The Changing Shape of Islamic Politics in Malaysia

Meredith L. Weiss

Malaysia has long been viewed as a model of a “moderate” Islamic polity. Muslims and non-Muslims have enjoyed the same civil and political rights, and Islamic parties have competed alongside secular ones in periodic elections, in spite of the distinctly Islamic timbre of Malaysia’s state and society. Growing domestic political volatility, however, has led many to question the viability of political moderation. Mounting Islamism among the public, reflected both in the rise of Islamic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and in the greater priority placed on public displays and enforcement of piety, has spurred and been reinforced by increasingly Islamist political parties. Discussions of political change have come to revolve largely around the place of Islam in party platforms and state institutions. The relative position of Muslim and non-Muslim citizens in the polity has altered with the incremental Islamization of state and society, and observing religious rituals has become a matter as much of state law as of personal choice for Muslims. Internationally, too, Malaysia has come to emphasize more its ties with non-Western and especially Muslim-majority states. Islam has thus become increasingly central to Malaysian politics—even though only slightly more than half the population (all ethnic Malays, and a small proportion of Indians, Chinese, and others) is Muslim.

Fostering this trend has been a combination of ideational shifts, generational change, and geopolitical transformation. Malaysia provides a valuable example of how redefinition of Islam and its relationship with other political discourses (primarily democracy and ethnicism), the rise of younger leaders who came of age amid the Islamic resurgence, and attempts to position a Muslim-majority state strategically in a world focused intently on the purported dangers of Islam force religion to the forefront of political debates. This reconfiguration makes religion a primary—and perhaps the preeminent—line of cleavage dividing the Malaysian electorate. Rather than simply a Muslim/
non-Muslim dichotomy to parallel long-dominant racial divisions, this split also cuts across Malay Muslims and has made politics increasingly contentious, volatile, and uncertain. The ultimate outcome could be a significant reorientation of Malaysia’s trajectory of political development.

By the late 1990s, the dominant perspective in Malaysian Islam appeared to be an inclusive, gradualist, and prodemocratic one. Both Muslim and non-Muslim opposition parties and activist organizations acknowledged the plural character of Malaysian society and clamored primarily for a program of enhancements to good governance and civil liberties. This common agenda gelled further when a popular, comparatively Islamist leader, Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, clashed with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and was purged from his official positions. Islamic NGOs and political parties joined with non-Islamic counterparts in a broad-based movement for social justice and political reform. Since then, however, the cooperation among these diverse partners has crumbled, and the attention of Muslim activists has been further diverted from general domestic political reforms to the U.S.-led war on terrorism and its implications for Malaysia. The governing Barisan Nasional coalition (BN, National Front) emerged still secure in its dominance, if “greener” (more Islamist) than before, having weathered its most significant challenge since independence in 1957. The BN is headed by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), with Mahathir Mohamad (1981–October 2003) and then Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (November 2003–) as prime minister. UMNO is secular-nationalist, though with increasing attention to Islamization since the 1970s; it is the linchpin of BN, and the head of UMNO has always been head of government.

Why was Malaysia’s moment of inclusionary and prodemocratic consensus disrupted? What accounts for the rise of ideological contention, volatility, and uncertainty, especially since 1999? Why has incremental Islamization resulted not in stable accommodation among Islamists and secular political forces, but in the worsening of ideological polarization and segmentation? This article will address these questions at three interrelated analytic levels. The next section below suggests that gradual Islamization has made religious values the central issue of Malaysian politics, polarizing rather than unifying society. In Malaysia, Islamization opened the way to the fragmentation of political society into three power blocs, as the debate over the role of religion inevitably had an impact upon the possibilities for democratization and market-led modernization. Three core positions soon emerged,
each with a powerful advocate. Those who desired Malaysia to become a secular state (unsurprisingly, mostly non-Malays) found their champion in the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP; secular, left-wing, primarily Chinese). Those who envisioned building a democratic state imbued with Islamic values, but retaining secular laws and institutions, coalesced around the communally organized UMNO and its partners in the ruling BN coalition. Then there were those who called for establishing an Islamic state, with full implementation of sharia (Islamic) law. They pinned their hopes on the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS, Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, which is primarily Malay; stance has ranged from Malay nationalist to staunchly Islamist; headed by Fadzil Noor [1989–2002] and by Abdul Hadi Awang since then, with Nik Aziz Nik Mat as spiritual leader). The section thus demonstrates the diverse ways to interpret the meaning of Islamic values in political and economic life, as well as the propensity of religious politics to generate disunity and contention in the political arena.

The next section then maps out these major ideological positions along two dimensions of attitudes, one regarding the establishment of an Islamic state, the other regarding democratization. This mapping of Malaysia’s ideological terrain not only clarifies and fleshes out the ideological divergences noted in the first section but also shows how variable the positions of the major political actors are on these key ideological dimensions. Competition has forced the two political actors most dominant today, UMNO and PAS, into ambiguous—if not internally contradictory—political platforms. Each has constantly to juggle new ideas and strategies to counter criticisms and to find a balance between frequently incompatible demands for Islamization and democratization coming from different societal sectors. This increasingly evident ideological inconsistency has imbued Malaysian party politics with a high degree of uncertainty and volatility: even if UMNO continues to dominate, the content of its party platform may change significantly over time.

UMNO insists that Malaysia has already met the requirements of an Islamic state as well as can be expected in a postcolonial, multireligious context, implying that there is no need for further Islamization and, by extension, for voters to support PAS. PAS, in contrast, calls for full implementation of sharia law in order to differentiate itself from the “secular” UMNO in electoral competition. At the same time, PAS promises to disavow discrimination on the basis of race, language, and even religion with the goal of bringing reform-minded, secular opposi-
tion parties into a loosely Islamic coalition. So, while UMNO blurs its secular identity in its quest for public recognition of its Islamic credentials, PAS entraps itself in an ambiguous identity of the opposite kind. The more it tries to reach out to secular reformist voters critical of UMNO, the less credible becomes its distinctiveness as an Islamic party and the more unstable the support of its “natural constituency” of Islamists. The inability of these political actors to develop a mutually agreeable political discourse offering a persuasive foundation for a democratic state imbued adequately with Islamic values and institutional forms has contributed to the worsening of political uncertainty not only at the margins of the polity but also at the very core of the Malaysian political system.

The concluding section weighs the significance of current trends in light of Malaysia’s constitutional and demographic characteristics. The continual reorientation of UMNO and PAS will continue to cause political uncertainty and undermine the durability of political alliances across elections, but it will not necessarily spark any radical and lasting electoral realignment or institutional shifts. A degree of instability, however, will likely endure as a systemic trait of new Malaysian electoral politics—the result of the ideologically ambiguous self-identity the two dominant political parties came to develop by the late 1990s.

**Islamic Politics in Malaysia**

Gradual Islamization since the early 1970s has hardly fostered a consensus on the nature of Malaysia as a modern nation-state. On the contrary, it only revitalized debate on the fundamental questions of what politics is about. The protagonists in these contests over national identity since Malaysia gained independence in the 1950s have been two political parties, the historically secular-nationalist UMNO, and the more Islamist (but also historically Malay nationalist) PAS, the latter bolstered by an assortment of Islamic NGOs. Ironically, both UMNO and PAS use the discourse of Islam and democracy strategically for electoral purposes, and both have been challenged on their interpretation of and commitment to these concepts and values. Among the most significant markers of the future shape of state and society have been questions of citizenship and participation in an Islamic state, of the extent and nature of democracy in Malaysia, and of Malaysia’s position within the international state system and its foreign policy priorities. Islam touches on all three questions, making Malaysia’s drift toward
Islamization a catalyst not for consensus-building but for ideological polarization, rivalry, and instability.

Citizenship in an Islamic State

Islamization has kept the issue of citizenship contentious. This debate hearkens back to the early years of independent Malaya. Then, non-Malays fought to achieve citizenship within a Malayan political community without precluding their loyalty to the particular ethnic community to which they belonged, whereas Malay nationalists defined the Malay nation and state as synonymous, leaving little space for non-Malays' citizenship. The Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), one of the core parties comprising the BN and the dominant political party among ethnic Chinese, eventually reached a compromise with UMNO to acquire non-Malay Malaysian citizenship, but not on genuinely equal footing with ethnic Malays. Heng Pek Koon explains, “In conceding [the] special position of the Malay rulers, Islam as the state religion, Malay as the sole national language, and special rights treatment for Malays—the MCA had, in fact, acquiesced to Malay hegemonic status in the new nation state.”

However, that did not put to rest the question of religion and citizenship. After more than four decades of independence, the question of whether Muslims and non-Muslims should enjoy equal rights as citizens in an Islamic state still remains a primary line of political cleavage. In 2001, in a soon-retracted pamphlet, “Malaysia Adalah Sebuah Negara Islam” (Malaysia is an Islamic state), the government used Al-Mawardi’s eleventh-century text, Al-ahkam as-sultaniyya, to argue that non-Muslims could be appointed as government ministers. The same text, however, warned that Muslims must closely watch over non-Muslims, as well as specifying special taxes to be levied on non-Muslims living in an Islamic state and providing safeguards for the privileged status of Islam and Muslims. As Patricia Martinez explains, some of these practices are incorporated into modern Malaysia’s government policies, like restrictions placed on the building of places of non-Islamic worship. She concludes that the BN’s expressed vision of the Malaysian nation-state and the regime’s trajectory thus far may “result in non-Muslim Malaysians becoming officially second-class citizens,” in contravention of the Malaysian constitution.

This Muslim/non-Muslim dichotomy also resurfaces—albeit in another form—in PAS’s vision of an Islamic state. Though the party has expressed sensitivity to the rights and status of non-Muslims, PAS
envisions sharia law as superceding the current constitution.\(^8\) PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang clarified in August 2002 that state leadership and fundamental policy areas would be the exclusive domain of Muslims, though non-Muslims (\textit{dhimmi}) would be allowed to express their views and perhaps influence government decisions. Non-Muslims would also participate in judicial cases involving non-Muslims and choose political leaders in predominantly non-Muslim areas of the country. In addition, the establishment of an Islamic state would not prevent non-Muslims from enjoying basic political, social, and economic rights.\(^9\) However, the real extent of political rights and status granted non-Malays in PAS’s (or, for that matter, even UMNO’s) conception of an Islamic state remains unclear, even if they were protected as a class of tax-paying, “contractual” citizens.\(^10\)

Naturally, this privileging of Islam and Muslims by UMNO and PAS has provoked intense political countercurrents. Farish Noor captures the moral critique of the notion of Islamic statehood. Speaking for the interests of non-Muslim Malaysian citizens, he argues:

In a secular state, concepts like citizenship, nationality and sovereignty . . . are framed within a secular framework where one’s identity is based on the status of the subject as a private individual rather than the member of a faith community. Conversely, membership to a religious state entails a transition to a new ideational framework . . . where those who belong to religion X will be the “natural citizens” of that state and others not . . . In such a religious state, the status and identity of those who do not belong to the dominant faith community will always be hanging in the balance.\(^11\)

To sum up, especially in PAS’s poorly specified conception of an Islamic state, the rights and status of non-Muslims (and of women of all religions) remain unresolved at best and dubious at worst.

\textit{Islam and Democracy}

Islamization has also forced a rethinking of the relationship between Islam and democracy and the role of Islamic values in the building of modern political institutions. Like the concept of citizenship and national identity, questions of democracy and \textit{keadilan} (justice) have been amenable to diverse and even contradictory understandings. One group of liberal political activists trying to establish a genuinely secular state has strenuously tried to reinterpret or recreate Islam as an essentially democratic discourse in order to harness it for political lib-
eralization. Among them is scholar-activist Chandra Muzaffar, who ardently argues that universal values like freedom, justice, and equality are all integral parts of the teachings of classical Islamic philosophy and embedded in the Quran and sharia law. According to him, it has been repressive political elites in Muslim societies as well as intolerant new Islamic movements that have impeded the development of civil society based on this generally prodemocratic Islamic value system. In Malaysia, these obstacles have impeded the progress of “civil Islam,” which Robert Hefner defines as a tradition “affirming democracy, voluntarism, and a balance of countervailing powers in a state and society [and] embracing the ideals of civil society,” rather than “a monolithic ‘Islamic’ state.” Over time, “uncivil” Islamist elements have spread throughout Malaysia as well as the rest of Southeast Asia, some linked at least loosely with PAS or radical Islamic NGOs. Still, the ideological differences between “militant extremists” and the moderate mainstream Muslim majority in Malaysia are substantial and significant. As Syed Ahmad Hussein explains: “Muslim politics involves the competition between dissenting Islamists and the Muslim elite in government in shaping the imagination of Muslims as well as to gain political power.”

The presumed compatibility of Islam and democracy is associated with a discourse of “progressive Islam” that dates back to late-nineteenth-century reform movements in Malaysia and Indonesia. Farish Noor argues that the concept of progressive Islam has always been “highly normative, descriptive, prescriptive and ideological in content and form,” as well as politicized. He deems the progressive Islamic project “a prime example of top-down social engineering, where the discourse of Islam has been wrestled and defined by statist intellectuals, bureaucrats, technocrats and securocrats” to make it more compatible with economic development and nation-building. State-managed Islamization has yielded a largely tolerant, nonviolent, pluralist society in Malaysia, in which even controversial groups like the Muslim feminist organization Sisters in Islam may thrive. From a progressive Islamic perspective, the problem is not Islamization per se but when Islamization is distorted by political forces so it is “marked not by the universal ethical message of the religion—that is, of justice, tolerance, equality, and freedom—but rather by growing intolerance, repressive teachings and practices, and the shrinking of democratic space.”

Geopolitical shifts have encouraged a rupture in Malaysian discourses. The late 1990s saw a resurgence of progressive Islam and attention to the compatibility of Islam and democracy. This tendency
was strengthened as PAS worked to buttress its electoral alliance with secular opposition parties to challenge the UMNO-led BN coalition. Especially after the September 11 attacks in the United States, by contrast, attention has been focused on the possibility of the rise and spread of militant Islam in Malaysia and the region. However, while those attacks heightened the sense of danger, Malaysia’s most recent crackdown on Islamic extremism actually predates the U.S.-led war on Al-Qaida and terrorism. Already in mid-2000, the government reported its discovery of a massive arms cache and violent standoff with members of the 1,800-strong militant Al-Ma’unah sect. The government claimed that the “deviant” Islamic sect had planned to foment political instability and ultimately topple the state, and it arrested twenty-seven members. Mahathir went on to accuse PAS of collusion with the radical Islamist group—a claim PAS denied.18

Then in August 2001, following a spate of previous arrests, the Malaysian police detained ten alleged members of the underground Kesatuan Mujahideen Malaysia (KMM, Malaysian Mujahideen Group), seven of whom were also PAS members.19 The government claimed that the group aimed to topple the Malaysian regime and establish an Islamic state. Several dozen additional alleged KMM members were subsequently detained. Just before the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, Mahathir escalated the sense of threat by announcing the discovery of a network of extremists bent on establishing a united Islamic government in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Put on the political defensive, PAS leaders denied any party connection with the KMM and asserted that they would expel any of their members found guilty of promoting violence.20 Still, individuals from both PAS and UMNO acknowledge that the KMM does exist, describing it as a group of graduates of Pakistani schools, even if they disagree over its activities or aims.21 The Malaysian police have linked the group with a botched bank robbery, the assassination of a state assemblyman, and attacks on Christian churches and Hindu temples.

To make the situation even worse for PAS, some Malaysians were found to be involved in violent incidents in Indonesia. The Malaysian cell of Indonesia-based Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), moreover, constituted the largest in the JI network, with around 200 members, many of them very well-educated. That the Malaysian JI cell served as a conduit between JI and Al-Qaida in Afghanistan, established front companies to channel funds and procure weapons and ammonium nitrate for bombs, assisted militant actions in Maluku, and ran a training camp for the Malaysian and Singapore cells only strengthened Mahathir’s position in domestic
politics. Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi warned that Malaysia had become a center of Islamic terrorism. Although evidence of the existence, activities, and link to PAS of the KMM has been sketchy, the government’s crackdown has evoked comparatively little opposition, given widespread societal fear of the specter of radical Islamic militancy.

To arrest the apparent drift toward extremism, Mahathir announced plans for establishing a compulsory “national service program” for all eighteen-year-old male citizens. Although it is a costly and controversial initiative, as one UMNO official explained, “It’s the best way to force the races to mix [with one another]. . . . And it’s a good way to shape young minds.” The government has also pursued various modifications to the national education system, with the aim both of undercutting private religious schools that Mahathir said were “brainwashing” students to oppose the government and of fostering greater ethnic integration. With these changes, private Islamic education would come directly under state regulation. Under the pretext of ensuring “quality education” for all students, the government has temporarily stopped funding private Islamic schools and is making plans to absorb the approximately 126,000 students enrolled at private Islamic schools into “secular” public schools, where any Islamic education can be closely monitored. Moreover, to redress ethnic separatism, non-Malays would be encouraged or forced to enroll at national schools, too, rather than attend private schools. Making national schools more palatable especially for ethnic Chinese students would be a shift to a greater emphasis on English-medium rather than Malay-medium education. Even so, such a change in education policy was controversial given the political capital invested over the years in the maintenance of vernacular education. That the regime pursued these initiatives in spite of their high costs vividly showed its determination to control the flow of ideas and discourses related to Islam.

Foreign Policy

Another dimension along which Islamization has had and will likely continue to have a polarizing effect is Malaysia’s relationship with other states. As part of affirming his government’s pro-Muslim stance, Mahathir cultivated close relations with Muslim nations, promoted transnational Muslim cooperation, projected his government as a mediator in the Philippine government’s long-running conflict with Muslim separatists, and worked to assume a leading role in the Organization of
the Islamic Conference (OIC). Particularly since the general elections of 1999, the government has pressed for OIC unity, even proposing the formation of a common Islamic currency and interstate banking network and calling for the unified bloc representation of Muslim countries in the World Trade Organization. It is likely that Mahathir’s successor in November 2003, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, will continue in the same vein.

From the regime’s perspective, however, this increasing of ties to the Islamic world has to be balanced against other political and economic imperatives, including the need to participate in the Western-dominated international trade and financial regime. Within the post–September 11 international context, too much of a tilt toward “Islamic unity” inevitably endangers Malaysia’s relationship with non-Muslim states, including the United States, on whom it significantly depends for economic prosperity. Thus, the BN government has been careful not to push the Islamization of Malaysian foreign policy to the extreme in spite of ideological pressure from some quarters in society to show unity with the Islamic world against the U.S. war on terror.

Moreover, taking a more extremist stance would not only risk confounding Malaysia’s relations with its immediate neighbors in Southeast Asia, who are even more caught up in counterterrorism efforts, but also problematize even more the issue of Malaysia’s national identity. Because the boundaries of the ummah (Islamic community) are defined in terms of religion and hence not necessarily coterminous with the geographic borders of juridical states, the Islamization of foreign policy—if unchecked—could alienate Indonesia and the Philippines if it required Malaysia to take sides with secessionist Islamist movements there in the name of post–September 11, pan-Muslim solidarity. Furthermore, Malaysia’s national identity has long been marked by a tension between the cause of Malay unity in the sense of the Indonesia Raya (Greater Indonesia, or union of the ethnic Malay peoples of Southeast Asia) proposed as Indonesia and Malaya contemplated post-colonial arrangements in the 1940s, on the one hand, and maintenance of the existing political boundaries between the two countries established under colonial rule on the other. Too much Islamization could rekindle this postcolonial debate to the detriment of regional stability and national identity.

Domestically, the political fallout from a pro-Islamic foreign policy could be particularly serious for Malay-Chinese relations. Even with the current restraints on the Islamization of foreign policy, the predominantly-Chinese DAP has joined other advocates of secular state-
hood to show their uneasiness. The DAP national publicity secretary Ronnie Liu protested in September 2002 "that the pronouncement of Malaysia as an Islamic state has resulted in the country being placed on the US Government's blacklist of countries deemed to pose a threat to US national security." To protect Malaysian national interests, he argued, the DAP opposed the characterization of Malaysia by both UMNO and PAS leaders as an Islamic state and appealed to the general public regarding the need to maintain a good working relationship with the international community.

To sum up, Islam has meant different things to different people. Its increasing relevance to everyday political affairs has given rise to competing discourses on questions of citizenship, national identity, democracy, and the state's policy orientation. UMNO articulated its policy of gradual Islamization as a means to meet the electoral challenge of PAS, but by doing so it inadvertently made Islam an even more contentious political concept, with profound implications for the future shape of the Malaysian polity.

**Political Actors**

The key protagonists in the contest over the reconstruction of Islam as a modern political discourse have been UMNO and PAS. These two political parties have used diverse ideas rooted in Islam strategically to justify the type of polity, society, and foreign policy they envision as the appropriate goals of Malaysia's modernization. Although the most obvious beneficiary of the increasing political cachet of Islam has been PAS, careers have been made or unmade in UMNO, too, based on religious credentials and commitments. More than anyone else, Mahathir, prime minister from 1981 through 2003, was particularly dexterous in harnessing ever-evolving Islamic discourses for his political goals, playing up the difference between PAS's seeming radicalism and UMNO's carefully crafted, devout, but pragmatic stance in order to maintain BN hegemony in the face of a persistent Islamist challenge.

However, the availability of new ways to interpret the political meanings of Islam strengthened the hands of Mahathir's rivals, too. These new interpretations enabled PAS to build a more broad-based electoral coalition with other parties and fostered a new generation of Malay leaders more attuned to Islam than to anticolonial nationalism as a basis for ethnic unity. Their political activism led to the flourishing of Islamic-oriented NGOs espousing varying approaches to Islam and
conceptions of its place within the larger polity. These demographic, discursive, and geopolitical shifts over time have changed the tenor and focus of “political Islam,” or the drive to bring state institutions more fully in line with quranic dictates.

The examination of key political actors and trends in Malaysia suggests that the existence of an oppositional challenge based on Islamism in a Muslim-majority state is likely to tie the government’s hands, narrowing its political options such that a degree of Islamization is all but unavoidable. To counter opposition Islamists’ accusation that it is secular or even heretic, the ruling party must prove its Islamic “credentials” by disavowing secular pragmatism. Even then, however, questions regarding the parameters, content, and standard-bearers of political Islam become ever more contentious as ruling-party and opposition forces compete to harness the same religious belief system to strengthen their own political credibility and weaken that of their opponents. This competition readily escalates into fundamental debates over the nature of Islam as a political discourse, its compatibility with political liberalization, and its relationship with foreign policy.

Islamic NGOs and Civil Society

Bridging the gap between the heightened religiosity of society and electoral politics have been Islamic NGOs. Most prominent among these in terms of both size and political impact has been Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM, Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement). The organization’s ventures include a network of Islamic schools that annually educate 20,000 students, a corporate arm (Koperasi Belia Islam), and substantial property holdings. ABIM’s nationwide complex of state and district branches stretches down to the grassroots, with a 1,000-strong staff and around 60,000 members. Most members are university graduates, often brought into the dakwah (Islamic proselytization) movement in their undergraduate years through the Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Pelajar Islam Malaysia (PKPIM, National Muslim Students’ Association), which spawned ABIM. Most have been beneficiaries of federal affirmative-action policies that benefit bumiputera, or Malays and other indigenous peoples, in university admissions, career advancement, and other areas. ABIM has produced leaders of PAS, UMNO, and the more recently formed Parti Keadilan Nasional (Keadilan, National Justice Party; multiracial but Malay-dominated; centered around former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim and headed by his wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail). Among them are Anwar Ibrahim (who
helped found ABIM in 1971, then led the organization from 1972 until he resigned to join UMNO; past PAS president (until his death in 2002) Fadzil Noor; his deputy and successor Abdul Hadi Awang; and Keadilan supreme council member Ghazali Basri.

ABIM generally advocates an incremental approach to social and political change. The organization has been active in a variety of campaigns for human rights and civil liberties. ABIM is officially nonpartisan and forbids its officers from simultaneously holding office in any political party. Over the years, however, changes in ABIM's approach have fostered shifting associations with different political parties. Initially, the organization was closely linked with PAS, and many current and former ABIM members are PAS members or leaders. Particularly in the 1970s and early 1980s, echoing PAS's party line, ABIM lambasted UMNO for superficial and insufficient Islamization. The NGO criticized the ruling party's un-Islamic practices and challenged it to develop Islamic leadership and policies locally and internationally. As Saliha Hassan describes, ABIM's "Islamic revivalism discourse addressed almost all aspects of private life and public life. . . . Although it has not declared its aim for the establishment of an Islamic state in Malaysia as openly as PAS does, it is assumed that that is its preference and final aim."

Nonetheless, when Anwar Ibrahim was co-opted into UMNO shortly before the April 1982 elections, he brought many of his ABIM supporters with him. A number of them subsequently rose alongside the fast-advancing Anwar to high positions in the government and state bureaucracy. ABIM's denunciation of the government thereafter become more muted. Although it continued to criticize UMNO's policies and projects, its preference for development along Islamic lines was no longer far removed from the government's own stance.

However, when Mahathir purged his deputy and heir apparent in 1998 for alleged corruption and sexual misconduct, Anwar and his followers organized a massive sociopolitical reform movement under the name Reformasi. ABIM assumed a key role in the movement, resuming its traditional oppositional stance. ABIM members generally allied with PAS or with newcomer Keadilan, a political party centered around Anwar and the social justice concerns of the Reformasi movement. This time, along with other NGOs as well as opposition parties, ABIM called for justice, civil liberties, and a change of government. ABIM has since scaled back its alliance with opposition political parties, especially in light of internal disputes within Keadilan, taking steps to reassert its nonpartisanship. Still, ABIM remains a prominent political force.
The steady development of ABIM as an organized, politicized institution reflects a broader trend of gradual Islamization that has pervaded Malaysian civil society since the 1970s. University students especially have increased their involvement with campus dakwah organizations and changed their attitudes, priorities, and dress (most clearly evident in the increasing number of women donning Arab-style garb). Muslim students face strong peer pressure to be visibly devout, to support Islamic politics, and to make religious activities and activism a central part of their undergraduate lives. While also apparent in the general public, these religious pressures are particularly intense on university campuses, which have become increasingly Malay (and hence Muslim) in terms of demographics, given both rising Malay education levels and preferential quotas favoring bumiputera in college admissions.

Ironically, the growth of Islamic-oriented NGOs has forced secular political activists and NGOs to become more vocal and politically engaged, too. Among the more vehement critics of the dakwah movement in recent years is Farish Noor, who vociferously warns against the dangers of "juvenile theocracy" and "the gradual colonisation of universities by the home-grown Talibani of Malaysia."37 Farish admonishes against the "jihad mentality" now increasingly prevalent in Malaysia. He explains, "The vocabulary of political debates is already all about jihad and martyrdom and heaven and hell. That kind of rhetoric is dangerously inflammatory."38 By contrast, Zainah Anwar suggests the tide may be turning in a more progressive direction, given rising public awareness of the dangers of radical Islamist politics, the public's increasingly close and critical scrutiny of controversial decisions by the PAS-led government in the two states the party controls, and popular displeasure with PAS's call for action against the United States. Overall, she concludes, "the opening of public space for debate on Islam and Islamic issues in the past few years augurs well for democratic politics and the development of a more progressive Islam."39

Over the past few years, controversy has raged especially over the rights of Muslims and non-Muslims to express critical views of Islam or the way it is interpreted or practiced in Malaysia. Muslim critics of hudud laws (the Islamic criminal code) or other aspects of Islamic statehood are liable to be lambasted as akin to kafir (infidels) and non-Muslims to be told they have no right to comment. This lack of tolerance was most visible in a January 2002 memorandum the Persatuan Ulama Malaysia (PUM, Malaysian Muslim Scholars' Association) presented to the Conference of Rulers (comprising the traditional sultans,
Meredith L. Weiss

(though, notably, not ABIM or PAS), the memorandum requested punitive action against six writers for denigrating Islam and the ulama (religious scholars). The individuals identified as reprobates included academics Farish Noor, Kassim Ahmad, and Patricia Martinez; Sisters in Islam executive director Zainah Anwar; columnist Akbar Ali; and lawyer Malik Ithias. Shortly thereafter, PUM also adopted a resolution decrying the “Western-oriented” mass media and individuals for insulting and misrepresenting Islam and called upon the Conference of Rulers and other authorities to defend the sanctity and integrity of Islam.

Such calls to curtail freedom of speech have not been limited to civil societal groups. Around the same time, the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia called for banning writers without “in-depth knowledge” of Islam from expressing their views on the religion. Provisions for enforcement included holding special briefings for newspaper editors and vetting freelance columnists’ credentials. Sisters in Islam criticized this move toward “theocratic dictatorship” as an “attempt by the religious authorities to monopolise the discourse on Islam in Malaysia [and restrict it] to only those who subscribe to one particular point of view in Islam.”

Overall, then, nonstate actors, especially Islamic NGOs, play important roles in determining the tone of and space for Islamic discourse, but not without a high degree of internal dissension.

UMNO

UMNO’s stand on the role of Islam in politics has undergone critical changes over the years. The ruling party was responsible for the original program of gradual Islamization launched to co-opt the dakwah movement after it started gaining force on university campuses in the early 1970s. Initially, the dakwah movement was led by Malay university students exposed to the transnational resurgence of Islamic thought, but over time the movement penetrated major national institutions and took root in the public sphere, bringing Islam to the forefront of politics. As a party representing Muslims but also constituting a comparatively secular, Malay-nationalist linchpin of the ruling BN coalition, UMNO could not legitimately deny the primacy of Islam as a basis for political organization and ad-deen (way of life). Instead, UMNO struggled to shape, control, and tame the forces of Islamization to serve its political goal of building a moderately Islamic polity. Since
the 1980s, David Camroux explains, this has involved the state’s attempt to “channel the Islamic resurgence along a modernizing path linked to the secular objective of Malaysia becoming a fully industrialized country by the year 2020.” He describes UMNO’s approach as “both reactive and proactive.” The party asserts its Islamic credentials in order to “appeal to traditional concerns,” but at the same time, its articulation of “a [secular] Malaysian model of modernization is designed to shift the agenda of ideological debate onto ground in which a ‘fundamentalist’ doctrine would have no resonance.”

An important part of the regime’s strategy to co-opt and control Islamization involved the recruitment of former dakwah activist Anwar Ibrahim into UMNO in 1982 to combat an Islamist opposition challenge, especially from PAS. Anwar rose rapidly through the ranks, being elected a vice president of UMNO and head of the party’s youth wing within a year; later holding several key ministerial portfolios; and ultimately becoming deputy prime minister in December 1993. Under the leadership of Anwar and Prime Minister Mahathir, the government introduced the policy framework Penerapan Nilai-nilai Islam (assimilation of Islamic values) to reinforce such qualities as good character, fairness, and accountability in government administration. Although this framework neither represented a radical redirection of policy nor was intended to formalize a full-fledged Islamic state, it still constituted “the most purposeful expression of an Islamization process that UMNO had ever made.” The government also introduced Islamic reforms in the financial sector, establishing Islamic insurance schemes and usury-free banking; strengthened Islamic education policies; stressed the observance of Islamic rituals in official government settings; sponsored centers for research and teaching on Islam; and enhanced Islam-related programming in the state-controlled media. However, as part of its perennial task of balancing and moderation, the government also stressed multiethnic power-sharing and muhibbah (cultural and religious tolerance and accommodation), even as language and education policies increasingly emphasized the preeminent place of Malays in state, society, and national culture.

UMNO in a sense has been trying to prove to the general public that it is more “Islamic” than what its opponents make it out to be. The ruling political party’s embracing Islamic values was less by choice than the byproduct of electoral competition. The primary challenge to its political hegemony being an Islamist one, UMNO finds itself forced to take on a more Islamic timbre to defend its constituency. Because of the reactive or defensive nature of its Islamization strategy, UMNO has
taken on PAS in struggling for the “hearts and minds” of the Malay electorate less by contesting the rightness of Islamic governance in multireligious Malaysia than by excoriating PAS’s particular “brand” of Islam as inferior or insisting that the party can be trusted to uphold Islamic precepts and institutions at least as well as PAS. As part of this strategy, Mahathir’s UMNO lavished money on mosques, the International Islamic University, state-run dakwah organizations, and the like. More recently (described below), to negate the raison d’être of PAS and its electoral platform, Mahathir declared Malaysia to be already an Islamic state in spirit as well as in reality. Also, in the face of September 11 and the subsequent war on terror, he increased his efforts to project Malaysia as a benignly moderate (i.e., not conducive to terrorism) Islamic state at home and abroad.

Though PAS deemed these institutional and ideological efforts at Islamization too moderate, they appear quite radical from a secular perspective. Farish Noor argues that “it was the UMNO-led government’s Islamisation policy which began in the 1980s that really helped to normalize political religion in everyday life, marginalizing whatever hopes there might have been for a secular political alternative in the country.” Likewise, Greg Barton laments that the staffing of “official offices of Islamic authority” with government appointees beholden to the regime in power has precluded the development of the kind of “cultural Islam” (or Islamism directed more at social life than government policies) one finds nurtured among the independent ulama of Indonesia. As a result, Islam in Malaysia constitutes both a comparatively conservative, pro-establishment force and a rubric for galvanizing the political forces disaffected by and disillusioned with the way the government has “controlled and contrived most expressions of Islamicity in official Malaysian life.”

Previously, Malaysians believed “that this clash over the interpretation and definition of Islam could be confined within the parameters of the Malay Muslim political arena.” Now, with Islamization and the polarization surrounding it, Islam has “become a Malaysian debate,” with consequences for all citizens.

These tensions came to a head in late 2001. Mahathir tried boldly to undercut PAS and obviate its calls for regime change by declaring Malaysia an Islamic state. In September 2001, Malaysia’s Ministry of Information released “Malaysia Adalah Sebuah Negara Islam” (Malaysia is an Islamic state). Dubbed the “929 declaration” after the date of its announcement, this pamphlet asserted that “the reality of Malaysia as an Islamic state is something that can no longer be denied.” The ministry followed up with another ideological offensive,
“Penjelasan mengenai Malaysia sebagai Negara Islam” (Explanation about Malaysia as an Islamic state). At the crux of the government’s argument is its insistence that Malaysia meets the requirements of an Islamic state as well as can be expected in a postcolonial context, where the state still maintains the judicial-legal institutions entrenched under and inherited from the British colonial era. Governance, including military defense, is primarily in the hands of Muslims; the laws of an Islamic ruler and Islamic jurisprudence are enforced; and the ulama recognize Malaysia as an Islamic state.52 Hence, there is no need to vote for PAS and its more radical vision of Islamic politics. In Mahathir’s words, “There are no controversies when I declare that Malaysia is an Islamic state. . . . I have just declared what is already a fact. Because PAS played up this issue, we have to explain that we are already an Islamic state, [so] there is no need to want to set up an Islamic state.”53

PAS lashed back at Mahathir, criticizing his attempt to make Malaysia “an instant Islamic state, like instant noodles.”54 Former lord president Tun Salleh Abas, by contrast, questions the consistency of the government’s stance: “If [Mahathir and UMNO] think Malaysia is an Islamic country, then why do they object against PAS’ attempt to implement Islamic laws?” He clarifies, “it is right to say that Malaysia is an Islamic country, population wise, because the majority of her citizens are Muslims. But it is wrong to say that we have an Islamic government.”55 According to PAS, only when the sharia is fully implemented and corruption, injustice, and other ills of UMNO rule are eradicated will Malaysia become a truly Islamic state. PAS has been vague, though, about how it would bring this vision to fruition.56

A flood of protest from societal groups and political parties promptly forced the government to withdraw the 929 declaration.57 Overall, however, the response to the declaration among the general public was comparatively muted. Examining letters to the editor (a common locus for political debate) of mainstream English and Malay newspapers, Mustafa Anuar found that “the response tended to be critical of PAS rather than directly commenting on, if not criticizing, Mahathir’s announcement.”58 Similarly, Patricia Martinez explains that few representatives of non-Muslim religious organizations and non-Malay-based parties in the ruling BN coalition “expressed either concern [about] or outright rejection of the notion that Malaysia was an Islamic state, or that non-Muslims had nothing to worry about.”59 So mild a response suggests the level of ideational and demographic change that has occurred thus far in Malaysia: the priority placed upon Islam by both UMNO and PAS has come to be expected and, at a min-
imum, tolerated as inevitable, opposed from an acknowledged minority position, or seen as not inconsistent with constitutional government. The dualistic self-identity of UMNO as a devout but pragmatic political party has put it in a complex place in international relations. The regime has tried carefully to position Malaysia internationally “as the fruit of a happy union between strict Islam and modern capitalism,” equally amenable to Western trading partners and to members of the OIC. Despite Mahathir’s perennial criticism of the United States and the “West” more broadly, the war on terrorism has provided him with a real boost. Indeed, “September 11th, in a way, has been a godsend to Dr. Mahathir, allowing him to crack down on ‘extremists’ without a peep of protest from the West, even if some of them are merely opponents of the government.”

Mahathir had accumulated international infamy over the years by blaming jealous foreigners for conspiring to cause Malaysia’s economic and political troubles, so his support for the U.S.-led initiative against international terrorism (albeit not for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq) carried a certain irony. Prior to September 11, support for the BN had been eroding, as evidenced in several by-elections and by the extent of factionalism and disgruntlement within UMNO and among the BN coalition partners. By the middle of that year, Mahathir had already launched a crackdown on suspected KMM militants, only to find that the public remained largely skeptical of the allegations made against KMM and saw the crackdown as a mere political ploy to discredit the Islamist opposition. After September 11, the public mood drastically altered. Even Musa Hitam, chair of the Malaysian Human Rights Commission, declared that human rights must take a backseat to the state’s efforts to maintain national security.

Violent terrorist attacks in neighboring Southeast Asian countries strengthened public support for forceful, proactive state action against possible Islamic militants and heightened public suspicion about the true intentions of PAS should it come to power. On the global stage, Mahathir took full advantage of the opportunity to present Malaysia as an exemplary, moderate Muslim country, even going so far as to agree to host an antiterrorist center in Kuala Lumpur. He could thus simultaneously accomplish three tasks: attack Islamic radicalism, especially as allegedly represented by PAS; uphold Malaysia’s Islamic credentials domestically and internationally; and curry favor with countries like the United States. Having credible allies in the Muslim world not only helped the United States in its counterterrorism efforts but also tempered perceptions of its waging a “war on Islam.”
Opposition Parties

The Malay opposition, by contrast, has evolved toward two divergent positions on the issue of Islamic statehood and democracy. Islamic revivalism has brought heightened emphasis on Islamic rituals, implementation of Islamic legal codes, and strengthening of Islamic praxis in all areas of social, political, and economic life. For example, in the two states PAS governs, the party has required that Muslim women cover their heads, restricted gambling and the sale of alcohol, and tried to implement *hudud* law (though barred from doing so by the Malaysian constitution). This shift may be traced back to the death of progressive Islamist former PAS president Burhanuddin al-Helmy in 1969 after over a dozen years at the party’s helm and especially to a change of leadership in the early 1980s.

During his party presidency, Burhanuddin had promoted a “synthesis of reformist Islam, democracy, nationalism and socialism,” a combination of moderate goals that came to dominate PAS ideology for more than twenty years, including five years in coalition with UMNO in the BN. The party changed course in 1982 when Burhanuddin’s successor was ousted and strident Malay nationalist Mohammad Asri Muda assumed the PAS leadership. At that point, a younger and more radical cohort came to prominence. Many of them were educated in Saudi Arabia or Egypt, inspired by the Iranian revolution, and emboldened by the vision of Islamic governance that the revolution symbolized. A significant proportion of this “ulama faction” had been previously active in ABIM and other *dakwah* organizations and “were dedicated to the cause [of] Islam and therefore greatly displeased with the manner Islam had been subordinated to Malay culture and nationalism.” By the mid-1980s, a transformed PAS had come to call for a “total, pristine, and unadulterated Islam” as the basis for society and governance rather than the pragmatic blend of Islamism and pro-Malay ethnicism the party previously touted. PAS contested the 1986 elections with the slogan “PAS—the party of Allah.” The party met with a dismal result. Non-Malays saw little cause to support PAS, and many Malays were alienated by its denunciation of Malay nationalism and pro-Malay affirmative-action policies as *assabiah* (anti-Islamic parochialism). In spite of this electoral setback, many within PAS as well as in some Islamic NGOs and smaller Islamic parties still support uncompromising Islamism.

In contrast to this comparatively radical approach, a more moderate discourse stressing the prodemocratic predilections of Islamic gov-
ernance and the possibility of cooperation between Islamic and secular parties has also taken root in Malaysia. This discourse highlights universal values like judicial independence, economic redistribution, and human rights and sees them as compatible with not only secular philosophies but also religious texts, including the Quran. This approach really developed after a moderate faction under Fadzil Noor took over PAS leadership in 1989; Fadzil remained party president until his death in 2002. As of the early 1990s, this moderate faction tried to make PAS more tolerant and friendly toward both Malay Muslims and others, as well as to focus more on issues of democracy and social justice than on the prompt establishment of an Islamic state (negara Islam).66

In 1999, many younger Malay leaders in both PAS and Keadilan took this approach in arguing the viability of their parties’ alliance with the predominantly Chinese DAP and the socialist-leaning Parti Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People’s Party) in the Barisan Alternatif coalition (BA, Alternative Front; includes Keadilan, PAS, and the Parti Rakyat Malaysia [PRM, Malaysian People’s Party; formerly socialist and still left-wing and multiracial but Malay-dominated]). Then, “for the first time, PAS talked about Islam through the language of democracy and human rights, respect for the rule of law, freedom of speech and expression, the right to live free from fear and threat, [and protection of] the rights of all communities.”67 Previously, such a coalition had not seemed feasible as PAS refused to renounce its goal of establishing an Islamic state and non-Malay parties staunchly opposed that aim. Prior alliances hence had to be indirect. Most notably, PAS joined a more secular Malay party, Semangat ’46, in the Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (Muslim Unity Front) in 1990, and the latter rather than PAS forged links with non-Malay parties like the DAP.68

Even the BA coalition built in 1999 did not specify an explicit understanding of the political role of Islam. PAS toned down its rhetoric but did not renounce its goal of installing an Islamic state. The 1999 opposition front’s manifesto, “Ke Arah Malaysia Yang Adil” (Toward a just Malaysia), pledged only to “create a favorable atmosphere—through the provision of infrastructure, education and legislation—towards affirmation of Islam as a way of life among Muslims, while ensuring that the rights of non-Muslims to practice their respective religions or beliefs continue to be guaranteed.”69 The incumbent BN played up this lack of clarity as part of a fear campaign to dissuade non-Muslims and more moderate Muslims from supporting the opposition coalition.70
These two trends, one more radical and the other moderate, are not wholly incompatible. Most important, “true” Islamic governance is defined by many advocates as precluding racial discrimination: individuals may occupy different statuses in the polity based on religion, but not based on race or ethnicity. In its party constitution, PAS promises to act fairly toward all Malaysians and to promote interracial harmony, and the party has disavowed discrimination on the basis of race, language, nation, and even (somewhat problematically) religion from the outset. PAS officials have pledged regularly (if somewhat inconsistently) at least since the mid-1980s to abolish Malay special rights and bumiputera privileges if the party comes to power and have accepted the possibility of even a non-Malay prime minister, though they are less prepared to accept one who is not Muslim. A multiracial perspective is broadly acceptable to both moderates and radicals in the party. Moreover, the Reformasi movement’s emphasis on “justice” could capture more theocratically as well as secularly inclined Islamists. The core of that movement had less to do with the regime’s secular nature per se than with issues of socioeconomic justice, judicial integrity, and accountable governance, all of which were said to be mandated by Islam and upheld more consistently by PAS than by UMNO. This message was not so far removed from PAS’s stance in the mid-1950s, when Burhanuddin al-Helmy proposed that “the forces of nationalism, the forces of Islamism and the forces of socialism . . . are not separable from one another but are in fact related to one another.” Thus, although PAS had been drifting toward a more doctrinal approach through the 1980s and 1990s, this more pragmatic, bridge-building position reversed that trend. Doing so allowed the party to woo otherwise hesitant urban and secular-minded voters to PAS, Malay-dominated Keadilan, and the opposition more broadly in the late 1990s.

PAS enjoyed a surge of support in 1998 when Mahathir ignominiously purged Anwar. Given that Anwar had been credited with having boosted the Islamic credentials and practices of the UMNO-led BN regime, it is hardly surprising that so much of the opposition to his downfall in September 1998 took the form of an Islamist challenge to Mahathir and that the opposition centered around PAS. New members flocked to PAS immediately after Anwar’s dismissal, pulling PAS to the forefront of the opposition. Recognizing that it needed allies to pose a credible challenge to the multiracial BN government, PAS joined up with other opposition parties and NGOs, including secular ones, through the PAS-led Majlis Gerakan Keadilan Rakyat (Gerak, People’s Movement for Justice) and the NGO-led Gagasan Demokrasi Rakyat (Gagasan, Coalition for...
People’s Democracy). By the time of the 1999 elections, these coalitions had been supplanted by the BA electoral coalition.

All this coalition-building occurred without a grand compromise on the political role of Islam. To facilitate cooperation, PAS carefully cultivated an image of moderation and tractability in the lead-up to the November 1999 elections. In both rhetoric and images, PAS portrayed itself as a safe, reasonable choice to head a new government coalition, even for non-Muslim voters wary of an Islamic state. Key to PAS’s electoral strategy was identifying itself as a proponent of keadilan (justice) rather than just of Islam. The party promised good governance, upheld the principles of democracy, and espoused nondiscrimination on both racial and religious grounds. Especially important, with a nod to Malaysia’s still-diverse religious and ethnic demographics, PAS leaders explained (with some waffling) that the creation of an Islamic state could be put on hold in the interest of the multiparty cooperation necessary to defeat the BN. The party discussed the possibility of opening “associate membership” to non-Muslims and reiterated its commitment to complete tolerance for non-Muslims, plus maintenance of democracy, should the party come to power. Complementing this secularized, progressive image was the appearance of some PAS leaders at Reformasi events dressed in Western suits, speaking with equal facility in Malay or English. In the same vein, the very popular Harakah, PAS’s biweekly newsletter, came to include an English-language section in every issue (previously only alternate issues included such a section). Significantly, whereas the English-language section of Harakah tended to include more secular articles to appeal to a wide spectrum of readers and underplay the strength of PAS’s Islamic ideology, the Malay-language section was often more consistent with PAS’s usual Islamist rhetoric. With this dual electoral strategy, PAS fared well in the 1999 elections, although it is impossible to say with certainty how many voters bought in to the party’s new image or how many supported PAS for that reason.

In spite of their different overarching motivations and bases of political support, the DAP and a significant portion of moderate PAS leaders and members all positioned themselves closer to political liberalization during the late 1990s, giving rise to hopes for continued moderation and compromise in the opposition camp and to the expectation of a slowdown—if not a reversal—in the spiraling Islamization resulting from electoral competition between PAS and UMNO.

Those hopes were dashed after the 1999 elections, however. PAS shifted back again toward its former policy of espousing the prompt
installation of an Islamic state, vindicating critics who had labeled PAS's less Islamist stance in 1999 political opportunism. To some extent, the electoral results foretold this reversal. The aggressive stance PAS has taken reflects its dominant position in the BA: it was the Malay Muslim vote that shifted most remarkably with Reformasi and PAS that won almost all the seats in the east coast states of Kelantan and Terengganu. In those two states, PAS has introduced reforms, some of them in contravention of the BA's 1999 electoral platform. Among the most contentious was the July 2002 passage of a *hudud* bill in Terengganu, which would institute corporal punishment as specified in the Quran for various criminal offenses. The PAS-led state assembly in Kelantan had passed a similar enactment in 1993 but could not implement it because Malaysia's constitution grants primacy in criminal law to the federal government, although state legislatures retain primacy in matters related to Islam. Both NGOs (particularly women's groups) and opposition political parties decried the passage of the 2002 bill, even as ABIM and Jemaah Islah Malaysia (JIM, Malaysian Islamic Reform Society) come out strongly to support it. All the same, the rights of the small minority of non-Muslims have been safeguarded or even advanced in Kelantan and Terengganu, aside from PAS's revoking most alcohol licenses (although alcohol may still be sold in non-Muslim majority areas and non-Muslims may consume alcohol), banning of beauty contests, and similar measures. Moreover, PAS has largely stuck to its word in Kelantan and Terengganu in furthering accountability and transparency in government.

Since becoming the leader of the parliamentary opposition at the national level in 1999, PAS has pursued Islamist policies on the federal level, too. PAS legislators have tried to table bills to make apostasy a capital offense for Muslims and to curb the propagation of other religions (most commonly Christianity). Party leader Nik Aziz explained PAS's position:

> Everyone knows we are an Islamic party. Our policy is based on Islam. But in order to get closer to the non-Muslims and to topple a cruel government, we agreed to drop our demand. If we become the federal government we could enact hudud law for the Muslims, as they would understand that this law comes from Allah. The non-Muslims would be free to choose between the English law or the Islamic law.

One important exception to this trajectory in PAS from a progressive orientation back to a relatively radical one has to do with the posi-
tion of women in the party. Even at the height of PAS’s rhetoric of political moderation and openness in 1999, Kelantan chief minister Nik Aziz asserted his opposition to supporting female candidates for public office, including even Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Anwar’s wife and the founding leader of Keadilan. Nik Aziz raised hackles even more by declaring in March 1999 that PAS would prefer that women stay at home unless their income from outside employment is absolutely necessary, a statement made much of by local mainstream media. PAS has allowed women to be nominated to political office but has not allowed them to run in elections since 1959, arguing that their doing so, at least in the current political environment, may jeopardize women’s dignity, involve physical contact with men, and take too much time away from home and family duties. In response to UMNO’s aggressive courtship of young Malay women since the 1999 elections, PAS has publicly stated that it will allow women to contest for state and federal level parliamentary seats in the next election. Party leaders have still specified, however, that women are only suitable for certain types of policymaking (e.g., on health and family matters).80

The Islamic state issue proved the Achilles’ heel of the BA. Despite protracted negotiations among opposition party leaders after the 1999 elections, PAS refused to sign a joint statement assuring voters that the coalition would not establish an Islamic state if it came to power at the federal level.81 PAS’s uncompromising stance on the Islamic state issue subsequently led the DAP to withdraw from the BA in late 2001.82 Then, the war on terrorism and Mahathir’s attendant attacks on his Islamist opponents cast the coalition’s future and strength of the opposition even more into doubt. Past experience has shown that no single opposition party can muster the support to unseat the BN alone. If PAS does not renounce its commitment to the establishment of an Islamic state and the other opposition parties do not accept anything but a secular political order, effective electoral cooperation will be very difficult to achieve. So far, the other opposition parties (aside from the DAP) have been rather inconsistent or ineffective in their responses to PAS’s Islamist initiatives.83 However, perceptions of PAS’s extremism and intolerance of dissent could drive a wedge between the remaining BA parties and propel some proportion of PAS members to UMNO or other parties.

Further complicating matters are contradictory geopolitical trends. On the one hand, developments elsewhere in the Muslim world have pushed PAS toward radicalism. On the other, they have made it easier for Mahathir and his UMNO-led BN government to discredit and
attack PAS as a source of instability. PAS leaders lambasted the United States as a "hooligan," "the mother of all terrorists," and the "Great Satan" for its military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq and urged Muslims to conduct a "peaceful jihad" by supporting Afghanistan's Taliban regime in "any way" short of violence. Mahathir, in turn, lashed out against PAS for alleged links with KMM militants (which PAS denies), arresting a number of party members since mid-2001. Although anti-Americanism is nothing new in Malaysia, and even the BN regime was opposed to the use of U.S. force in Afghanistan and Iraq, public support for the Taliban is far less widespread. Its stance on counterterrorism efforts, in fact, opened up PAS anew to insinuations that it sought to establish a Taliban-like regime in Malaysia and that its democratic rhetoric is only a façade. The effect overall for PAS has been to weaken the party and its prospects. The regime’s crackdown has not only left a number of party members detained for indefinite periods; it has also raised popular fears that the party really may be what UMNO accuses it to be: politically illiberal and more radical than progressive.

Realignment Without Radical Change

A close examination of Malaysia helps reveal more broadly what triggers shifts in Islamists’ tactics and fortunes, how the war on terror impacts domestic Islamic politics, and whether Islamism constitutes a homogeneous or heterogeneous political force. Overall, the Malaysian case suggests that where the primary political opposition comes from Islamists (as is also the case in Indonesia, Egypt, Algeria, and elsewhere), the incumbent regime will be hard-pressed to maintain a truly secular government, especially if Islamists find common ground with secular-minded reformist groups in the broader opposition camp. Malaysia’s experience through the late 1990s exemplifies this process. Geopolitics then tipped the scales: international counterterrorism efforts altered the balance of power among domestic political actors and bolstered the BN regime’s attempts to enforce moderation. In other words, in the case of Malaysia, ideational changes have been critical to advancing the cause of political Islam domestically, not least by facilitating coalition-building across more and less Islamist factions. But even the most convincing arguments about the benefits of full Islamic statehood have been seriously undercut by disparaging post-September 11 transnational discourses, as well as by the imperative of coordinat-
ing with neighboring Southeast Asian countries and with the United States for reasons of both security and economics.

Since the opposition against Mahathir's Malay-centric regime is partly based on an Islamist platform, the spiraling Islamization of discourse and policies is probably inevitable. Such an outcome represents continuity far more than any cataclysmic realignment. Anthropologist Judith Nagata's caveat from the mid-1980s remains germane: "The current resurgence of dakwah among certain elements of the Malay-Muslim population must be placed in the context of the lengthy historical sequence from which the present ethnic and political situation has evolved." She explains that the dakwah movement is not a "mere fashion or fad" but "resurrects a number of ancient themes about the essential nature of Malayness and the status of the Malay community."85

Despite attempts definitively to settle the question of national identity and the place of religion in it since independence, the issue remains as contentious as ever. The ambiguity—if not internal contradiction—built into UMNO's conception of a devout but pragmatically secular Malaysian nation-state, as well as PAS's balancing of the notion of keadilan for all with Islamic statehood, only attest to the reality that Malaysia has not yet come up a definitive formulation of what Malayness is and how that identity relates to Islam and democracy. The shifts and splits in the orientations of both PAS and UMNO are products of this underlying ambiguity in Malaysian national identity and party identities.

The result is a continuing degree of uncertainty in Malaysian politics. While UMNO presses its advantage among voters as a "safe" and appropriate choice, PAS is likely to persist in its uneasy balancing of Islamism and secular reformism. To be sure, the opposition party may gain confidence, resources, and skills, both from experience and from the ideational and generational changes occurring in Malaysia. Notwithstanding the sustained spread of prodemocratic Islamist discourses in Malaysia, however, PAS may still be pulled in two different directions. The death in June 2002 of party president Fadzil Noor opened the door to the party's "young Turks," who express frustration with top party leaders' unwillingness to cooperate more with secular partners, especially by compromising on the Islamic state issue. At the same time, Fadzil was replaced by acting president Abdul Hadi Awang, who is considered to be more of a "firebrand" and thus not likely to lead PAS toward a particularly moderate or conciliatory path.86 Moreover, as Samad Ismail complains, Malaysian youths now are cynical and pro-opposition but "politically illiterate." Eschewing informed debate, they
only “gossip about politics.” Such students are swayed by emotion toward intolerance, dogmatism, and radical Islam. If Samad is correct, demographics may work in PAS’s favor. Current projections are for 2 million new voters in the next elections (due by 2004), out of a total population of just 24 million. Overall, then, the stance of PAS, at least in the short term, is likely to remain comparatively radical, leaving opposition cooperation probably less significant than in 1999.

Despite sometimes hyperbolic media accounts and dire warnings, continuing uncertainty in electoral politics and party affairs is not likely to bring any dramatic institutional changes. Malaysia’s constitutional character will continue to limit the pace and magnitude of Islamization. Other checks aside, it is unlikely that PAS will ever get strong enough (or the population change significantly enough) to amend the federal constitution—which requires a two-thirds parliamentary majority—to make Malaysia officially an Islamic state as defined by PAS. Continued gerrymandering and reapportionment of seats has made PAS’s chances of unseating UMNO and the BN ever-more slim, especially given the weak position of the party in the less heavily Muslim East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. Moreover, if that possibility ever came to seem more likely, PAS would probably lose some of its support among moderate Muslims, who supported PAS in 1999 more for the “Anwar factor” and outrage against Mahathir than out of an ideological preference for an Islamic state. Furthermore, even PAS’s own party constitution makes no mention of an Islamic state.

Finally, now more than perhaps ever before, the international dimension is particularly salient to an understanding of Malaysian domestic politics. The U.S.-led aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the omnipresent Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has radicalized some Muslims in Malaysia, encouraging PAS to take a particularly aggressive stance against the United States and in favor of Muslim unity. Meanwhile, in cracking down on purported Islamic militancy while also asserting the viability of a more moderate course, Mahathir was able not only to weaken PAS by asserting the dangers of radical Islam (i.e., PAS) but also to position Malaysia propitiously in the international order. The combination of Mahathir’s agile management of the country’s national image and foreign policy in a time of global crisis and PAS’s seeming radicalization goes far to ensure the continuity of BN hegemony, especially if Mahathir’s successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, can ply the same course. Even so, beneath the broad gloss of continuity will be continued shifts and countershifts as factions and parties jostle for position. More broadly, the interplay of changes in
Meredith L. Weiss

ideas, demographics, and geopolitics ensures that Islam will remain a core aspect of how Malaysians think of the nation and of how policy-making and political contests take shape for the foreseeable future.

Meredith Weiss is assistant professor of international studies at DePaul University. She has written extensively on civil society and social movements in Malaysia and Singapore, Malaysian electoral politics, and the changing nature of ethnicity and communalism in Malaysia.

Notes

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Association for Asian Studies annual meeting in New York, March 27–30, 2003. Thanks to Elizabeth Collins for organizing that panel and to Zakaria Haji Ahmad and several attendees for their useful comments. Thanks also to Byung-Kook Kim and two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful criticisms and suggestions. What weaknesses remain are entirely my own fault.

1. With the important exception that freedom of religion is extended only to non-Muslim non-Malays and Muslims are subject to sharia law for civil matters. For an exegesis of the constitutional status of Islam and Muslims, see Ahmad Ibrahim, “The Position of Islam in the Constitution of Malaysia.” In Ahmad Ibrahim, Sharon Siddique, and Yasmin Hussain, eds., Readings on Islam in Southeast Asia (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985), pp. 213–220. For the background, organization, jurisdiction, and concatenation with adat melayu (Malay customary law) of sharia law courts in Malaysia, see Abdul Majeed Mohamed Mackeen, “The Shari’ah Law Courts in Malaysia.” In Ibrahim, Siddique, and Hussain, Readings on Islam in Southeast Asia, pp. 229–235.

2. Around 60 percent of the population is Muslim; demographic projections suggest that this proportion will increase over time. Buddhists comprise around 19 percent of the population, Christians 9 percent, and Hindus 6 percent. Malays, who comprise slightly more than one-half the population, are required by the Malaysian constitution to practice Islam.


17. Ibid., p. 3.


19. Among them was Nik Adli Nik Aziz, son of PAS spiritual leader Nik Aziz Nik Mat, who was accused of being the KMM’s ringleader. Nik Aziz admitted that, like many other Malaysians, his son had fought with the mujahideen in Afghanistan against the Soviets but denied his having had subsequent ties with militants.


24. Abuza explains that Al-Qa’ida has been penetrating Southeast Asia since 1991. The four main reasons he offers for Al-Qa’ida’s success in co-opting individuals and groups and establishing new cells are the benefits of working internationally for domestically oriented militant or secessionist groups; the growth of radical Islam in the region (attributable to economic dispossessions, political repression, and the spread of religious education); the fact that Southeast Asian states have been “countries of convenience” for terrorists; and the relatively unguarded stance of these ethnically plural, tolerant, secular societies (Abuza, “Tentacles of Terror,” pp. 428–429).

25. Quoted in Jayasankaran, “Plan.”


32. For a more comprehensive view, see Zainah Anwar, *Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia: Dakwah Among the Students* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk, 1987); Jomo Kwame Sundaram and Ahmad Shabery Cheek, “Malaysia’s Islamic Movements.” In Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah, eds., *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia* (North Sydney: Asian Studies Association of Australia and Allen and Unwin, 1992), pp. 79–106; Salihah Hassan, “Islamic Non-governmental Organisations.” In Meredith L. Weiss...

33. Data on ABIM are from interview with ABIM secretary-general Shaharuddin Badaruddin, April 7, 1999, Wangsa Maju.

34. Historian John Funston clarifies: “although ‘dakwah’ (literally, to call or invite) is loosely translated as missionary activities, in the Malaysian context this refers more to the task of making Muslims better Muslims than converting the non-believer.” Funston, “The Politics,” p. 171.


36. ABIM members in Keadilan, together with other members from Islamic NGOs or formerly from UMNO, claimed to have been sidelined in the party on account of their opposition to the merger of Keadilan and the small, multiracial, left-wing Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM, Malaysian People’s Party). To quell the dispute, the ABIM leadership asked its members to dissociate their party-based and NGO-based activities. Malaysiakini, November 23 and 27, 2001.


38. Quoted in Elegant, “Getting Radical.”


45. Ibid., p. 857.


47. See Camroux, “State Responses,” for an excellent discussion of the balance among accommodation, co-optation, and confrontation in UMNO’s
response to PAS, the *dakwah* movement, and other manifestations of Islamic resurgence, especially since the 1980s.


51. Quoted in ibid., n.p.


54. Quoted in ibid.


59. Martinez, "Malaysia as an Islamic State—Part 1."


64. Mohamed Alias, *PAS' Platform*, p. 182.


67. Zainah, "Facing the Fundamentalist Challenge."

68. For that election, PAS did pick a relatively moderate theme: *Membangun bersama Islam* ("Develop with Islam"). The party advocated governance based on Islamic values but with full protection for the civil, political, cultural, and religious rights of non-Muslims. By 1995, however, PAS had reverted to a more clearly Islamist stance, alienating most of what non-Muslim support it had managed to achieve. See Edmund Terence Gomez, *The 1995 Malaysian General Elections: A Report and Commentary* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1996), p. 21.


71. See, for instance, Malaysiakini, June 19, 2002.


73. For instance, PAS president Fadzil Noor was reported to have said the party would defer its plans for an Islamic state and instead focus on issues highlighted in the BA manifesto. He then refuted the first part of that report, saying articulation of a clear stance on the Islamic state issue awaited BA-level negotiations (Malaysiakini, July 12, 2001) and asserting, “an Islamic State is our objective” (quoted in New Straits Times, April 11, 1999). Prior to the elections, though, one PAS leader went so far as to insist that the idea that the party seeks to establish an Islamic state is mere “Western propaganda,” designed to discredit PAS in the eyes of more moderate Malay Muslims and non-Malays. Interview with Husam Musa, political secretary to Nik Aziz and Kelantan PAS youth chief, February 23, 1999, Kota Bharu.

74. By mid-1999, Harakah Daily had become one of Malaysia’s most widely read papers, with a circulation of around 250,000, leading the government to restrict its frequency and crack down on distribution. Legally, only PAS members may purchase Harakah.

75. Zainah also notes this disparity: despite PAS’s supposed commitment “to reform and democratic principles . . . the language it speaks at the village level in its traditional constituencies, and even in the Malay pages of Harakah, is one of an intolerant and extremist Islam” (Zainah, “Facing the Fundamentalist Challenge”).

76. Women’s groups were especially incensed by provisions that would charge a woman who reported rape with qazaf (slanderous accusation) unless she could find four Muslim, male eyewitnesses to the crime. PAS was forced to amend that part of the bill, although the burden of proof still rests on the woman. The state government delayed enforcement of hudud law while it sent a team to study the implementation of Islamic laws in other countries.

77. Salbiah Ahmad, “Hudud, Here We Go Again!” Malaysiakini, June 25, 2002.

78. Proselytization among Muslims is already prohibited and hence rare.


83. PRM, for instance, has reiterated its opposition to the concept of an Islamic state or the imposition of beliefs by political elites, but with virtually no apparent effect on PAS’s position (Malaysiakini, July 7, 2002). By contrast, Keadilan president Wan Azizah Wan Ismail stated that PAS had the right to enact hudud law in Kelantan and Terengganu, given that the party was demo-
cratically elected and no Muslim can reject sharia laws, including *hudud* (*Malaysiakini*, August 26, 2002).

84. See *Straits Times*, September 25, 2001; Agence-France Presse, October 1, 2001.


86. His deputy, Mustafa Ali, however, denies any major difference between the two men’s leadership styles. Interview, August 25, 2003, Kuala Terengganu.

