119 "Salafi Jihadi Disokong Individu Berpengaruh?", *utusan.com.my*, 10 October 2018.

police and their so-called “traditionalist whisperers”.¹²⁰

Overall it is too soon to see where the Pakatan alliance is heading, but Malay and Islamist groups including PAS already have sent warning that they can turn to mass mobilisation in the streets just as their counterparts in Indonesia did if the government moves too far away from a traditionalist agenda.¹²¹ On 8 December they organised a “Himpunan 812” rally, deliberately fashioning themselves after the Indonesian “212 Movement” that brought down Ahok, the Christian governor of Jakarta in 2016.¹²² Regardless of what happens to Pakatan, it is safe to predict that a significant number of Malaysian Salafis will continue to see their interests being served more by engagement than quietism – though they will continue to be divided by party affiliation.

VI. SALAFI POLITICAL TRAJECTORIES IN MALAYSIA AND INDONESIA

The evolution of Salafism in Malaysia has taken a very different trajectory than in neighboring Indonesia, and the differences show how misguided it is to think of Salafism as a monolithic block. Malaysia’s ethnic divide and competition between PAS and UMNO for the Muslim vote has pushed Salafis there toward a level of political engagement that would be unthinkable in Indonesia.

If in Indonesia, the main faultline among Salafis has been between purists who reject any political engagement, and *haraki*, who regard involvement in politics as necessary to achieving broader goals (full application of shari’a), the line in Malaysia is between quietists and modernists, largely over theological issues, but with both camps seeing their interests served by political activism.

In post-Soeharto Indonesia, the *haraki* political agenda has aligned with those of other Islamists, namely ensuring the victory of Muslim candidates in elections and bottom-up Islamisation of the society through propagation of Salafi doctrine at the grassroots. The long-term (but very distant) aim is formal implementation of shari’a as initially formulated by the so-called Jakarta Charter at the time of independence but later set aside in the interests of national unity.¹²³

In Malaysia, Salafis show little interest in formal application of shari’a as it is considered a distinctively PAS agenda. They are far more interested in achieving political influence in their own right, dominating Islamic discourse and the Islamic bureaucracy, fighting the perception of a link between Salafism and terrorism, and targeting the Shi’a minority. To understand these differences, one needs to examine how Malaysian *tajdid* and Indonesian *haraki* compare in terms of theology; how the Saudi role differs between the two countries; why the counter-terrorism issue has mattered so much more in Malaysia; and why Shi’ism became a more prominent target in Malaysia than Indonesia.

First, while Indonesian *haraki* and Malaysian *tajdid* share some similarities in political thought, their ideologies are shaped by different sources. Educated in Medina, Indonesian *haraki* leaders were inspired by activist Saudi ulama such as Salman al-Audah who led the

120 “Bukan Perlis Sahaja”, *utusan.com.my*, 14 October 2018.

121 Hew Wai Weng, “Himpunan 812 and a New Rivalry in Malay Politics”, *newmandala.org*, 18 December 2018.

122 The “212 Movement” is named after a massive Islamist rally organised in central Jakarta on 2 December 2016. A “reunion” rally, organised on 2 December 2018, was aimed at bringing down President Jokowi in the April 2019 elections. See IPAC, “After Ahok: The Islamist Agenda in Indonesia”, Report No. 44, 6 April 2018.

123 *Ibid.*

1990s Sahwa movement to resist secularism and westernisation.¹²⁴ While Indonesian *haraki* are willing to tolerate traditionalists and Sufis who share the Islamist goals, they are much more socially conservative than Malaysian *tajdid* on issues such as sexual orientation. Indonesian *haraki*, for example, have been at the forefront of mobilising support for a new law that would make homosexuality a punishable crime. Malaysian *tajdid* figures agree that homosexuality is prohibited in Islam but propose persuasive methods as a better way to stop it.¹²⁵

One reason Malaysian modernists are relatively open-minded may be their eclectic educational backgrounds. As part of its pro-Malay development policies from the 1970s onwards, Malaysia sponsored thousands of students to study overseas, but mostly in Egypt, Jordan and the West rather than in Saudi Arabia. This control over scholarships enabled the government to tightly monitor the activities of overseas students and filter out ideologies that might oppose the state's vision of Islam. Almost none of the *tajdid* activists studied in Saudi Arabia and therefore did not inherit the Saudi antipathy towards the Muslim Brotherhood, for example. Many *tajdid* followers, including Maszlee and Asri, did part of their studies in western universities, which exposed them to wider varieties of Islamic thought.¹²⁶ Their experience living in Muslim-minority countries may have made them more eager to showcase Islamic moderation and reconcile Islamic purification with progressive positions on selected social issues.

There are several reasons that Saudi-style quietism came to be the preferred strain of Salafism in Indonesia. One is the legacy of repression of political Islam during the Soeharto era during which overt political organising with a pro-shari'a agenda was simply not possible. The growth of Salafism and the availability of Saudi oil funding for scholarships and support of local mosques and schools coincided with the height of Soeharto's powers, and apolitical religious study kept the nature of Salafi teachings under the government's radar. The *haraki* phenomenon in Indonesia is relatively recent, a result perhaps of political freedom, the use of social media and increased piety in the urban Muslim middle class.

The Saudi state has also played a different role in each country. If in Malaysia Saudi funding was mostly used to support state-sponsored Islamisation with government religious agencies being some of the biggest beneficiaries,¹²⁷ in Indonesia the relationship was much more direct, with Saudi and Kuwaiti charities funneling aid to non-government institutions.¹²⁸

Indonesian Salafis have from the outset distanced themselves from modernist organisations like Muhammadiyah – Indonesia's second largest Islamic mass organisation that was established in 1912 – that they considered too liberal and not sufficiently Salafi. *Tajdid* Salafis in Malaysia, on the other hand, proudly proclaim themselves as the successors of the modernist Kaum Muda. One possible reason is that unlike Muhammadiyah, the Malaysian Kaum Muda never became a dominant religious establishment, hence its symbolism remained an attractive anti-establishment platform for young people almost a century later.

Finally, the terrorism issue has had a much deeper impact on Salafis in Malaysia than in Indonesia. In both countries, traditionalists have tried to portray "Wahhabism" as leading to

124 Having been pardoned for his previous involvement in Sahwa, Salman al-Audah was detained again in 2017 as part of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's crackdown on 'dissents' as al-Audah was close to the Qatari-backed Brotherhood leaders. In September 2018, Saudi prosecutors sought death sentence for him.

125 "Seks Songsang dalam Dunia yang Rencam", *drmaza.com*, 24 May 2012. The persuasion strategy includes protecting the basic rights of the LGBT community as citizens and engaging them in dialogues rather than criminalising or excommunicating them.

126 Asri did a fellowship program at Oxford University in 2011 and Maszlee obtained a PhD from Durham University.

127 Shanti Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, London, 1997, p. 105.

128 Noorhaidi Hasan, *Laskar Jihad*, Ithaca, 2008. In Indonesia, Saudi influence drew on personal connections to individual Muslim leaders, particularly to the late Muhammad Natsir, founder in 1967 of the Islamist NGO Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (DDII). Beginning in 1973, DDII became the Indonesian representative of the Saudi-based World Muslim League (Rabithah al-Islam al-Alami). By the mid-1980s it was sponsoring Indonesian students to study in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

terrorism because Salafis were gaining ground at their expense. Nahdlatul Ulama leaders in Indonesia began a major anti-Wahhabi campaign in 2011 with the publication of a best-selling book, *The Bloody History of Salafi-Wahabi Sect*. But it never led to any serious anti-Salafi measures by the government because Salafis have become an accepted part of the Muslim community and because the purists took a virulent stance against terrorism. When Bali bomber Imam Samudra published a book titled *Me against the Terrorists* from his death row in 2004, Salafi cleric Luqman Ba'abduh immediately released a rebuttal entitled *They Are the Terrorists*. To this day, Luqman and other popular Salafi clerics such as Firanda Adirja maintain good relationships with the police, occasionally deliver sermons at the police mosques and actively contribute to CVE campaigns through their radio programs and online media.

In Malaysia, accusations of a Wahhabi-terrorist link have been much more politically charged, with traditionalist muftis and religious officials making the claim – and in some cases bringing about arrests – as a way of trying to stem the popularity of clerics like Dr Asri, and Salafis responding to the accusation by seeking political protection from UMNO or PAS. Ironically, it may have been the lack of any major terrorist act in Malaysia that made such politicised charges possible. In Indonesia, periodic attacks gave Salafi clerics plenty of opportunity to come forward to denounce them. The absence of extremist violence in Malaysia meant that there was no opportunity for the Salafis to so clearly promote their non-violent credentials.

Intolerance is a charge that critics have justly levelled against Salafis in both countries, but there are major differences between Indonesia and Malaysia here as well. In Indonesia, Salafi intolerance has been directed primarily at traditionalist practices, like celebration of the Prophet's Birthday (Maulid), and minority Islamic sects considered "deviant", especially Ahmadiyah and Shi'a. The anti-Shi'a campaign in particular is associated with the Saudi government's efforts to counter Iranian influence in the Muslim world more generally. But despite the hate campaign, physical persecution of Shi'a is rare in part because Shi'ism is not outlawed by the Indonesian government and also because mainstream traditionalists largely tolerate the small minority of half a million to two million people.¹²⁹

In Malaysia, Shi'ism has been systematically targeted not only by Salafis but also traditionalists and official religious departments. Some researchers attribute the "state-backed discrimination" of Shi'a in Malaysia to the country's special relations with Saudi Arabia in the first Mahathir era and during the Najib administration, and that may be a factor.¹³⁰ But because there have been many fatwas on Shi'a deviancy and because several Shi'a members have been detained under the ISA or persecuted by state religious authorities over the years, targeting them carries few repercussions – either legally or socially. Salafi-traditionalist rivalries also mean that Shi'a were a convenient scapegoat for both: traditionalists attacked Shi'a to prove that they have no link to Shi'ism and the Salafis did so to show who the "real" extremists were.

VII. CONCLUSION

Salafism may be a global *manhaj* or method of purifying Islam from idolatrous practices but the exact form it takes is shaped by its local context. The image that non-Salafis frequently hold, of local Salafis blindly following anachronistic Wahhabi tenets at the behest of Saudi donors, does not hold up in Malaysia.

129 IPAC, "The Anti-Shi'a Movement in Indonesia", Report No. 27, 27 April 2016. In the NU stronghold of East Java, there was little resistance to the few Shi'a schools there until about 2011, when a mixture of family feud, competition for followers, and the exploitation of this Sunni-Shi'a rift by local political candidates combusted in a violent outbreak against a small Shi'a community in East Java's Madura Island.

130 Mohd Faizal Musa & Tan Beng Hui, "State-Backed Discrimination against Shia Muslims in Malaysia", *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 3, 2017, pp. 308-329.

Malaysian Salafis have been more beholden to political parties than to Saudi donors; their survival strategy in an increasingly contentious environment was more engagement in elite politics rather than more grassroots outreach as in Indonesia.

The intolerance and exclusivism that have come to characterise Salafis elsewhere have been somewhat muted in Malaysia, with exception of the oneupsmanship with the traditionalists to see who can be most anti-Shi'a. The relatively low number of Saudi-trained Salafi leaders could be a factor; if so, the tripling of Saudi government scholarships as the result of King Salman's 2017 visit might presage the emergence of a younger generation of more hardline clerics. That said, even some Saudi-educated Salafis have shown flexibilities after they are involved in party politics.

It also may be the case that Salafi intolerance seems muted in Malaysia simply because it has been UMNO, PAS and traditionalists in charge of the religious bureaucracy who have taken the most controversial decisions in recent years on converts, use of the term Allah by Christians and expanded mandate of the shari'a police.

It was Prime Minister Mahathir who presided over that bureaucracy's growth in the interests of protecting UMNO against PAS encroachment and in doing so helped undermine the progressive image of Malaysian Islam that he sought to project. Now that he is back, with a Salafi as education minister but liberals well represented in the Cabinet, the question is whose influence will prevail.

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