The “State Islam” Nexus: Islam and the State in Indonesia and Malaysia, 1982-2008

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of PhD
Graduate Department of Political Science
University of Toronto

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2012

Abstract

My thesis argues that in 1982-2008, “state Islam” created a pluralistic Indonesia and an anti-pluralistic Malaysia. The rubric of “state Islam” is a political alliance of secular politicians, religious bureaucrats, and Islamic socio-religious organizations. During these twenty-five years, state policy in Indonesia repressed Islam through the political marginalization of the formal and informal institutions of Muslim piety and practice. On the other hand, state policy in Malaysia accommodated Islam through promoting similar institutions. The rise of Islamic political and cultural consciousness in 1979 had triggered leadership transition and elite factionalism in 1982 in Malaysia and in 1989 in Indonesia, during which a new Islamic-centric force of entrepreneurs drove policy change.
From 1982 to 2008, Indonesia and Malaysia created new state religious bureaucracies that regulated Islam, persecuted minority Islamic sects, and curbed the political autonomy of socio-religious organizations embedded in Islam.

Chapter 1 constitutes a literature review and outlines my argument and key variables, while Chapter 2 provides the historical context of Islam in pre and post-independence Indonesia and Malaysia. The next chapter takes us to Indonesia in 1982-1994, when the Suharto government embarked on its institutional repression of Islam. Chapter 4 demonstrates how in 1982-1994 the Mahathir government in Malaysia launched its parallel institutional accommodation of Islam. Returning to Indonesia, Chapter 5 shows how Suharto’s institutional repression from the late 1990s directly created the conditions for a pluralist Indonesia today. Chapter 6 examines how the Mahathir government, previously locked in a close relationship with Islam through institutional accommodation in the late 1990s to early 2000s, produced a contemporary Malaysia resolutely hostile to political and socio-cultural pluralism. The final chapter explores the concept of unintended consequences and suggests comparative and cross-regional implications for my findings.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I take the opportunity to express my thanks to Dr. R. S. Milne for first inspiring my lifelong interest in Southeast Asia. I am perpetually grateful to Dr. Jacques Bertrand, who shaped my disciplinary training and has been exceptionally patient and supportive during this long journey to bringing the dissertation to its conclusion. I cannot ever thank enough the intellectual inspiration and emotional support that Dr. Diane K. Mauzy provided to me for the past fifteen years. I want to thank all my interviewees in Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta who generously gave of their time to assist my project. Dr. Shamsul A. B. of the Institute of Ethnic Studies at the National University of Malaysia was invaluable for my fieldwork in Malaysia. I owe a debt of gratitude to Jakarta Islamic State University for technical support and assistance. My thanks also go to Dr. John Wood, Dr. H. B. Chamberlain, and Dr. Tineke Hellwig, who helped guide my studies at the University of British Columbia.

I gratefully acknowledge the University of Toronto’s Department of Political Science for financial and academic support. My academic studies and teaching have benefitted greatly from working with Dr. Jacques Bertrand, Dr. Michael Donnelly, Dr. Victor Falkenheim, and Dr. Edward Schatz. Thanks are also due for the financial support that I received from the Dr. David Chu Program in Asia Pacific Studies, the School of Graduate Studies at the University of
Toronto, and the Ethnicity and Democratic Governance project at Queen’s University.

My love of Indonesia came from Saleh Umar, Dr. Yasmine Shahab, Maryam Umar, and Hussein Umar; I thank them all for their hospitality in Jakarta. My love of Malaysia first came from a family friend, Ong Beng Hin and his family in Petaling Jaya. Special thanks to Dr. Laurence W. Preston. Finally, I would like to thank my family - my dear wife Cicik (Murnilawati) Preston and our daughter Amira Preston, my mother, Dr. Jennifer Jay, and my brother Graham Preston - for all their love and sacrifices to bring this dissertation to completion.

I am solely responsible for all the errors that remain in my dissertation.
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ARABIC, MALAY, AND INDONESIAN TERMS

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<tr>
<td>Agung</td>
<td>Malaysia’s Constitutional Monarch</td>
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<td>Ahmadiyah</td>
<td>Minority Muslim sect in Indonesia</td>
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<td>Al’ Maunah</td>
<td>Minority Muslim sect in Malaysia</td>
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<td>BAKORPAKEM</td>
<td>Body under the Indonesian Attorney General’s Office to monitor sects and beliefs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barisan Nasional</td>
<td>National Front (formerly The Alliance), governing coalition of Malaysia since 1957</td>
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<td>Dakwah</td>
<td>Student based Islamic revivalist movement in Malaysia</td>
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<td>Darul Arqam</td>
<td>Minority Muslim sect in Malaysia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fatwa</td>
<td>Recommended, but not obligatory, advice to individual Muslims</td>
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<td>ICMI</td>
<td>Association of Indonesian Islamic Intellectuals, Suharto era institution</td>
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<td>Islam Hadhari</td>
<td>Civilizational Islam, initiative of Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah</td>
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<td>JAI</td>
<td>Ahmadiyah, largest representative lobby of the sect</td>
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<td>JAKIM</td>
<td>Malaysian Islamic Development Department, equivalent to Ministry level institution dedicated to the regulation of Islam</td>
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<tr>
<td>Khalwat</td>
<td>Close Proximity, enshrined in Malaysia’s sharia code regulating non-married couples</td>
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<td>Menteri Agama</td>
<td>Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs</td>
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<td>Muhammadiyah</td>
<td>Followers of Muhammad, modernist Muslim-based socio-religious organization in Indonesia</td>
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<td>MUI</td>
<td>Indonesian Ulama Council, newly influential quasi-state religious organization post-1998</td>
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<td>Nahdlatul Ulama</td>
<td>Renaissance of Islamic Scholars, Muslim based socio-religious organization in Indonesia, traditionalist</td>
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<td>New Order</td>
<td>Authoritarian political regime of Indonesia led by Suharto, 1966-1998</td>
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<td>Pancasila</td>
<td>Five Principles, governing ideology of Indonesia</td>
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<td>PAS</td>
<td>Islamic Party of Malaysia, opposition political party of Malaysia</td>
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<td>Piagam Jakarta</td>
<td>Jakarta Charter, proposed (and unsuccessful) preamble to Indonesian constitution enshrining sharia for Muslims</td>
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<td>PPP</td>
<td>Unity Development Party, Islamic based political party of the New Order</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reformasi</td>
<td>Democratic/civil society movement in Indonesia and Malaysia c. 1998</td>
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<td>Sarekat Islam</td>
<td>Islamic Association, First proto-Muslim based/nationalist political party in Indonesia</td>
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<td>Shia</td>
<td>Islamic law</td>
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<td>UMNO</td>
<td>United Malays’ National Organization, dominant Malay party of Malaysia’s governing coalition</td>
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CHAPTER 1

THE TOPIC AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 “State Islam” as a Concept and Term of Analysis

My dissertation presents a comparative historical and institutional analysis of Islam and Muslim Politics, but situated within an intriguing empirical and geographical context-Muslim Southeast Asia. Outwardly, Indonesia and Malaysia present natural comparative case studies. Both countries are geographically contiguous and contain ethnic Malay and Muslim majorities but with a high degree of ethnic and religious diversity. Indonesia is the world’s most populous Muslim nation with a population of 227 millions, 90% of which are Indonesian Muslims and the remaining 10% consisting of ethnic and religious minorities (Chinese, Christian, Hindus, and Buddhists, and indigenous peoples). Malaysia is a much smaller nation with 27 million people, with a narrow majority of Muslim Malays (50.4%), and minorities of Non-Muslim Chinese (23.7%), indigenous peoples (11%), and Indians (7.1%). Despite these two very complex demographics, Indonesia and Malaysia are distinguished by an absence of prolonged and sustained ethnic and racial polarization, for the reason that strong home-grown cultural ethics of pluralism and religious tolerance have worked for

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1 Muslims constitute only 50.4% of the population, but Malays as an ethnic group constitute 61% of the population.
the most part against sustained ethnic and religious conflict. Both countries also exhibit substantial economic development. Indonesia is currently a G20 emerging economy, blessed with an abundance of natural resources and a growing, powerful domestic consumer market that helped it to weather the worst economic downturns of the global financial crisis of September 2008. Malaysia’s economic success, fueled by a labor force of high-skilled and low-wage workers, is anchored by the logistical and technological advantages that the country offers to the engines of global capitalism. Both countries have cordial relations with the Muslim World. Violent incidents such as the concerted, political repression of Islam in Kemalist Turkey between 1923-1980, or the outbreak of civil war in Algeria between 1991-2002, are absent in Indonesia and Malaysia. Rather, the Indonesian and Malaysian states have been successful in integrating the political challenge of the global Islamic revival movement without much violence, by maintaining firm political control while compromising largely on the cultural demands of the movement.

Indonesia in 1989 repressed the Islamic revival through state Islam while Malaysia in 1982 compromised with it through state Islam. The outcome was a pluralist Indonesia and an anti-pluralist Malaysia. My comparative analysis of the two countries seeks to explain the relationship between the state and Islam and the policy outcomes of divergent degrees of political and socio-cultural pluralism. Studying the institutions of the state and Islam provides the analytical key to understanding these empirical political developments in Indonesia and Malaysia.
Among the sources used in this study are primary and secondary works, official and unofficial government documents, and local English and Indonesian-Malay language newspapers collected during my fieldwork in Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur in June 2007-July 2008. Supplementing these documents are personal interviews that I conducted with major political actors, including key civil servants and bureaucrats in Indonesia’s Ministry of Religious Affairs and Malaysia’s Department of Islamic Development, key figures in major prominent socio-religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (Renaissance of Islamic Scholars) and Muhammadiyah (Followers of Muhamad) in Indonesia, and the International Movement for a Just World (JUST) and Sisters in Islam in Malaysia (SIS). In addition, some prominent retired and current politicians in Indonesia and Malaysia provided crucial insights and political context to my institutional analysis of the relationship between the state and Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia. These interviews were conducted in English and Bahasa Indonesia or Bahasa Malaysia the official language of respectively, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Chapter 1 situates my comparative analysis within a theoretical framework and the academic literature. The next chapter opens with the historical and cultural context to the coming of Islam to the region, followed by the historical background under which Indonesia became independent in 1945 and under which Malaya achieved independence in 1957 and subsequently became the Federation of Malaysia. Chapter 3 examines how the Suharto government embarked on its methodical institutional repression of Islam. It first brought in the Pancasila (Five Principles) policy, which became a political failure and strategic misstep
that provoked the Tanjung Priok massacre in September 1984. A major political and policy turning point came in 1989 with a more sympathetic but ultimately more coercive turn towards Muslim politics and socio-religious institutions. Chapter 4 then outlines an earlier crucial turning point in Malaysia in 1982, when the Mahathir government embarked on its parallel institutional accommodation of Islam, by first bringing Anwar Ibrahim into the government and then launching the state’s twin Islamization and Islamic Values campaigns in 1982-1985. After 1987, the government accelerated these policies upon abortive political challenges to Mahathir; and in 1994, it prosecuted the controversial Darul Arqam minority Muslim sect.

Chapter 5 demonstrates how Suharto’s institutional repression directly created the conditions for a pluralist Indonesia today. The emergence of a pluralist, political landscape of Islamic politics in 1998-2001 was a direct consequence of repudiating the authoritarian legacy of Suharto’s New Order. In the post-2001 period, the newly risen conservative Muslim quasi-government institution known as the MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council) became the conservative challenger in competitive and pluralist Muslim politics. From 2003 to 2008, the complexities and challenges of pluralism in Indonesia were illustrated when in alliance with opportunistic mainstream Indonesian politicians, the avowedly anti-pluralist MUI attempted to destroy the Ahmadiyah, a Muslim minority sect.

The next chapter returns to Malaysia and outlines how the Mahathir government, previously locked in a close and productive relationship with Islam
through institutional accommodation, ironically produced a contemporary Malaysia, now resolutely hostile to political and socio-cultural pluralism. From 1996 to 1997, the new state religious institution, JAKIM (Jabatan Agama Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, Malaysian Islamic Development Department), became an independently minded bureaucratic entity fully in charge of state Islamic policy. Anti-pluralist campaigns in 2000 under JAKIM’s aegis prosecuted Muslim minority sects. In 2004-2008, JAKIM played a significant role defeating Abdullah Badawi’s Islam Hadhari project, which had been launched to bring in more political and socio-cultural pluralism to the Malaysian body politic.

1.2 Historical Institutionalism

Comparative historical analysis has a long tradition in the political science literature, most notably with Barrington Moore’s seminal *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. Moore importantly sought to link the historical development of class and

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capitalist relations causally with the consolidation of political regimes of democracy, fascism and communism across geography and time.

Historical institutionalism built on Moore’s work by identifying institutions as a unit of analysis in comparative historical analysis. Political scientists focused on the study of institutions within the context of this comparative historical analysis and an explicit commitment to theoretical and methodological rigor. Historical institutionalism serves as the major theoretical foundation and methodological approach structuring this comparative analysis of politics in Indonesia and Malaysia. The study of institutions has long been a cornerstone of political science inquiry. To assess political development and accompanying trajectories of regime typologies, from authoritarianism to democracy, political scientists need to know a country’s political, legal, and administrative structures. Studying institutions in a narrow context is often described in the field as old and archaic institutionalism. This approach eventually fell out of vogue because of its perceived lack of theoretical rigor and ties to normatively problematic Cold War politics. In addition, a central focus on formal institutions was inadequate because these institutions were often poor indicators of empirical political reality. The rise of political behaviorism repudiated the strict devotion to the study of formal institutional structures in old institutionalism, in favor of analyzing informal rules and norms of political culture and behavior. Initial excitement over the potential of this approach proved a false dawn of sorts, as it translated to excessive “grand theorizing,” a tendency to craft
over-extended and meta-historical arguments out of lean and incomplete empirical material.

The most significant work representing this historical institutionalist scholarship is *Structuring Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Perspective*, a collection of seven case studies edited by Kathleen Thelen, Sven Steinmo and Frank Longstreth. In her own contribution to the volume, Thelen argues that larger political issues and controversies are often shaped by the institutional context in which they emerge.\(^3\) Formal institutions may include constitutions, statutes, common law, and other governmental regulations. By statute, these outline the boundaries between executive, legislative, and judicial branches. By contrast, informal institutions may embody traditions, customs, moral values, religious beliefs, and all other norms of behavior that have customarily gained wide societal acceptance through several generations.\(^4\) Accordingly, “institutions matter too” in a number of fundamental ways. They can empower or constrain political actors (for example, politicians, labor activists), they may constitute crucial political, organizational, and bureaucratic resources that are up for grabs through political competition or strife, or they themselves can represent larger ideological or culturally symbolic currents.

Building on this premise, Peter Hall outlines what is at stake in political battles mobilized in or around institutions. Institutions structure goals and

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motivations of political actors, but this structuring may be a hierarchical process granting advantages to some actors while putting other actors at a major disadvantage.\textsuperscript{5} These institutions can offer political actors unique resources and opportunities for political organization and mobilization not available anywhere else. Notions of institutional dynamism and institutional change that are emerging as new currents in the institutionalist literature lend some insights.

Thelen and Steinmo criticize overly static and mechanistic accounts of institutions that do not take into account institutional dynamism. Institutionalism dynamism contends that institutions are subject to the forces of history and political change. Therefore, institutions evolve, change, and transform according to the particular political and historical context where they are embedded.\textsuperscript{6} “Institutions as objects of change” is a complementary research direction that Thelen and Steinmo briefly highlight. Here, new directions that political scientists are taking in institutionalism have begun to point out how institutions themselves become both the object and subject of political contention and assorted political strife. In this respect, institutions are once again important as research directions of political scientists because they factor into and shape the political strategies of political actors. Institutional change is often actor-oriented, buttressed by motivations of deriving political advantage or seeking political brinkmanship.\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{5} Thelen and Steinmo, “Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics,” 2.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{7} Thelen and Steinmo, “Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics,” 21.
Research in historical institutionalism has focused a great deal of attention in developing theories of formal institutions, but new work has begun to emerge and inform how informal institutions such as ideas, norms, and values can also structure political actors and outcomes. Cultural attributes embedded in human history and societies have long been understood to play a role in political outcomes and institutions, but political scientists have searched for a comparative analytical framework that incorporates these cultural considerations.

Noteworthy in this research direction is the recent work by Sheri Berman, David Laitin, and Kathleen McNamara, in which they propose specific mechanisms of culturally derived institutional change. This scholarship repositions “culture as variable,” or culture as the “ideational variable.” The concept of the ideational variable is a flexible theoretical and practical methodological tool that offers great utility for my dissertation. Moreover, this premise contends that ideas, norms, and culture not only have a place in political analysis, but they play a direct role as either subject or object of political outcomes and institutions. Berman elaborates on the potential of cultural variables in institutionalism:

ideas, norms, culture can be both dependent and independent variables…neither role need to be considered dominant in the abstract; scholars should simply differentiate and investigate which is appropriate to the project at hand.8

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Berman describes how precisely ideas, norms, and culture become relevant to political outcomes and institutions as the:

Process of institutionalization, how ideas become embedded in organizations, patterns of discourse, and collective identities, and manage to outlast the original conditions that gave rise to them…

The operationalization of historical institutionalism, through critical junctures, and path dependence provides explanations for divergent outcomes. A critical juncture identifies a significant or profound event that changes the prevailing circumstances, and affects political and policy change. A path dependence encompasses a broader institutional, and political trajectory which follows causally from these changes. Kathleen Thelen succinctly explains the connection between critical junctures, and path dependence:

The first [analytical claim] involves arguments about crucial founding moments of institutional formation that send countries along broadly different developmental paths; the second [analytical claim] suggests that institutions continue to evolve in response to changing environmental conditions and ongoing political maneuvering but in ways that are constrained by past trajectories.

The identification and sequencing of critical junctures is important for providing historically orientated case studies and narratives. Critical junctures develop out of temporal antecedent conditions. These underlying antecedent conditions are contextualized in specific and sequential historical processes.

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9 Ibid., 238.
10 Lars Magnusson and Jan Ottosson. *The Evolution of Path Dependence*. (Cheltenham.UK: Edward Alger Publishing, 2009). Magnusson also identifies the similar concept of “path departure” which refers to the long term systemic recalibration of a system.
Charles Tilley emphasizes the importance of timing and sequencing in critical junctures when he declared that “when things happen within a sequence affects how they happen.”

A historical institutionalist analysis of critical junctures makes this reliance on history explicit, as Thelen emphasizes:

What all of these comparative historical studies share is a perspective that examines political and economic development in historical context and in terms of processes unfolding over time and in relation to each other, within a broader context in which developments in one realm impinge on and shape developments in others. All of them engage in close examination of temporal sequences and processes as they unfold, and perhaps even more importantly, as different processes at the domestic level or at the international and domestic levels unfold in relation to one another. They all focus on variables that capture important aspects of the interactive features of ongoing political processes, and in ways that explain important differences in regime and institutional outcomes across a range of cases.

Critical junctures allows for or propels changes in policy. These critical junctures presents a series of contingent choices to political actors. These choices are embedded historically, as they reflect specific constellations of resources in political and social life available to political actors. Paul Pierson writes that sequencing is also important in analyzing the consequences which arise out of these contingent choices:

when a particular issue or conflict emerges in a society becomes critical for two reasons. On the one hand, the repertoire of possible responses is historically determined. On the other hand, once a response is adopted, it may generate self-reinforcing dynamics that put politics on a distinctive long-term path.

13 Thelen, “Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics.”
This notion of a positive feedback loop is integrated within Scott E. Page’s four distinct variables driving the consolidation of these policy choices: increasing returns, self-reinforcement, positive feedbacks, and lock-in. Page elaborates further on the nature of self-reinforcement, and positive returns:

Increasing returns mean that the more a choice is made or an action is taken, the greater its benefits. Self-reinforcement means that making a choice or taking an action puts in place a set of forces or complementary institutions that encourage that choice to be sustained. With positive feedbacks, an action or choice creates positive externalities when other people make that same choice. Positive feedbacks create something like increasing returns, but mathematically, they differ. Increasing returns can be thought of as benefits that rise smoothly as more people make a particular choice and positive feedbacks as little bonuses given to people who already made that choice or who will make that choice in the future. Finally, lock-in means that one choice or action becomes better than any other one because a sufficient number of people have already made that choice.

The critical junctures concept is actor-oriented, and assumes that actors often make rational and self-interested choices and political decisions when presented with a clear, empirical political reality. Noteworthy is the debate on delineating the relationship between institutional structures and actors’ agency in this critical juncture and path dependency perspective. In her 1992 article, Thelen seems to suggest that most historical institutionalist scholars would not find fault with the rational choice perspective of actors making self-interested and rational choices, but she also accepts that these actors’ choices are first embedded in an institutional context. Fleshing out this research direction, Colin Hay and Daniel Wincott examine the relationship between structure and agency in the context of

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historical institutionalism. They posit how actors navigate and negotiate the contours of institutional structures through notions of “direct effects” and “strategic learning,” in effect emphasizing how actors reflect on and anticipate the consequences of their political decisions and choices, to avoid the pitfalls of “old institutionalism” and its excessive dependence on structural explanations.17

Contingent choices by political actors set a specific trajectory of institutional development and consolidation. This trajectory is difficult to reverse because of the nature of self-reinforcing dynamics, and positive returns for actors. Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier identify these trajectories as path dependence or enduring institutional legacies. The operationalization of path dependence is through “mechanisms of production” which consolidate a new “legacy”: shifts in political outcomes and in constellations of political, social, and economic interests.18

Interestingly, such a consolidation of a “new legacy” is often not immediately apparent and is a gradual contingent process. Collier and Collier state, “that a [new] legacy often does not crystallize after the critical juncture, but rather is shaped through a series of intervening steps.”19 This three-stage process consists first, of the aforementioned “mechanisms of production,” then “mechanisms of reproduction,” finally producing “stability of the core attributes

19 Ibid., 31.
of the [new] legacy.”

Collier and Collier again reemphasize the importance of the interrelationship and sequential unfolding of historical and political processes as “the stability of the [new] legacy is not an automatic outcome, but rather is perpetuated through ongoing [temporal] institutional and political processes.”

Theda Skocpol and Pierson revisit concepts of self-reinforcement and positive feedback by contending that outcomes at a “critical juncture” trigger feedback negative or positive mechanisms and reinforce the recurrence of a particular pattern into the future.

The literature on historical institutionalism, as discussed above, directly undergirds with my dissertation, where I apply the study of institutions as a epistemological approach to analyze the relationship between the state and Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia. In my study, institutions are better understood as defined broadly, encompassing both formal institutions and informal institutions. The operationalization of historical institutionalism indeed provides causal explanations for shifts in political outcomes through the concepts of critical junctures, and path dependence.

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20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
1.3 Political and Socio-cultural Pluralism

Apart from historical institutionalism, my dissertation rests on a second theoretical pillar of pluralism. Pluralism, by its very basic definition, implies many, difference, and diversity across the spectrum of a country’s political system and the very demography which constitutes its society. An epistemology also implies the consideration of many theoretical approaches to explaining political and socio-economic phenomena in the empirical world. Notions of pluralism in such disciplines as political science and sociology once referenced specific notions of group identities and interest group politics. Robert Dahl’s seminal work is important in building an American empirical democratic theory explaining the power of groups. Dahl popularized the concept of pluralism by de-emphasizing the individual autonomy of political actors and seeing them more as representatives of specific factional interests that had to be mediated and accommodated in a democratic society.23 His privileging of groups and factional interests in political analysis had far-reaching influence, but in the early 1970s, it led to a backlash from more radical and structuralist oriented political scientists. They dismissed American pluralism as ideologically conservative and merely descriptive, lacking any theoretical rigor. In recent years, new approaches have arisen that conceptualize pluralism as a broad organizational framework with a diversity of interpretations, values, and methodologies.

Defining pluralism both theoretically and operationally helps ground the concept in an empirical political reality. In particular, Gregor McLennan’s *Pluralism* has been very influential in shaping my basic theoretical assumptions about pluralism.\(^{24}\) While recognizing the utility of employing methodological pluralism, my thesis emphasizes his theoretical definitions of *socio-cultural* and *political* pluralism. McLennan defines *socio-cultural* pluralism as constituting many types of important social relations and subcultures, and multiple identities and selves based broadly through a religious tradition or more narrowly constituted upon personal identity.\(^{25}\) His conceptualization of *political* pluralism informs my examination of the chronological and institutional development of the relationship between the state and Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia. Political pluralism as an abstract ideal involves the recognition of socio-cultural difference, the facilitation of difference, and the representation of difference in all basic decision making-arrangements.\(^{26}\) Alternative or antithetical understandings of pluralism also play roles in my analysis. Anti-pluralism involves active or concerted political repression of difference, enshrining rigid, textual and conservative interpretations of religious piety and practice and the promotion of static monocultures through the political repression and legal marginalization of minority sects and their religious expression.

However, the operationalization of pluralism is more important for my dissertation, as it allows for the measuring and the accounting for shifts in degree

\(^{24}\) Gregor McLennan, *Pluralism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
\(^{26}\) Ibid., 7.
of political and socio-cultural pluralism in any given empirical political reality. The literature has traditionally treated pluralism in this operational context as three fold: pluralism as pre-existing fact, pluralism as a political process within the state, and pluralism as political outcome. Firstly, pluralism as a preexisting fact emphasizes the importance of ethnic, class, and demographic cleavages in shaping a country’s political dynamics. Next, pluralism as a political process within the state is tied to Dahl’s focus on factional and interest group politics shaping public policy. Thirdly, pluralism as a political outcome refers to the reflection of political and socio-cultural pluralist ideals in a country’s formal and informal institutions, following political struggles that draw in rival political actors and interests.27

These three empirical definitions of pluralism are interrelated, but my dissertation privileges an understanding of pluralism as an end political outcome in its central analytical framework. This is observed and measured qualitatively, temporally and across cases, by the state’s recognition of socio-political interests. These include a diverse degree of opinion regarding the relationship between the state and Islam, the vigorous contestation of these groups over their distinct ideas through an open and frank debate, and the accommodation of these conflicts openly, transparently and democratically.

1.4 Muslim Politics in Indonesia and Malaysia

Finally, the emergence of a distinctive Muslim politics in the empirical political contexts of Indonesia and Malaysia constitutes the final theoretical anchor of this dissertation. The 1979 Iranian Revolution and its accompanying geopolitical aftershocks challenged political scientists and historians to take more seriously the study of Islam and politics. This early scholarship explains Muslim politics as either the reaction to or the product of Modernization.

The modernization theory previously posited that the progressive secularization of societies leads to the eventual elimination of religion from the political sphere. The modernization paradigm seems to stand in stark contrast to underlying empirical trends, particularly in the Muslim world. A noted scholar of Islam, John Esposito explains Muslim politics as situated within the context of modernity and does not represent a repudiation of modernization. Muslim politics are very modern, because they embody new forms of identity and meaning in societies scarred by the failures and crises of the modernization ethos. He draws direct causal linkages between such struggles of modernization and the rise of Muslim politics.28 In fact, themes of a return to Islam, to reinvigorate Islam with the lessons of the early years of Muslim civilization, became in the late 1970s a dominant trope of Muslim politics and ideology. Such an emphasis on revering tradition exists uneasily alongside a commitment to modern technology and most forms of political organization and mobilization. In most cases, Muslim politics

does not reject outright modernization; instead, it creates distinctions between a Western rationalism of modernization and secularism, while contrasting it with an Islamic approach that embraces modernization and renewed religiosity.

Scholars such as Bernard Lewis present another interpretation of Muslim politics and the modernization theory. He believes Muslim politics to be a unique byproduct of the political and cultural ethic of Islam. This Islam Exceptionalism School argues that the modernization theory is flawed because it holds a Christian bias that fails to recognize Islam as something autonomous and distinct.\textsuperscript{29} It sees Islam as a pre-modern ethic on the basis that notions of the division between religion and politics, mosque and state, are foreign to Islam. Islam requires its own enlightenment, a revolutionary break from the traditional to the modern that replicates the experience of Christianity and Western civilization. The rallying claim of this school, “In Islam there is no separation between religion and politics,”\textsuperscript{30} has taken a whole life of its own in the larger geopolitical War on Terror discourse. In any event, most scholars today would agree with the contention that Islam is a living reality and that its politicization is an increasingly salient fact.

Integrating the study of Muslim politics both cross regionally and within the general academic literature was the next step in building a study of Muslim politics. Contextualizing the rise of Muslim politics globally and across diverse religious traditions is the guiding impetus behind Martin E. Marty and R. Scott

\textsuperscript{30} Lewis, \textit{Islam and the West}, 135.
Appleby’s seminal series of edited *Fundamentalisms Observed* volumes.\(^31\) Marty and Appleby link their cross comparative analysis through the concept of fundamentalism to explain both the renaissance and success of religious politics in a now predominately secular age. However, in contrast to Esposito, Marty and Appleby portray the relationship between religious politics and modernization as an often tenuous and confrontational one. Religious politics as defined through the lens of Marty and Appleby’s construct of fundamentalisms are portrayed as political movements centrally concerned with “fighting back, fighting with, fighting for, and fighting under God,” against both secular political opponents and governments.\(^32\)

While the series was crucial for first taking the study of religious politics seriously and establishing a new systematic methodology for tracing the historical development and ideological building blocks of religious politics, its insights fell short of anticipating the evolution of a less confrontational and more pluralist religious politics. Quintan Wiktorowicz’s *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* rejects claims that Muslim politics and political activism are *sui generis*. Wiktorowicz instead interprets developments in Muslim politics primarily through the lens of social movement theory. In this respect, the study of Muslim politics and its political activism is not too dissimilar from the study of democratic, labor, and environmental movements. However, Wiktorowicz’s most innovative insight was to contend that the study of Muslim politics might bring

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32 Ibid., viii-ix.
new methodological tools and empirical data to the literature on social movements proper. Specifically, the resurgence of Muslim politics and its political activism in often-repressive political environments, the decentralized and diffused nature of Islamic authority, and the importance of building personal connections through underground social networks in this activism, might contribute to developing a broader and more empirically intuitive social movement literature.33

The narrowing geographic scope of the renaissance of Muslim politics also engaged scholars to provide more regionally grounded explanations. The study of what was once considered marginal to the study of Muslim politics, Islam in Southeast Asia, provides the opportunity to correct monolithic explanations of Muslim politics heavily drawn from the experience of the Middle East. Ironically, most scholarship on Islam and Southeast Asia argues for a Southeast Asian Exceptionalism that rejects the application of Middle East Muslim Politics to the region. It holds that Islam is embedded in the history and culture of Southeast Asia and practiced in eclectic ways.34

Islam in Southeast Asia is bound to pre-existing Hindu-Buddhist traditions and as such exhibits little of the puritanical character of its Middle Eastern cousins. Instead, the practice of Islam in Southeast Asia has historically emphasized moderation, pluralism, and tolerance. Such an approach offers the advantage of reinterpreting Muslim politics through the prisms of democratization and civil

society theory.\textsuperscript{35} However, the very nature of the Southeast Asian Exceptionalism argument precludes generalizability and application to states and societies outside Southeast Asia.

There is a major debate about whether Muslim politics constitutes its own sub-field or whether existing theories can adequately explain it. With some qualified consideration, I argue the latter, that Islam should be framed in its own theory. Approaching the study of Muslim societies requires some appreciation of Islam, not simply as any other static variable, but as a dynamic, subjective, variable of ideas, norms, and culture grounded in Islamic socio-cultural history. As such, I question overly deterministic and essentialist views of Muslim politics as presented by Lewis and Samuel Huntington. It would seem that a broad substantive theory would present a more fruitful avenue to conceptualize the definition and scope of a Muslim politics. I agree with John Esposito’s claim that most contemporary Muslim politics contain many complex debates over contrasting approaches to modernization, development, democracy, secularism, and capitalism.\textsuperscript{36}

Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatoris’s \textit{Muslim Politics} presents a distinct approach to Muslim politics. I ground my treatment of Muslim politics with their seminal conceptualization that:

\begin{quote}
Muslim politics involves the competition and contest over both the interpretation of symbols and control of institutions, formal and informal, that produce and sustain them. The interpretation of symbols is played out
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{35} Hefner, \textit{Remaking Muslim Politics}.
\textsuperscript{36} Esposito, \textit{Islam and Politics}. 
against the background of an underlying framework that, while subject to contextualized nuances, is common to Muslims throughout the world.37

Indeed, the substance of Muslim politics covers a diverse spectrum of ideas, symbols, interpretations, values and larger organizational structures of generally accepted Muslim piety and practice, which then becomes the basis of distinct socio-political interests. A distinct Muslim politics framework therefore explains how these interests attempt to translate these ideals into a coherent political program and public policy outcomes.38 Muslim politics as the driver of socio-political interests are not self-contained for they almost inevitably draw in larger state authority and state power. State and non-state political actors compete for the resources provided by these institutions to shape and sustain their own particular conceptualization of Muslim piety and practice, be it radical or moderate.

Empirical studies of Muslim states and societies in Southeast Asia have shed light on the development of Muslim politics in contemporary political contexts. Individual studies of Indonesia encompass micro-level and macro-level anthropological ethnographies and political analysis of its authoritarian political system. In particular, Indonesia’s post-1998 democratization has opened the floodgates to new research on ethnic conflict, separatist nationalisms, decentralization and local government, and the political economy of corruption

38 Eickelman and Piscatori, Muslim Politics; Esposito, Islam and Politics.
and development.\textsuperscript{39} Similarly, research on Malaysia has ethnic politics, developmental models, and its ethnic based political economy. Post-1998 Malaysia has attracted considerable academic scrutiny on the embryonic civil society and Partai Islam Se-Malaysia or Islamic Party of Malaysia.\textsuperscript{40} Political, economic, and social congruities between Indonesia and Malaysia offer unique opportunities for cross comparative studies of these Muslim states in Southeast Asia. For example, \textit{Challenging Authoritarianisms in Southeast Asia: Comparing Indonesia and Malaysia} focuses on the \textit{reformasi} movement in 1998-1999 that challenged authoritarian Suharto and Mahathir governments.\textsuperscript{41} Amy Freedman’s \textit{Political Participation and Ethnic Minorities: Chinese Overseas in Malaysia},


Indonesia, and the United States is another example of this research on the ethnic Chinese minority.42

William Liddle and Robert Hefner provide valuable studies interpreting Muslim politics in Indonesia and Malaysia. Liddle’s seminal *Leadership and Culture in Indonesian Politics* charts the rise and articulation of the Suharto New Order regime at its peak in the mid 1980s.43 Liddle locates the origins of Suharto authoritarianism in Cold War politics and then examines the regime’s efforts at managing an Indonesian society’s growing religious consciousness. Hefner takes issues somewhat with Liddle’s work and moves his analytical focus to the near contemporary period, concentrating on the regime at its decline from 1997 to 1998. His controversial *Civil Islam* argues that Muslim politics hastened the end of the New Order by channeling their religious ideals through democratic politics.44 It dispels Lewis and Huntington’s monolithic portraits of Muslim politics as authoritarian and anti-modern. While Hefner is very good at highlighting the potential of Muslim politics of contributing to this development of political and cultural pluralism, he is also not sanguine about the internal divisions that drive many Muslim politics. Hefner expands in his later follow-up work on these by examining further the rise of expressly orthodox and anti-pluralist interests that

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challenge the pluralist consensus and political establishments of contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia.45

Specific research on the development of Muslim politics in Malaysia is also helpful to this study. Diane K. Mauzy and R. S. Milne analyze Muslim politics in Malaysia through the first term of the Mahathir administration of 1981-84.46 They insightfully note that the Mahathir administration channeled Muslim politics to support the country’s political and socio-economic modernization. Kikue Hamayotsu’s study of Muslim politics in Southeast Asia treats Indonesia and Malaysia as systematic and analogous case studies.47 She argues that major political actors such as Suharto and Mahathir approached the formulation of state Islamic policy with specific strategic goals in mind. According to her, these strategic goals consist of nation building and appropriating Muslim politics as another form of nationalism.

In his Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia, Jacques Bertrand establishes a viable historical, institutionalist framework in which to interpret empirical developments of pluralist Muslim politics.48 His identification of crucial critical junctures to explain the outbreak of renewed ethnic conflict and new configurations of ethnic and nationalist identity is an innovative adaptation of a framework once previously confined to explaining empirical developments in

Latin America. This framework does not specifically address the form and ideational substance of religious politics, but nevertheless it is a useful framework in which to contextualize the political battles and struggles that inform the transformation of religious into the empirical political realm through rival socio-political interests. Therefore, I appropriate the critical junctures framework to interpret the changing and evolving relationship of the state and Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia vis-a-vis a transforming Muslim politics embedded in major socio-political interests and its implications for political and socio-cultural pluralism in both polities.

1.5 Question, Variables, Thesis and Alternative Arguments

What are the consequences of states in the Muslim World engaging with Islam and its associated Islamic Revival? I argue that a comparative historical analysis of institutional restructurings, identifying critical junctures and subsequent path dependencies in each case, and then emphasizing the notion of unintended consequences, yields a framework to produce an answer. I introduce an independent variable, the concept of “state Islam,” that became a major causal factor transforming Muslim politics in Indonesia and Malaysia. It delineates a political alliance between secular nationalist politicians, their state religious bureaucracies, and the formal and informal institutions of Muslim piety and practice in both countries. “State Islam” primarily involved state efforts to cajole, repress, or accommodate the greater societal and institutional expressions of Islam.
through formal institutions (state institutions, state statutes, and semi-autonomous quasi-state socio-religious organizations) and informal institutions (social and cultural values, norms, ideas, and contemporary debate involving Islamic piety and practice). The dependent variable of this study is pluralism. I define this variable operationally as the state’s recognition of socio-political interests that represent a diverse degree of opinion on the relationship between the state and Islam, the vigorous contestation of these groups over their distinct ideas through an open and frank debate, and the resolution of these conflicts openly, transparently and democratically. Through a comparative study of the relationship between the state and Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia from 1982 to 2008, I argue that both states largely succeeded in integrating the political challenge of the Islamic Revival, transforming Muslim politics under a rubric of a “state Islam.” I contend that “state Islam” generally produced political moderation tinged with a growing cultural conservatism. However, in the bigger picture, these historical shifts in state Islamic policy had long-term unintended political consequences as they also created the conditions for a pluralist Indonesia and an anti-pluralist Malaysia today.

My thesis argues that state Islamic policy in the two countries was promulgated in the creation of new statutes and religious bureaucracies that regulated Islam through the “state Islam” nexus. From 1982 to 2008, the state persecuted mystical and minority Islamic sects and curbed the political autonomy of socio-religious organizations embedded in Islam. Using historical and contemporary case studies, I explain the variances in state Islamic policy and
political and socio-cultural pluralism. Critical junctures are examined where path dependencies led to a restructuring of the relationship between the state and Islam.

In Indonesia, the relationship between the state and Islam was often tense and defined by shifts in degrees of repression. Malaysian state Islamic policymaking was far more consistent, largely constituting an upward trajectory in the growing accommodation and promotion of Muslim piety and practice by the state, albeit with some conditions and close regulation by a rapidly expanding state religious bureaucracy. In the course of these twenty-five years, state policy in Indonesia was based on the repression of Islam through the political marginalization and subversion of the formal and informal institutions of Islamic piety and practice. This repression ultimately created greater political pluralism and diversity in public policy outcomes. On the other hand, state policy in Malaysia derived from the accommodation of Islam through the promotion and co-optation of similar institutions. Ironically this accommodation subsequently bred a narrowing of political and socio-cultural pluralism and diversity in similar public policy outcomes.

I begin the comparative analysis of Indonesia and Malaysia with a chapter that traces important historical and political developments of these two countries up to 1982. In subsequent chapters, I locate the origins of these distinct path dependencies at two early critical junctures, in 1982 in Malaysia and in 1989 in Indonesia. These distinct path dependencies first emerged as a result of critical junctures conditioned by the existing external geopolitical environment of the Islamic Revival, the confluence of specific periods of leadership transition and
factionalism at the very elite levels, and the appearance of new subordinate political entrepreneurs who drove policy change towards Islam.

The global Islamic Revival provided an initial spark in reshaping policy as it provided new challenges for regimes now vulnerable in terms of ideological and international legitimacy. An aging President Suharto of Indonesia in 1989 facing questions over a prospective leadership succession and a newly inaugurated Prime Minister of Mahathir of Malaysia in 1981, still insecure about his newly achieved political position, point to heightened periods of leadership transition and potential elite factionalism at the highest levels of both polities. The final factor that opened up similar critical junctures was the sudden appearance of subordinate political entrepreneurs (such as future President B. J. Habibie in Indonesia and future Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim) who actively embraced Islam in order to better position themselves for a post Suharto Indonesia and Post Mahathir Malaysia political landscape.

Constrained by these specific institutional constraints and political conditions, President Suharto of Indonesia in 1989 chose to accelerate the institutional repression of Islam, while Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia earlier in 1982 conversely sought institutional accommodation with Islam in service of his modernizing agenda for the country. These three factors created a critical juncture, which then provided an opportunity for policy change and shifts in degrees of political and socio-cultural pluralism. These path dependencies then evolved dynamically through the interaction of underlying structural constraints, and self-reinforcing dynamics. Contingent choices by political actors produced
increasing positive returns which then mediated the shifting political motives and orientations of individual political actors related to leadership and elite factionalism. Islamic state policymaking was also an intensely political project as actors such as Prime Minister Mahathir and President Suharto in each political context retained some autonomy after the imposition of these critical junctures.

Once initial critical junctures in Indonesia and Malaysia were arrived at in 1989 and 1982, the institutional restructuring of formal and informal institutions through the “state Islam” nexus took on separate and contrasting path dependencies in each country. In turn, these path dependencies imposed distinct pluralist and anti-pluralist institutional legacies. The new institutional legacies were then consolidated, when Indonesia’s Suharto fell from power in 1998 and when Malaysia’s Abdullah rose to power in 2003. In this respect, these legacies constricted the ability of contemporary political actors such as the MUI and Prime Minister Abdullah to realize their own independent political agendas that contradicted prevailing institutional legacies in their respective countries. To a degree, both state projects were flawed in conceptualization and implementation. Functioning mostly as the institutional repression of Islam in Indonesia, “state Islam” ultimately helped to produce a degree of political fluidity and socio-cultural pluralism in contemporary Indonesia. By contrast, in Malaysia, “state Islam” functioned primarily as the institutional accommodation of Islam; it produced political stagnation, hostility to political and socio-cultural pluralism, and an increasing emphasis on rigid, textual and conservative interpretations of Muslim piety and practice.
An alternative or counter-factual account of these empirical shifts in pluralism in the Indonesian and Malaysian cases might emphasize other explanations. Namely, regime type could be considered the strongest determinant in shaping the viability of pluralism in each country case study. In this respect, post Suharto Indonesia’s democratic transition has empowered political and socio-cultural pluralism, while Malaysia’s much more closed and mildly authoritarian system has conversely blocked the further promotion of pluralist ideals in its politics and governance. Furthermore, top down liberal democratic consolidation from the national government in Indonesia has entrenched strong constitutional protections of the freedom of association and the freedom of religion that has constricted contemporary political actors from outright banning Muslim Minority sects, such as Ahmadiyah in Indonesia. The absence of the active enforcement of these constitutional protections in Malaysia has empowered a co-existing sharia jurisprudence system that directly works against pluralism.

These explanations remain superficially appealing, but they overlook the role of history, and the historical development of regime types in Indonesia and Malaysia. Regime type in Indonesia and Malaysia has remained far from static. Indonesia from 1966 to 1998 under Suharto’s New Order was a resolutely authoritarian political system that launched wide ranging economic reforms while strictly controlling the political process. The early years of the Mahathir government under the Barisan Nasional ruling coalition government exhibited a wide degree of political pluralism and competition at the very elite level, as new Malay political actors emerged to challenge Mahathir in terms of policy and even
his very political leadership. Moreover, the formulation of policymaking towards Islam was heavily influenced by specific historical and institutional legacies that derived from the evolution of Islam’s constitutional position and its formal political role in Indonesia and Malaysia. Antecedent conditions creating a specific junctures were also historically derived. These conditions opened critical junctures which provided contingent choices to political actors to affect political and policy change. Self-reinforcing dynamics and increasing positive returns then explain how the interventions of specific political actors, primarily mediated by elite factionalism, subtly engendered different constellations of “state Islam” in the two countries. A focus on a regime type explanation underplays somewhat the autonomy and agency of political actors, and each of their contingent choices. Elaborating an explanation that is not primarily regime type based then provides an opportunity to emphasize history, contingency, and the choices of political actors.
CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL CONTEXT TO 1982

2.1 Coming of Islam to Southeast Asia

Islam has long historical and institutional roots in Southeast Asia, predating colonialism and the era of modern independent nation states. The coming of Islam to present day Indonesia and Malaysia was a relatively diffuse process where the religious tradition successfully adapted itself to local conditions with minimal political and cultural upheavals. The penetration of Islamic civilization (or Islamicate civilization according to Marshall Hodgson) into Southeast Asia’s Malay world had seminal implications. The Malay world had deep cultural affinities with South Asia, shaped as it was by successive waves of Hindu and Buddhist influences, and bound together by local tradition known as adat through a triad of Hindu-Buddhist syncretism and indigenous feudal kingship. Political unity was absent from the Malay world, then existing as a diverse group of indigenous states located from the Malay Peninsula to the Indonesian archipelago islands of Sumatra and Java.

Islam was first brought in as a religion by a new class of Muslim émigré traders based in newly emerging coastal port cities. The Sunni school of Islam dominated Southeast Asia, as Shia influences were entirely absent from these
initial contacts and diffusion of Islam. These Muslim merchants and traders represented a new cosmopolitan commerce in the backdrop of ideational change, radiating from a thriving Islamic civilization enveloping the Malay world. The thriving cosmopolitanism brought substantial material rewards, but only those who formally converted to Islam were granted unencumbered access. Islam was attractive on multiple levels, material and pragmatic. The religion fundamentally heralded the beginnings of a social revolution in the Malay world, with its emphasis on an individual’s personal access to the sacred without a formalized clergy class, its commitment to nominal class and racial equality, and its emphasis on acts over belief. The adherence to a strict moral code of conduct, rather than trying to reach into adherents’ inner thoughts and beliefs, shook a staid Malay world of entrenched political and religious hierarchies under feudal kingship.¹

It was in the 12th to 13th centuries that Islam arrived and spread in the Malay world, from Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra to much of the Malay Peninsula-Indonesian archipelago by 1500. The popular appeal of Islam cut across class and gender. A noted Indonesian historian, Michael Laffan, has convincingly painted the coming of Islam to the Malay world as a type of mutual negotiation and consensus between local rulers and their subjects. Rulers were drawn to the growing commercial power and prestige of Islam.

Conversely, their subjects of lower socio-economic strata were attracted by Islam’s social message. The arrival of Islam ended the standoff between commercial urban coastal centers and the rival inland-based rice cultivation based states. The coastal periphery triumphed over these previously hegemonic inland empires. Under Islam’s hegemony, the rapid sublimation of these sophisticated Hindu-Buddhist inland kingdoms was abrupt, but the Hindu-Buddhist influences never faded away and in fact persisted into the region’s rich cultural and religious make up.

The character of Islam in the Malay world and the context of its transmission would serve as important touchstones in the development of a singular Islamic tradition in island Southeast Asia. The peaceful spread of Islam through commerce, cosmopolitanism, and social revolution rather than through outright conquest and war smoothed the somewhat rough edges and doctrinal rigidities of Islam. As part of this process of diffusion, Islam grafted and adapted to an already rich local cultural and religious tableau. Local Islam in Southeast Asia then became constituted from indigenous traditions of local adat with entrenched religious traditions of Hinduism, and Buddhism.

Adat defines a particular set of cultural norms, values, customs, and practices for specific ethnic groups that are found in the Indonesian-Malaysian archipelago. These specific cultural attributes also encompass commonly held religious beliefs about both the supernatural and larger metaphysical beliefs about

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2 Michael Laffan, Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia, the Umma Below the Winds (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 11.
the nature of existence and life after death. The development of a particular mystical tradition in the most populous ethnic group in Indonesia, the Javanese *kebatinan*, serves as a striking and representative example how local folk religious traditions became important in Indonesia prior to the arrival of Islam in the region. *Kebatinan* interestingly eschews eschatology, life after death, or any concept of contrasting heaven and hell. Instead, the adherent is urged to find an inner path to religious contemplation and individual well-being to build a personal, enduring, and sustainable relationship with God. Most notably, *kebatinan* is a flexible and pragmatic belief system easily adaptable or syncretic to other religious traditions, most notably Islam, which also constructs moral universes or ideational worldviews. *Kebatinan* as religious *adat* reached its apogee in the aristocratic circles and royal courts of Java’s major Sultanates. It was also present in the Malay Peninsula where Arabic, Persian, and Malay traditions coexisted and thrived as a type of religious pluralism.

The indigenous traditions of *adat* then linked Southeast Asian Islam to other iconoclastic traditions in the Muslim World, most notably traditions of Sufism found in Turkey and Iran. The ethos of Sufism de-emphasizes official ritual and overly narrow readings of Islamic law (*Sharia*) in favor of transcendental and spiritually substantive approaches. Sufism turns to more inner and mystical approaches to faith, binding adherents to religious contemplation, meditation, and aestheticism through *zikr* (the repetition of the Names of God, supplications or formulas taken from hadith texts, and verses of the Koran).
Sufism also tapped into local folk traditions and reverence of prominent religious leaders.

The followers of Sufism organized themselves into orders and brotherhoods (*tarikat*), binding themselves to these specific respected Sufi masters. Many of these orders then established strong institutional bases or lodges (*tekke* or *dergah*) that continue to endure in Turkey today. These Sufi traditions found real resonance in a Southeast Asian context already buffeted by existing traditions of *adat* and *kebatinan*. The transmission of Islam to Southeast Asia through the integration of the Sufi brotherhoods among Muslim traders of the Islamic civilization reinforced the development of religious traditions of syncretism, adaptation, and retention of local color. This florid religious blend gave rise to a specific Island Southeast Asian Islamic practice of religious pluralism and tolerance.4

2.2 Islamic Modernism and Reform

In the late 19th century, the rise of Islamic modernism (or Islamic reformism) repositioned Islam in Southeast Asia in more outward directions, seeking internal revitalization and projected external confidence in order to directly meet the challenge of European colonialism. The forces and ideas of


Islamic modernism were integral to developing a spectrum of acceptable Muslim piety and practice. The spectrum is equivalent to a governing set of informal ideational institutions that underpin Islam as a religious tradition. Under European colonial rule, Islam interacted with more secular rational traditions and helped to forge the modern dynamics of nationhood and nationalism.

As articulated by the great intellectuals Jamaluddin Al-Afghani, Muhamad Abduh, and Rashid Ridha, Islamic modernism gained strength in the late 19th century in response to the political and economic decline of Islamic civilization, in the backdrop of European imperialism and dominance. They felt that the European occupation of much of the heartland of Islamic civilization in the Middle East had significantly damaged Muslim self-confidence and identity. Their critiques inspired individual Muslims to reassess Islam and create social movements to realign their governments to meet the challenge of modernity. For Al-Afghani and other like-minded intellectuals, the ethos of Islamic modernism had two impulses. Islam must embrace modernity by accepting the technological and intellectual innovations of the West and at the same time, it must return to the historical, original, and orthodox roots.

The Malay World was readily drawn to Islamic modernism, embracing in concert Western modernity and Islamic tradition to welcome the concepts of nationalism and the independent nation-state. Almost immediately, new Islamic political and intellectual currents came together to found hybrid political-religious institutions in Indonesia. In 1912, a group of independent indigenous Batik traders founded the first Pan-Indonesian political party and nationalist
organization, *Sarekat Islam* (Islamic Association) in Surakarta (Solo), a small regional city on the island of Java. The group came together to meet the threat of ethnic Chinese competition in the batik trade and deal with the perceived hostility of the Dutch colonial state. The Dutch almost immediately banned *Sarekat Islam* because they saw its potential as a vehicle for pan-Islamist mobilization and anti-colonial resistance. They later relented with the proviso that it remain a purely local organization, but *Sarekat Islam’s* place in Indonesian historiography and nationalist narrative was assured. The founding leaders of *Sarekat Islam* primarily saw the organization as a small commercial batik lobby and not necessarily as an organization for Pan-Islamism. *Sarekat Islam* was launched with a great deal of excitement and organizational vigor, but it quickly lost steam and faded away as a political force by 1921.

Soon after, two socio-religious organizations, *Muhammadiyah* (Followers of Muhamad) and *Nahdlatul Ulama* (Renaissance of Islamic Scholars), were founded. Despite holding very different orientations, both organizations were inspired by *Sarekat Islam* as a modern political organization and social interest group with a distinctively Muslim character. They remain significant in Indonesian politics because they continue to serve as the organized forces that shape acceptable and mainstream Muslim piety and practice. Founded by the modernist leader Ahmad Dahlan in 1912 in Yogyakarta, *Muhammadiyah* primarily focused on education and aimed to transform and upgrade the

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transmission and dissemination of Islam through new educational institutions and publications. It sought to strip local adaptations and syncretic embellishments in favor of a return to rigorous and orthodox interpretations of Muslim piety and practice.

The rise of *Muhammadiyah* and its new developing institutional empire posed a direct challenge to entrenched local traditions and religious leaders, who held sway over the interpretations of Islam in the Malay world until the arrival of Islamic modernism. Local religious institutions had been more fluid and adaptable, not given to overtly strict or rigorous interpretations of Islamic orthodoxy. The religious traditions of Hindu-Buddhist syncretism, having survived the first arrival of Islam and the onset of European colonial administrations, now faced a new deadly rival in the form of Islamic modernism. By claiming legitimacy through an appeal to Islam’s golden age and by applying modern mass techniques of organization and education, Islamic modernism threatened to wipe out the staying power and influence of local religious institutions that promoted pluralism and non-conformity.

*Nahdlatul Ulama* was founded in Surabaya in 1926 as a rival to *Muhammadiyah*, to counter the growth of Islamic modernism and to reaffirm the legitimacy and institutional foundations of Islamic traditionalism. The leaders of *Nahdlatul Ulama* came from Java’s traditionalist *Ulama* class (religious teachers). As an organization founded explicitly by the traditionalist *Ulama* class, *Nahdlatul Ulama*...
Ulama positioned itself as defender of traditionalist schools of theology and law. It took a stand against modernist interpretation and its marginalization of religious syncretism and local religious diversity.

From 1950 to 1957, during Indonesia’s brief constitutional, democratic period, Nahdlatul Ulama was an important political party represented in most national coalition governments, because it took on a more pragmatic approach than Islamic modernism in cooperating with state authorities. Conservative elements in the Indonesian Islamic constituency saw it as too closely politically aligned with mainstream secular nationalists who dominated the Indonesian independence movement. As a political and intellectual movement, Nahdlatul Ulama succeeded at protecting traditionalist religious institutions by courting state power and influence. Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama shaped the contours of modern Muslim politics in Indonesia by balancing the rival political and theological schools of Islamic modernism and Islamic traditionalism. The two mass socio-religious organizations served as sounding boards where European and Japanese colonial governments could conceptualize Islamic policy. Eventually the independent Indonesian state vetted Islamic opinion, leadership, and organizational dynamics mainly through these two rival organizations.

As in the Indonesian case, Islamic modernism reached Malaysia, but its influence in establishing large-scale socio-religious and educational institutions was limited. The geographic spread of Malaysia was one inhibitor to the creation of large-scale instruments of Islamic modernism. The Malay population was overwhelmingly rural and agriculturally based, which made the transmission of a
mostly urban-based Islamic modernism a logistical difficulty. The Malay Peninsula had a pluralist, divided society, where inter-ethnic group dynamics and communal tensions shaped pre-independence politics. Islamic modernist appeals attracted only Malays and held little cross-ethnic or national appeal for the broad population.

Some degree of Islamic modernism did have an influence in shaping the religious character and institutions of the Malay community. The appeal to a return to Islam’s golden age and emphasis on revived religious orthodoxy did not spark intense intellectual clashes between modernist and traditionalist schools. Without much competition, Islamic modernism in Malaysia molded itself into a new exclusivist, ethnic Malay identity with Islam as its symbolic center. Hussin Mutalib observes that

“…upon analysis, it is quite obvious that the reformist message, despite its approximately four decades of activism, was not very successful in broadening or opening up new vistas to the ethnic orientated culture of the Malays…a major reason for this was that the message was delivered against the backdrop of a less developed and parochial, feudal Malay society.”

In this respect, Islam became constituted in Malaysia as an ethno-social identity that distinguished Muslim Malays from the predominately non-Muslim Non-Malays. The Malay community was exclusively ethnic and kin-based, and even non-Malay converts to Islam were treated with suspicion and could not join the community despite now shared religious beliefs.

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This ethno-socialization of Islam has contemporary resonances in other contexts in the Muslim World. Post-Soviet independent states in Central Asia after the fall of Communism have also attempted to build intra-exclusive ethnic considerations into what constitutes a Muslim. These attempts were clearly aimed at building a new post-Soviet nationalist identity in Central Asia while putting ethnic Russians on the defensive.9

Such considerations of constructing a coherent political and ethnic community with fragile historical and cultural precedents provide close continuities with the Malaysian experience. Conversely, the distinctions about the close connection between ethnic community and Islam are entirely absent in Indonesia. The scale of Indonesia’s ethnic diversity and the spread of Islam across many of the archipelago’s ethnic communities made the delineation of strict ethnic conditions for Muslims in Indonesia moot.

The interchangeability of Islam and the Malay ethnicity became an important means to mobilize and empower a distinct Malay political and ethnic community that, in effect, had sharpened the distinctions between Malay and Non-Malay, Muslim and non-Muslim sectors. This polarization of ethnic communities in a pluralist Malaysia context served the interests of the embattled, dispirited Malay leadership on the defensive through both internal factionalism and the arrival of British commercial colonial interests.

Hardening ethnic and religious boundaries also served the interests of the ascendant British colonial establishment. The British in colonial Malaya recognized these ethnic distinctions of Islam in the peninsula and built them into their colonial governmental and educational institutions. By closely interlinking Malays and Muslims, the demographics of the Malay community were substantially expanded. New pro-British community leaders were identified and empowered, most notably the traditional Malay Rulers or Sultans, whom the British colonial authorities provided clear political protection. The subsequent elaboration of British colonial policy towards Islam reserved it strictly as an intra-ethnic concern of the Malay community. The British eventually created a hierarchal class structure in the Malay community, where men educated in traditional religious institutions (pondoks and madrassahs) ranked below those educated in English and Malay secular schools. The English educated Malays became the Malay backbone of the colonial civil service in pre and post independence Malaysia. They later served as the springboard of the Malay nationalist movement while individuals with a religious education largely played marginal roles in the struggles for independence in Malaysia.10

2.3 Islam, Independence, and the Secular State in Indonesia

The outbreak of the Pacific war in 1941 in Indonesia heralded the abrupt end of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia. The quick and stinging defeat of the

10 Louw, Everyday Islam.
Dutch over the course of a few months in early 1942 decisively ruptured the prestige and aura of Dutch colonial power and rendered post-war Indonesia difficult to govern. The Islamic policy of the Dutch colonial rule was built upon a series of political compromises, religious neutrality, and political vigilance, with assimilation as the eventual goal.

The colonial administrators sought to entrench distinctions in Islam between the political and the religious, but the Japanese occupation in 1942-1945 largely discarded these distinctions and encouraged the Indonesians to eradicate all vestiges of Dutch colonial rule. For their own material and strategic interests, the Japanese authorities moved to harness the power of Islam as an engine of social solidarity and political mobilization. They extracted Indonesia’s valuable commodities and natural resources with maximum efficiency and with the cooperation and active labor of local Indonesians. The Japanese interregnum was a short affair that began with the initial euphoria of liberation from Dutch colonial rule dissolving into the realities of harsh Japanese rule.

The Japanese occupation was cruel but it strengthened the position of Islam in post independence Indonesia. In his landmark *The Struggle of Islam in Modern Indonesia*, B. J. Boland identifies three significant developments: creation of a new state institution, the Office of Religious Affairs; the founding of the first modern Islamist political party, *Masyumi* (Council of Indonesian Muslim
Associations); and the establishment of the militia, *Hizbullah* (Party of God).\(^{11}\) The Office of Religious Affairs was the direct successor to the colonial Office of Native Affairs that Snouck Hurgronje once led. The Japanese transformed an office previously responsible for the administration of Islam in Indonesia into an office largely staffed and managed by Indonesians themselves. This office was a precursor for the creation of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in 1947. Founded in 1943, *Masyumi* provided the first model for an explicitly Muslim-based political party. It served as the political umbrella organization uniting various diverse Muslim organizations to support the Japanese occupation. The third development, *Hizbullah*, was created as a large militia organization for Muslim youths; after independence, many members were integrated into the Indonesian military.

During the occupation, the Japanese supported independence for Indonesia and supervised discussions over the political terms and constitutional structure of independence. As a consequence of these discussions, Indonesia “came into being neither as an Islamic state according to orthodox Islamic conceptions, nor as a secular state that would consider religion merely a private matter.”\(^{12}\) Sukarno’s political compromise to position a prospective independent Indonesia halfway between a strictly secular state and a rigidly theocratic state, also tied Indonesia and its nationalist movement to then contemporary political currents in the


\(^{12}\) Boland, *The Struggle of Islam*, 38.
Muslim World. Namely, the Indonesian nationalist movement led by Sukarno reflected a clear and widely held ambivalence over the example of Kemal Ataturk and nationalist Turkey in the greater Muslim World. Ataturk’s seminal example of his defiance of the West and a similar nationalist revolution in 1922 Turkey seemed to offer a clear and successful model for other nationalists for modern state building in the Muslim World. However, Ataturk’s confrontational and repressive relationship with Islam, along with his launching of a modernization process patterned closely on the Western experience, made it unlikely that a replication of the Turkey experience in an Indonesian context would occur.

Moreover, Ataturk’s abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 was the major cause of his unpopularity in the Muslim World. The act was perceived in Indonesia and in most of the Muslim World to be a blunt decapitation of the traditional spiritual heart and leadership of the Muslim World. Sukarno was cognizant of the Turkey experience and aimed to draw a relationship between the state and Islam that was not hostile and confrontational as it was in Kemalist Turkey, while also granting wide latitude to the nationalist secular establishment of Indonesia in its dealings with Islam. Hence, his rhetorical hedge of Indonesia legally defined as neither secular nor theocratic.

The Indonesian Muslim community, mostly not persuaded by the innovative synthesis, advocated the Jakarta Charter, a proposal that *sharia* law be

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included in the constitution. The seven Indonesian words of the preamble (dengan kewajiban menjalankan Syari’at Islam bagi pemeluk-pemeluknya) stress the obligation to live according to Islamic law for Muslims. But the Charter was ambiguous and unclear about whether the secular state was obliged to enforce religious law. Sukarno and the nationalist leadership dropped the Jakarta Charter because of the perceived threat that it posed for Indonesian secularism. Voiding the Jakarta Charter inflamed conservative Muslim elements and it became an important precedent for state policy towards Islam, respectful but ever vigilant. In many ways, it reached back to the Dutch colonial state’s covert institutional repression of Islam. Religious neutrality was implicit, but political vigilance, of ensuring that the state would carefully manage any political expression of Islam, was already present in post-independence Indonesia.

2.4 Islam, Independence and the Consociational Compromise in Malaysia

The Japanese occupation of Malaya was as brutal and trying as it was in neighboring Indonesia, but the country’s eventual path to independence was the antithesis of Indonesia’s revolutionary fervor. Indigenous political assertiveness and gradual British withdrawal characterized Malaya’s path to independence in 1957. A fragile, pluralist society and the growing ethnic polarization did not support a unified multi-ethnic nationalist movement for independence. After the

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14 Boland, The Struggle of Islam, 36.
15 Ibid.
Japanese left, the restoration of British rule was made more difficult because Japanese rule had encouraged independence movements. An imminent civil war delayed future talks on independence and constitutional arrangements. In 1948, a Communist insurgency (the Malayan Emergency) broke out and British officials launched an effective anti-insurgency campaign.

The British deprived the communist guerillas of support by resettling rural and Chinese populations while cultivating support from the conservative, anti-communist, and multi-ethnic elite. This cultivated elite formed the Barisan Nasional (Alliance) and spearheaded Malaysia’s independence movement. In 1951 and 1955, Barisan Nasional won local and national elections and formed the coalition government of Malaya when the British rule ended in 1957.

Articulating a role for Islam in post independence Malaya was a consensual and accommodative process. The Barisan Nasional leadership largely followed the British colonial precedent of accommodating Islam under strict political restriction. The colonial policy of the strict ethnic distinctions of Islam in colonial Malaya was integrated into post-independence negotiations. The Barisan Nasional negotiated a constitutional settlement that made Islam the official religion of the Federation, protecting religious freedoms for Non-Malay and non-Muslim minorities.

The relevant clause of the draft Malayan (later Malaysian) constitution made Islam the official religion of the Federation while allowing for the practice
of other religions. Islam was placed under the jurisdiction of local states and their Rulers, replicating the nature of British indirect rule but with some minor deviations. The constitution gave the Federation’s central government final primacy in the event of conflict between state law and federal law. It effectively ensured that Islam, *sharia*, and its other embedded institutions would fall rather unwillingly under the jurisdiction of a secular and multi-ethnic power-sharing government. The Federation’s official policy thus replicated the accommodative British approach to Islam by enshrining it as a collective symbol for the cultural identity of the ethnic Malays. The affairs of Islam became the affairs of local states and their local sultans. Islam remained symbolically important as a political and cultural identifier, but not as a more substantive political or governing ethic.

2.5 *The Nature of the Islamic Revival in Indonesia and Malaysia*

The resurgence of societal interest in both the private practice and public profile of Islam was another important qualitative shift that would mark post-independence Indonesian and Malaysian history. Beginning from the early 1970s, this “Islamic Revival” would reconfigure Indonesian and Malaysian society from the bottom up, while forcing their respective states to respond to these new societal currents through the formulation of new public policy.

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The specific origins of this Islamic Revival in the Southeast Asian context were complex and multifaceted. A stalled post war economic modernization and the struggles of implementing a secularist development model drove the Islamic Revival in the Middle East. This was a less relevant consideration in Southeast Asia where economic modernization was robust and the secularist development model not adopted wholeheartedly. The political and intellectual aftershocks of the Islamic Revival in the Middle East had primarily been spearheaded by new Islamist orientated political parties, socio-religious organizations, civil society groups, and intellectuals. These new groups thrived through the propagation of new debates and ideas through books, pamphlets, sound recordings, and other assorted media.

The influence of these new groups and their media eventually drifted to Southeast Asia and provided an important initial exogenous shock to the practice of Islam in Southeast Asia. However, both the distinct domestic political and cultural contexts of Indonesia and Malaysia channeled the Islamic Revival in new and interesting directions. The specific role of the relationship between Islam and Malay ethnicity, as originally institutionalized by the British colonial era Malayan state, was a major factor for the Islamic Revival in Malaysia turning into a mostly intra-ethnic Malay political and cultural movement. The authoritarian New Order state in Indonesia and the high degree of political control it exercised made the Islamic Revival initially a politically subversive force. The Revival then became

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a covert means for organizing political and cultural opposition to the Suharto regime.

Despite its diverse and contrasting origins, the Islamic Revival’s operationalization in Indonesia and Malaysia was very similar. Three distinctive and interrelated characteristics of the Islamic Revival in Indonesia and Malaysia were almost immediately apparent. Firstly, the Islamic Revival engendered a strong cultural consciousness among Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia. The Revival demanded immediately that Islam, as a religious tradition, had to be practiced first and foremost by individuals on a daily basis both privately and most notably in the public sphere. This new social compulsion generated by the Islamic Revival now made it imperative for individuals to adhere rigorously to the rituals of Islam, in terms of obligatory prayers, diet, dress, and the use of Arabic in daily language.

Secondly, the Islamic Revival also provided an ideological impetus for the implementation of Islamic ideals and precepts in the public sphere. Cultural consciousness first demanded that Islam be practiced much more openly and publicly. Now the political sphere had to be reconciled to Islam through new public policy to reflect Islamic ideals and precepts. Finally, the state in Indonesia and Malaysia would play crucial and often complimentary roles in channeling both the social and political demands of the Islamic Revival, as opposed to other jurisdictions in the Middle East, which often looked at Islam with undisguised hostility. The state’s crucial actions in promoting and sustaining the Islamic Revival were dependent on certain political actors and political conditions.
However, it was manifestly apparent that without the role of the state, the Islamic Revival would not have achieved its success in terms of political and cultural consciousness ultimately engendered in contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia.

2.6 Post Independence Politics of Indonesia and Malaysia to 1982

Indonesia experienced a brief period of post-independence constitutional democracy before it was overthrown in 1959 by the autocratic but chaotic regime of its founding leader Sukarno. Then the post 1959 Sukarno regime was succeeded by New Order regime of General Suharto (r. 1966-1998). The post-independence Sukarno regime was uninterested in establishing political stability and economic prosperity as the country was convulsed by national revolution, political radicalism, and economic disaster. Mass political violence accompanied the political transition to the Suharto regime in the mid 1960s. Economic modernization, political stability, and good relations with the West were the primary political and policy goals of Suharto’s government. The New Order regime was centrally concerned with matters of political survival and enforcing a stifling political consensus.

It was therefore implacably hostile towards the more orthodox components of Indonesian Islam, which were perceived to be a potentially dangerous opponent to political ascendance and military dominance of the New Order. The more pragmatic components of Indonesian Islam were represented by interests such as *Nahdlatul Ulama*; they co-operated to some degree with the Indonesian political
establishment. However, in the late 1980s, the New Order government and the more orthodox mainstream of Indonesian Islam constructed a tenuous and fragile political relationship.

Economic modernization driven by earlier free market reforms started to erode the political base of the New Order in the mid-1990s. New emergent middle classes started to push for more political transparency. In May 1998, the collapse of Suharto’s New Order regime fostered a vigorous democratic transition that implemented free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections, restored civil liberties, and supported a pluralistic political culture. However, a prospective consolidation of the new democratic regime is still not a settled question. Indonesia’s democratic consolidation continues to be threatened by corrupt excesses of Indonesia’s fledging democratic politicians, ethnic conflict between Muslims and Christians, and sectarianism and sporadic outbreaks of political violence and acts of terrorism by underground extremist Muslim activists.

In this respect, the political records on the accomplishments of Indonesia’s post democratic Presidents (President Abdurrahman Wahid, 1999-2001; President Megawati Sukarnoputri, 2001-2004; and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, 2004-present, have been mixed. Wahid was committed to the symbols and policy substance of fundamental democratic reform, but he was an ineffective President. Megawati was content to listen to good advice on economic matters from her advisors, but then pursued nationalist posturing through the military repression of separatists in Aceh. Yudhoyono is a talented politician but he is frequently an indecisive and overcautious political leader. In 2009 Indonesia celebrated its first
decade of democratic consolidation, but had to overcome significant obstacles in achieving this modicum of political stability. Today, the Indonesian state walks a perilous balance between sustaining open democratic politics and the challenges of preserving socio-cultural pluralism; often the most discordant voices are given public airings. Domestic pressure from the Indonesian security establishment and external pressure from some of Indonesia’s strongest Western allies mute these voices through harsh anti-civil liberties legislation that Indonesia’s democratic establishment in a conflicted position.

Malaysia’s political history has been far more sanguine, as it has been governed continuously since independence in 1957 by a multi-party, multi-ethnic ruling coalition known as the Barisan Nasional, and its successor, the National Front. The Malay political party, UMNO (United Malays National Organization), dominates the coalition and provides political continuity. Every single Malaysian Prime Minister to date are leaders of UMNO first and foremost (e.g., Prime Ministers Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1957-70; Tun Abdul Razak, 1970-76; Tun Hussein Onn, 1976-81; Mahathir Mohamad, 1981-2003; Abdullah Badawi, 2003-2009; and Najib Razak, 2009-present).

As UMNO recycles its leaders ad infinitum, Malaysia’s politics have been mostly stable, except in May 1969, when a single incident of communal conflict almost brought down the coalition and the insulated and cozy, elite-dominated system. Since 1971, the Malaysian state has almost exclusively focused on modernization and the economic uplift of the majority Malay, Muslim community through the contentious New Economic Policy (NEP). However, the ethnic
power-sharing institution of the Barisan Nasional and its internal coalition politics worked to correct the worst imbalances of the pro-Malay New Economic Policy.

Malaysia’s economic takeoff from the late 1970s also reduced inter-ethnic resentments and provided popular political support for the government through regular but often stage-managed national elections. The era of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad coincided with the golden age of Malaysian economic development. He transformed the Malaysian political landscape by power of a personal vision of Malay political dominance cemented by capitalism. His aggressive autocratic leadership style also eroded the legitimacy and political stability of Malaysia’s government, as the country experienced significant periods of authoritarianism. Mahathir’s sudden departure in 2003 brought a degree of political openness and reform under his immediate successor, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi. Mahathir’s political legacies of economic decline and a systemic breakdown of the multi-ethnic and elite dominated coalition politics left contemporary Malaysia facing hard economic and political choices.

Malaysia’s rapid period of economic development after 1970 coincided directly with the rise of religious political activism and consciousness, known locally as the dakwah movement. This religious grass roots movement fundamentally shook Malay society and forced the Malaysian state to respond. The subsequent embrace of Islam and most forms of its societal expression allowed the state to preempt active political threats from a Muslim based political constituency, but it also contributed to a growing religious conservatism of a state and a society uncomfortable with political transparency and any open debate
concerning the drift to a stagnant and official “state Islam.” In this respect, religious political mobilization and activism are present in Malaysia, but in a much more muted and low-key manner supervised and regulated by perceptive Malaysian state officials and their invasive religious bureaucracy. Malaysia displays none of the open democratic politics and vigorous political and socio-cultural pluralism of its larger neighbor, Indonesia. Its political and religious establishment has counterintuitively become generally hostile to any open religious debate and dialogue over the place of Islam in Malaysian society, marginalizing more diverse voices on Islam.

In the past half century, entrenched political and constitutional battles over the constitutional position of Islam were resolved decisively in the nationalist and secular interests of both states. These battles set the stage for future qualitative changes in state policies that would directly forge new institutional legacies in the near contemporary period. The rise of Islamic modernism and its contribution to developing a body of acceptable Muslim piety and practice renewed Islam as a social and political force. In turn, Islam as embedded in formal and informal institutions would become an important component of the political and cultural fabric of Indonesia and Malaysia in the post-independence era. The next two chapters cover extended developments in Indonesia under the Suharto government and in Malaysia under the Mahathir government.
CHAPTER 3

SUHARTO AND THE INSTITUTIONAL REPRESSION OF ISLAM, 1982-1994

President Suharto of Indonesia was too easily dismissed by international observers as the “smiling General,” when he first came to power following the aftermath the 1965 counter coup and its mass bloodletting of the partisans and supporters of Indonesian Communist Party. He was the pivotal figure at the heart of the New Order government for three decades that had restructured the institutions of Indonesian governance. Suharto’s path to political power and the institutional structures developed by his regime to govern Indonesia set the immediate context for the often tense and ambivalent relationship between the state and Islam in modern Indonesia. His regime was also heavily Jakarta-centric, as it centralized political control of Indonesia’s regions from Jakarta. The major political dynamic underscoring this relationship would be a concerted effort through institutional repression to keep Indonesian Islam wholly subservient and marginal to the New Order government.

The relationship between the state and Islam was confrontational and one-sided, as the state first sought to entirely undermine the traditional institutions of Indonesian Islam, and then, more significantly, craft a politically compliant Islam that would unquestioningly follow the state’s corporatist-derived political and
policy injunctions. This chapter will cover the course of this changing relationship between the state and Islam in Indonesia from 1982-1994. For much of this period, the Indonesian state and Indonesian Islam, as represented by its traditional socio-religious institutions, were at loggerheads and in confrontation. The New Order’s initial strategy of blunt political repression and coercion was illustrated by the *Pancasila* socialization policy and the closely linked Tanjung Priok massacre in September 1984. Such a strategy was effective in the immediate short term, but the New Order still faced significant long-term political challenges as the cultural and demographic impact of the Islamic Revival had yet to be fully played out. Indonesian Islam often chafed under the repressive political restrictions Suharto placed under it, but it did retain some reservoirs of political and ideational institutional resources that eventually constrained the regime to shift its strategy from overt repression to more stealthy repression.

This shift in tactics of repression coincided with the emergence of new antecedent political conditions confronting the New Order government. These new conditions included first an ongoing external geopolitical environment, the larger Islamic Revival, which gradually altered an entrenched regime’s political calculus of a continued distance from Islam. It heralded in a new period of leadership transition and factionalism that centered on an aging Suharto and an uncertain leadership succession, as subordinate political entrepreneurs took on an increasingly prominence. These personalities include B. J. Habibie, Minister of Research and Technology, and senior religious leader Abdurrahman Wahid. The New Order in its final days continued to be a repressive regime. Megawati
Sukarnoputri who represented a distinct Sukarno family nationalist legacy, was one of the most prominent political opponents of the regime during the New Order’s last decade. The nationalist challenge from Megawati is not within the scope of this thesis because the state’s response did not depart significantly from previous authoritarian corporatist strategies developed in the early 70s. I argue that the New Order’s relationship with Islam during this time frame was subtly different, employing new political strategies of institutional repression. I contend that in early 1989, the policy realignment to fine-tune state statutes and bureaucracies to be slightly more sympathetic to Islam represented a critical juncture where Suharto tactics of institutional repression were first developed. This involved the co-optation of the traditional socio-religious institutions by steering their constituencies through new state-mandated institutions, while attempting to undermine long standing traditional socio-religious institutions. These new tactics ultimately allowed the New Order regime to blunt the political challenge of Indonesian Islam in a far more comprehensive and systematic manner.

After 1989, the rubric of a Muslim politics in Indonesia would be transformed by the Suharto regime into a nascent and informal “state Islam” where Indonesian politicians, state religious bureaucracies, and the formal and informal institutions of Muslim piety and practice would co-exist uneasily. However, the repressiveness of Islamic state policymaking would lead to the development of a path dependency with unanticipated political and institutional consequences in the contemporary period. The inherent flaws of this repressive
approach, along with an unintended pluralist institutional legacy that emerged in a post Suharto democratic Indonesia, were first illustrated by the struggles of “state Islam”’s attempts to marginalize Abdurrahman Wahid in 1991-1994. The failure to overthrow Wahid at a National Congress in 1994 anticipated a contemporary Indonesia where Indonesian Islam maintains its autonomy from the state and repression no longer governs Indonesian state Islamic policymaking. In this respect, Suharto’s repressive apparatus, built upon existing historical and institutional legacies of the state’s relationship with Islam, conversely created the conditions for some degree of political and socio-cultural pluralism in contemporary democratic Indonesia.

3.1 Historical and Institutional Legacies of Suharto and Islam, 1982

The New Order’s predominant relationship with Islam was contentious and tinged with blunt repression. The regime’s emphasis on political consensus from 1971 on extinguished any expectations that Islam would play a substantial role in the New Order’s political institutions. Ironically, Indonesian Islam had previously been one of the strong supporters of the New Order in its early years. In 1972 traditionalist and modernist political opinions were consolidated in a single official political party, “the Unity Development Party.” The first step that diluted the prospective political power of Indonesian Islam can be traced to the restrictions on the overt use of religious symbols and political rhetoric that were placed on the Unity Development Party. This state-enshrined party was aligned
with Islam, but hopelessly deadlocked between personalities and divided along theological lines, it actually weakened Indonesian Islam as a viable political opposition.

The New Order government in the mid-1970s introduced several structural reforms that further eroded the institutional hegemony of Indonesian Islam. In January 1974, after much wrangling, a compromise reform to Indonesian family law was brought into parliament. The new legislation proposed to move much of existing marriage law from religious *sharia* law to a secular civil jurisdiction.\(^1\) The government’s rationalization for these reforms to standardize the marriage law was ostensibly straightforward. It argued that it needed to discourage polygamy and child marriage while providing real protections for women in cases of divorce and inheritance. Western observers and domestic supporters of the regime lauded these reforms as the first step to modernize and liberalize Indonesian society. However, in effect, the government’s reform of Indonesian family law by moving away from customary unwritten *adat* to modern written statute would have major implications for Indonesian Islam’s major political and socio-religious interests.

The bulk of Indonesian Muslim opinion was aghast at the tenor of this reform, which would suddenly upend a consensus on the family law that had governed Indonesian society since 1945. The introduction of secular civil courts and the option presented for non-religious, civil mixed marriages particularly

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enraged the traditional socio-religious institutions of Islam, whose leaders feared that most Indonesians would now opt for non-religious civil or mixed religious marriages. The threat of visible protest from Muslim youths over these marriage reforms subsequently led Suharto and the New Order to back down, out of political expediency. Components of the new marriage law deemed in conflict with *sharia* were deleted immediately, but the major thrust of the reforms in terms of introducing civil statute and the codification of law remained. In effect, both religious *sharia* law and secular civil law now shared jurisdiction over the private family affairs of all Indonesian Muslims. The government argued that these reforms did not contradict the spirit of religious *sharia* law, and so its legislation permitted restrictions on polygamy, child marriage, forced marriage, and divorce. However, the introduction of civil courts and their jurisdiction did represent an erosion of the social institutions of Islam and its near monopoly on the private affairs of its adherents. Buffeted by significant economic development on the back of oil boom in the 1970s, Suharto and the New Order entered its second decade in a strong position. With many political opponents vanquished, the regime had little appreciation of a growing social and demographic challenge that would later be repressed outright, or mollified significantly.

The Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan provided the overt political demonstration of an ongoing, fully-fledged revival of cultural and religious consciousness of Muslim piety and practice. This Islamic Revival in the Muslim World in turn became a domestic political concern that brought Islam to the renewed attention of the New Order’s
security organs. The overwhelming negative reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan increased political activism and political passions based upon Islam. However, the New Order’s similarity to the now deposed Shah’s government as secular and nationalist based regimes, both under the patronage of anti-Communist, Cold War political and security umbrellas of the United States was not lost on contemporary observers.²

A strong clerical-led Islamist political mobilization, as witnessed in the Iranian case, was not foreseen as a strong possibility on the horizon in Indonesia. However, the success of the Iranian Islamist opposition in deposing the repressive security apparatus of the Shah did give the regime pause to consider the potential danger of Indonesian Islam mounting such a challenge in the future if the New Order were to remain complacent. This fear of complacency, of not shifting strategy to anticipate the long-term demonstration effects of the Islamic Revival, would feed into a later reappraisal of the future direction of Islamic state policymaking immediately preceding critical juncture of early 1989. However, for the moment, blunt political repression and coercion were the prevailing political and policy tools of the New Order.

Contemporary outbreaks of small pockets of domestic extremist violence illustrated the impact that the Iranian Revolution had on Indonesian domestic politics. On 28 March 1981, a domestic DC-9 Garuda Airlines Flight 206 en route from Palembang to Medan was hijacked by a small cell of five Komando

Jihad members. The hijacked plane was diverted to Bangkok for a showdown. The hijackers demanded a 1.5 million USD ransom for the assorted motley of passengers that incidentally included three American nationals. They also demanded that the Indonesian government release some eighty Indonesian political prisoners and militants. Talks were “deadlocked” between the two sides. Three days later, Indonesian Kopassus commandos stormed the plane killed four of the five hijackers, and rescued forty-four passengers.¹ The government subsequently detained Sect members of Komando Jihad, who were placed on public trial in Jakarta from September 1982 to March 1983, to serve as a preemptive public deterrent to other extremist activists planning armed opposition to the state.² The Komando Jihad incident has been long forgotten in Indonesian historiography as a relatively minor and trivial incident of a random hijacking. However, contemporary policymakers could not anticipate this. The threat of further incidents of armed resistance from extremist factions could increase political pressure on the New Order; it was certainly one of the major factors driving the formulation of a confrontational and repressive Islamic state policymaking.

Finally, President Suharto’s personal ideological inclinations and those of his closest subordinates had a huge impact in shaping initial blunt approaches to state Islamic policymaking through secular nationalism and an authoritarian, corporatist, developmentalist ethos. In this respect, the strong personal character of the New Order’s authoritarian regime amplified the influence of specific political actors to shape and direct policy with little structural constraints. President Suharto came of age in a revolutionary Indonesia where the Sukarno postwar government subordinated Islam to nationalist and militarist agendas. Conservative religious mobilization in part played a role in Suharto’s rise to power in the maelstrom of the failed September 1965 Gestapu coup, but Suharto never wavered from his suspicion of and hostility towards Islam.

Suharto’s own personal religious adherence was also in question. In the early 1970s to the mid 1970s, Suharto’s closeness to Javanese Kebatinan, or mysticism, eroded the political and cultural cachet of mainstream Indonesian Islam. This personal attachment to the tenets of Javanese mysticism, of an unwavering belief in the power of the supernatural, was a frequent staple of international and domestic reports about Suharto.

The hostility of his subordinates to Islam was also influential. Suharto’s key associates included General Ali Murtopo⁵ who served as his personal aide

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and General Sumitro, who served as head of the Armed Forces. Suharto granted them a wide latitude and initiative to coordinate this institutional repression of Islam. The New Order was mostly a creature of the Cold War and anti-Communism. The government was dominated by the Indonesian military led by then General Suharto, who took power in the political vacuum of 1965-66, following a near collapse of a left leaning regime led by Indonesia’s founder, President Sukarno.

This new government, which quickly named itself the “New Order” to distinguish itself from a now discredited “Old Order” of Sukarno, took power in Indonesia with the strong political and economic support of Western governments. The New Order was dominated by Suharto with the support of the military; he sought the support and close collaboration of civilians to serve as economic managers and apolitical administrators. These economic managers and apolitical administrators, mostly trained in the West, would direct Indonesia’s economic modernization and embrace of capitalism while Indonesia’s military enforced an authoritarian political consensus in support of these goals of modernization.

Modernization essentially entailed a rapprochement with the West, which now was the only sustainable political direction for Indonesia in political and economic terms, given the near bankruptcy of the country by the Sukarno regime’s baffling economic policymaking. Modernization, according to Western economic precepts, also held significant ideological implications. Opting into and

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adapting to Western capitalist economic transformation required both a superficial commitment to apolitical pragmatism and an embrace of the values of secular modernization. Corporatism and militarism were the primary means of channeling this political pragmatism. General Murtopo envisioned a political restructuring of the Indonesian political system as an elite-dominated “depoliticization of Indonesia,” where the great masses of ordinary Indonesians were prevented from any real substantive political participation, except for carefully orchestrated ritualistic reenactments of “festivals of Indonesian democracy” on regular five-year intervals. Embracing modernization entailed a required material advancement of Indonesia in terms of wealth, resources, and consumption. Modernization, according to the New Order’s major intellectuals, also demanded an intellectual modernization. This intellectual modernization entailed confining Islam to the private sphere. Islam would now merely serve as an important cultural fabric of Indonesia, but it would take on no further socio-political connotations as related to Indonesian governance. The most important strategists of the New Order saw secularization as a major priority. It now meant that the traditional political and social institutions of embedded Islam in Indonesia would now have to carefully supervised and politically marginalized.

3.2 The Failures of Pancasila as Ideological Hammer, 1984

In its approach to Islam, the regime’s initial modernizing and corporate ethos would be vividly demonstrated by its efforts to undermine the political and social cohesion of Indonesia Islam through the blunt and ultimately ineffective *Pancasila* program. Through this program, the New Order government attempted to impose a new set of social and cultural values on all Islam-derived political parties and socio-religious institutions. Suharto then integrated this repression into Indonesia’s political timetable of 1982-1983. The People’s Consultative Assembly, *Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat*, the MPR, Indonesia’s supreme constitutional body, was scheduled to meet for the first time in five years in Jakarta in March 1983, after the parliamentary elections. It was a forgone conclusion it was going to reelect Suharto as President for another official five year term.

On New Year’s Day 1983, the government suddenly proposed the constitutional enshrining of the *Pancasila* declaration, as well as compelling all political and social forces in Indonesia to accept it as their guiding ideology. The *Pancasila*, an independence era document introduced by Indonesia’s founding President Sukarno as a symbolic means of providing ideological glue for a nascent Indonesian nation, was suddenly ever present again through its new prominence as an active agent of political socialization in New Order public policy.

A return to *Pancasila* was no accident as it was a culmination of the New Order’s attempts to construct a workable ideology, which had begun earlier in
1977-78. Conscious of the limits of avowed political pragmatism, and the vacuum it left to other political and social forces to fill with a competing value and social system, the New Order empaneled a body of experts to design a competing value system for the Indonesian populace. In this respect, the *Pancasila* program attempted to control the ideational and ideological landscape of Indonesia, by premising the importance of secular nationalism over other ideological competitors, such as Islam or a nascent civil society. Beginning in 1978, all civil servants below that of Cabinet Ministers were required to attend two-week mandatory workshops to “familiarize” themselves with the precepts of *Pancasila*. Dubbed “P4 courses” after the official Indonesian name for the workshops, it was unclear how effective was this process of socialization. With most civil servants out of the office fulfilling the requirements of the P4 courses, much of government business seemed to grind to a halt.8 The stated development of the *Pancasila* program was to move inculcation through workshops outside of governmental institutions and eventually into the greater population.

Despite the great amount of fanfare devoted to constructing a workable governing ideology out of *Pancasila*, it was still unclear what substantial utility came out of a process that mostly consisted of civil servants regurgitating *ad nauseam* the five generic principles of *Pancasila*: “Belief in One God,” humanitarianism, nationalism, democracy, and social justice.9 When the MPR eventually met in March, the extent of the government’s plans for the *Pancasila*

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9 Ibid.
program became much clearer. Not only did the government now mandate that all social and mass organizations adopt *Pancasila* as their guiding ideology, mechanisms for enforcement included the right of the government to dissolve or suspend any organizations that did not accept *Pancasila*.\(^{10}\)

The government’s *Pancasila* strategy was poorly conceived and conceptually incoherent. Most importantly, as a strategy of repression, it was ultimately ineffective as it precipitated now vociferous opposition and a renewed political mobilization from Indonesian Islam, which the strategy had been originally designed to preempt. In July 1983, Sjafruddin Prawiranegara, a former Republic Finance Minister, Prime Minister of the rebel PRRI government distributed a public letter to Suharto. Although Sjafruddin was a marginal figure in Suharto Indonesia, his letter nevertheless effectively spelled many objections to such a prospective to the *Pancasila* program. An English translation, published two years later in the prestigious Cornell journal, *Indonesia*, clearly shows the perceived threat and larger political and social implications from the *Pancasila* socialization program.

According to Prawiranegara’s letter, the passage of the *Pancasila* draft law on mass organizations had clear implications:

To put it briefly, if the Indonesian Muslim community is to be prohibited from establishing and maintaining Islamic associations, whether in the political field or in other social fields, this is not only in contravention of the 1945 Constitution-and thus in contravention of the *Pancasila* itself, but, in practice means an attempt to kill Islam-through the *Pancasila*! For the *Pancasila*, being a creation of men, can be interpreted and applied

according to the wishes and thoughts of men, namely those men who hold power, the power-holders controlling the Armed Forces! And in the long run, the teachings of religion—particularly the Islamic religion will—so I fear, and tens of millions of Indonesian Muslims share my fear—be suffocated by *Pancasila* Morality, *Pancasila* Economy, *Pancasila* Law, and all other such *Pancasila* offspring, the results of which we can already observe: alcoholism and narcotics, promiscuous sex and the resulting proliferation of venereal disease in society, particularly among teenagers, rampant criminality and corruption, alongside measures to combat them, which on the one hand are completely ineffective, and on the other hand show symptoms of no longer being under the control of [the] law.\(^{11}\)

The stakes were perceived as irretrievably high for Islam in the *Pancasila* debate. These actors perceived that the passage of the draft law could mean undermining Islam’s social cohesion through value change. This shift in values through the socialization of the avowedly secularist ideology, such as *Pancasila*, could substantially sideline Islam from Indonesian public life.

Concern about the potential far-reaching implications of *Pancasila* socialization began spreading from the top leadership of the embedded institutions of Indonesian Islam to its restive grassroots in some of Indonesia’s major metropolitan centers. A particular center that built resentment and anger was concentrated in the northern outskirts of Jakarta, in the heavily religious neighborhoods located near the harbor of Tanjung Priok. A small place of worship, the *Musholla As-Sa’adah*, was an important community gathering place and oasis for the communal prayers of many of the neighborhood men. A series of minor conflicts between area locals and the military personnel based at the Military District Commando Operation (*Kodim*) created an immediate atmosphere

of confrontation between the two parties. However, the specific issue of *Pancasila* socialization would prove to be a decisive factor in exacerbating the conflict into a full-blown massacre.

Earlier on, in 7-8 September 1984, soldiers visiting the prayer hall interrupted fiery sermons from local imams who were denigrating *Pancasila*. The arriving military personnel then allegedly entered the small *musholla* with their footwear intact—a great cultural offence to all Muslims. Inside the place of worship, the soldiers inspected the walls of the *musholla*, ripped down posters or pamphlets highly critical of the *Pancasila* socialization policy, and with another inflammatory gesture smeared gutter water on the other posters that they did not remove. A light scuffle between enraged local men worshipping at the *musholla* and the military personnel broke out immediately.

The crowd later burned a motorcycle belonging to the security forces as retaliation for the soldiers’ earlier conduct. Provoked even further, the soldiers then arrested and detained four local religious leaders for burning the motorcycle.\(^{12}\) Several days later, on the night of 12 September, a crowd of about 1,500 people gathered and decided to march to the local police headquarters to demand the release of the four local officials of the *musholla* detained by the military. Before the march was scheduled to begin, an open-air communal prayer

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was held with several imams giving even more fiery speeches about the specific dangers of *Pancasila* socialization. Upon the arrival of protestors at the police station, anxious security forces proceeded to fire indiscriminately into the crowd. The military’s shooting of the protestors was politically incomprehensible. But the security forces’ tactics were in line with the regime’s strategy of overt institutional repression, although the confusion and chaos on the ground caused an excessive use of force. Initial press releases at the time reported the government’s official casualty count of nine killed and fifty-three wounded; the figures were later adjusted to eighteen killed.

This confrontation in September 1984 became known as the Tanjung Priok massacre. In the immediate short term, it had no impact on the final passage of the *Pancasila* legislation through parliament. The government ruled out any compromise on the *Pancasila* bill. In his February 1985 budget speech, Suharto addressed the dissent from Islam by casually describing the recent crisis in Jakarta of September to October 1984 as “narrow acts of fanaticism…. forms of extremist activities which are harmful to us [Indonesians].”13 On 1 June 1985 parliament finally passed the *Pancasila* bill on mass organizations and mandated its adoption with strict allowances prescribed for enforcement. The voice vote in the chamber was unanimous.14

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In the long term, the Tanjung Priok massacre was a resounding political failure and strategic misstep for the New Order. The government’s shocking and unapologetic use of lethal force to subdue grassroots opposition to *Pancasila* socialization, a pretty innocuous and forgotten policy, made the victims martyrs and the incident became transformed into an iconic symbol of Suharto’s often-brutalized treatment of his citizens. The continued historical and political currency of the Tanjung Priok massacre was illustrated when the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998 allowed the incident to receive new scrutiny. In 2000 Indonesia’s Human Rights Commission followed up investigations of inquiry and increased the estimated casualties to some four hundred. In September 2003 another ad hoc human rights tribunal charged and tried eleven soldiers and a former Brigadier General in charge of *Kopassus*, Indonesia’s Special Forces, with the shootings and murders of the protestors in September 1984.\(^{15}\) The court acquitted eleven of the senior officers commanding troops, including a retired former Major General and Brigadier General. Only eleven remaining lower ranking soldiers were convicted and in September 2004, each was sentenced to two to three years in prison.\(^{16}\)


3.3 Critical Juncture: Islam and Suharto 1989

As the New Order approached its third decade in the late 1980s, the confluence of three factors worked together to open a critical juncture that would reshape state policy towards Islam in more substantive and fundamental directions. Firstly, prevailing international geopolitical constraints on the rise of the Islam changed domestic political calculations for the regime. The second factor was the emergence of a potential leadership challenge to an aging Suharto through increased elite factionalism. Thirdly, the prominence of new political entrepreneurs actively employing Islam to gain political advantage worked to reorientate the New Order into a more favorable relationship with Islam. In late 1988 and early 1989 the critical juncture arrived at and reconfigured the state’s relationship with Islam in new and more significant ways. The formulation of an alliance of New Order politicians (as represented by Suharto and his entourage), like-minded grassroots intellectuals and bureaucrats, and the formal and informal institutions of Muslim piety and practice in Indonesia created a new informal “state Islam” dynamic that effectively neutralized religious interests as a viable opponent of the New Order.

The first condition responsible for providing a critical juncture involved changing domestic political calculations related to external geopolitical constraints. These external geopolitical constraints were related to the rise of Islam through the Islamic Revival and its impact on domestic Indonesian politics. The New Order had easily repressed earlier manifestations of the Islamic Revival
through small extremist terrorist cells. The Islamic Revival remained a political concern for the regime, as evidenced by the government’s mooted *Pancasila* socialization policy and its resort to blunt repression, as seen in the widespread backlash of the policy through the Tanjung Priok massacre.

However, the political calculus of maintaining a strictly authoritarian blunt repression of Islam was now beginning to recede. The end of the Cold War in 1989 brought new challenges of domestic and international legitimacy. Most importantly, the regime suddenly felt vulnerable. Anti-Communism had once sustained the regime as a strong Western ally in regional Southeast Asia. It also provided credentials for the international community to embrace the regime despite the military’s brutal seizure of power in 1965-66. Domestically, the repression of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) had also served as the ideological foundation of the regime, binding the New Order’s military base to its nationalist and technocratic civilian allies.

The sudden political irrelevance of Anti-Communism, along with these shifting geopolitical conditions, started to erode the regime’s ideological and domestic political legitimacy. This new legitimacy vacuum provided an impetus for the New Order to become suddenly open to policy reversal in the role of Islam in the Indonesian political sphere. It also helped to change an entrenched domestic political calculation, that any political expressions of Islam were inherently subversive and had to be immediately repressed. Brute political repression was no longer smart or feasible, as it could create a backlash that overwhelmed the regime. Previous attempts at blunt repression, as demonstrated
by the flawed *Pancasila* socialization policy that produced the backlash of 1984 Tanjung Priok massacre, showed that the costs of repression now outweighed the benefits of limited engagement.

A controlled opening to Islam in the longer term might be a more sustainable strategy. In this respect, the response of the Indonesian state to an opening to Islam as a means of maintaining legitimacy was similar to other cases in the Muslim World, which mooted similar openings. These other international cases served as precedents for realizing a successful and controlled policy change on Islam. The 1980 coup by the Turkish military also marked a turning point of sorts for a once confrontational and hostile state relationship with Islam. State religious services were significantly expanded through the promotion of Islam as a compulsory subject in national education; in addition, state religious institutions were established with overlapping civil jurisdictions. Islam was now implicitly regarded as a component of a nationalist Turkish identity, in order to prop up the weakening secular Ataturk credentials of the regime.\(^{17}\) Finding convergences between an Indonesian nationalist, secularist identity with a new religious dimension offered domestic and international legitimacy for a regime that by the end of the Cold War was unnerved ideologically and geopolitically.

The emergence of significant concerns about the Presidential succession produced new political instability and factionalism at the highest levels of the New Order. The leadership factionalism was a second contributing factor to

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creating a critical juncture. With no viable or credible successor designated, the transformation of the New Order from a corporatist entity of balanced interests, to an increasingly personalistic dictatorship of Suharto, was complete by the late 1980s. The Indonesian military, which always served as a pillar of the regime, grew alarmed at this shift to a personalist dictatorship. Suharto himself began to politically break from his military subordinates, suspecting them of grooming another prospective rival and nationalist general as his successor.

In 1988, the first public indication of a split between Suharto and his nationalist military colleagues can be seen in the sacking of hardline military chief General Benny Murdani, who was sidelined to the powerless role of Defense Minister. Growing concerns over the question of succession was a major factor driving this seminal reconfiguration of the relationship between Suharto and the military. The New Order, primarily the relationship of a like-minded military elite and its civilian technocratic associates, became replaced by a personal oligarchy anchored by the Suharto family itself. This new emerging elite factionalism at the New Order’s highest levels became a major pole of Indonesia’s closed authoritarian domestic politics at the time and was much commented on by contemporary domestic and Indonesian observers. Viewing this critical juncture in 1989 through the lens of leadership transition and elite factionalism further illustrates the political context and rationale of why such an apparently startling flip of Islamic policymaking might make perfect political sense. Embracing

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political Islam allowed Suharto to preempt any lingering questions over a prospective succession. He hoped to leverage the political support of Islam through such organizations as ICMI (Association of Indonesian Islamic Intellectuals) against his nationalist opponents in the military. Appropriating Islam over a declining and irrelevant *Pancasila* would then shore up the regime’s faltering ideological basis and grant a new ideological legitimacy to the developmentalist, corporatist ethos of the New Order. The culmination of its shift towards Islam brought immediate short-term personal political rewards. It reinvigorated support for Suharto in his third decade as Indonesian President. However, it would also lay the foundations for more conservative Islamist socio-political forces, through the creation of existing institutions and organizational resources that enable them to become an important political and cultural constituency after Suharto was forced to leave office in 1998.

Finally, new political entrepreneurs emerged who helped to shift state policy to become much friendlier towards Islam. They were future Presidents B. J. Habibie and Abdurrahman Wahid, whose political constituencies were anchored firmly in Islam. These political actors were certainly subordinate to Suharto, but they held bright promising futures in a post Suharto Indonesia. As both worked towards the possibility of an eventual Presidential succession, the political space for Islam is firmly integrated into the political mainstream. Habibie would serve as a driving agent of policy and move the New Order state closer to Islam. Wahid, in parallel, would attempt to forge an alternative means of political activism for Islam outside the strict contours of the state.
From the opening to Islam in 1989-1990, B. J. Habibie was the most visible of these state-centric entrepreneurs. The longtime incumbent Minister of Research and Technology, he was exceptionally close to Suharto, having been adopted as Suharto’s surrogate son since childhood. Habibie’s life and his record of accomplishment made for an odd fit as a new religious leader, but he could potentially be harnessed and recruited as the New Order’s future political elite. He represented the emergence of a new political constituency: highly educated and technically efficient, devout but largely politically apathetic. The lives of Suharto and Habibie had crossed paths on Suharto’s posting to Sulawesi in the mid 1950s, when Suharto lodged with Habibie’s family and took a personal interest in Habibie when the latter was a child. With Suharto’s support, Habibie later achieved significant success in his education and career, trained as an aerospace engineer with a PhD. from Germany.

Habibie returned to Indonesia in 1978 on Suharto’s orders to translate his personal success into a compelling modernizing and technological vision for Indonesia.19 Appointed the Minister of Research and Technology, Habibie’s technical training as an engineer made him an ill-suited politician, but the direct access he enjoyed to Suharto made him an important political figure in the New Order. A personal interest in Islam came to Habibie late in life as he, along with many members of Indonesia’s middle and upper classes began to turn to Islam as an important aspect of reauthenticating their cultural identity. Habibie, however,

held no formal religious credentials beyond that of a nonprofessional scientist approaching the corpus of Islamic teachings and literature with an eye for self-reinvention as a combined technocrat and Imam.

Abdurrahman Wahid was a political enigma who defied easy categorization. Wahid’s personalist leadership style of eccentric individualism often disarmed both his political opponents and supporters. However, his relationship with the Suharto regime and the ad hoc “state Islam” nexus was also far from clear. At certain time points and under certain political conditions, Wahid served as a strong political ally and political opponent of the New Order government after 1989. Nevertheless, his political pedigree as the son and grandson of the leaders of *Nahdlatul Ulama* gave him some political leverage to protect him somewhat from the full weight of the repressive security apparatus of Suharto. He certainly was an unconventional politician willing to speak his mind and defy the political and cultural consensus enforced by the New Order. Neither was he a secular nationalist politician; he sought a political role for Islam to play in Indonesia through a constructive and democratic politics linked to a then nascent civil society.

Wahid’s interesting background shaped his political independence and sometime opposition to the New Order. His traditional religious education in Indonesia was followed by long periods of study and travel abroad. From 1963 to 1971, Wahid moved between Cairo, Baghdad, the Netherlands, France and Germany. Wahid had no formal degree or educational qualifications, but his cultural and intellectual immersion in his travels abroad had a huge impact on his
thinking and approach towards promoting a constructive role for Islam in Indonesian politics and society. A career as a public intellectual followed his return home to Indonesia, where he gained some public traction in promoting his ideas about the modernization of Indonesian Muslim thought and opinion. He also vigorously defended the institutions of Muslim traditionalism from the further onslaught of modernist forces.\(^{20}\) A genuinely independent political voice with his own power base in *Nahdlatul Ulama*, Wahid remained the last obstacle to the consolidation of the state’s unchallenged institutional repression of Islam. As Wahid increased his vocal public criticism of the regime, the state would retaliate by attempting to overthrow him via a proxy in 1994.

The three factors of external geopolitical constraints changing domestic political calculations, the emergence of leadership transition and elite factionalism, and the prominence of new Islam-centric political actors created a critical juncture. This critical juncture substantially reshaped state Islamic policymaking, creating a “state Islam” nexus. After 1989, the New Order’s transformation of Muslim politics under the rubric of “state Islam” sought to bind the traditional, social institutions and prerogatives of Indonesian Islam to the state and its bureaucracy.

The New Order’s first concrete step to creating a “state Islam” dynamic was initially disguised under an ostensibly significant concession. In early 1989, the New Order moved to strengthen the role and jurisdiction for *sharia* religious courts in family and marriage law. This in effect marked a policy flip-flop from earlier extensive attempts to introduce civil courts to provide a secular alternative

to regulating the private affairs of ordinary Indonesians. The existing legal and institutional status quo provided for both traditional sharia and secular civil courts to share jurisdictions over the body of Indonesian family law.

However, in early June 1989, the government circulated new draft legislation that significantly upgraded the authority and prestige of traditional sharia courts by granting exclusive jurisdiction of these courts over marital, endowment, and inheritance law. The careful balance and shared jurisdictions between sharia and civil courts was upended completely, as the decisions of sharia courts would now not have to be confirmed by secular civil courts.\textsuperscript{21} The other contentious part of the draft legislation included ambiguous provisions that could potentially extend the jurisdiction of sharia courts to more areas of the law, including criminal law.

The Minister of Religious Affairs at the time, Munawir Sjadzali, tried to reassure secular liberals and Indonesia’s non-Muslim minorities, that the reforms were essentially routine. He was quoted as saying: “We want to make one law applicable to all Indonesian Moslems no matter where they live…We want to provide a mechanism to help M[usl]ims comply with their religious responsibilities, not force them to…the presence of the Islamic law is merely a historical need and it won’t disrupt the unity and integrity of the nation.”\textsuperscript{22}


\textsuperscript{22} Quoted in Cooney, “Indonesia to Give More Power.”
Most contemporary observers realized the significant political implications and long lasting institutional transformations that the government had embarked on through its empowerment of *sharia* religious courts. The former cabinet Minister and leading member of the Petition of Fifty, Slamet Bratanata spoke of these concerns more directly: “It’s Suharto’s way of neutralizing the fundamentalists, of making himself the hero of the Moslems by giving them something they have always had.” On the ominous consequence of increasing the state’s entanglement with Islam in Indonesia, Bratanata made another far-reaching insight: “he [Suharto] doesn’t like to see anything autonomous. By reintroducing these courts he brings them under his control.” In July objections to the draft law were quickly dismissed and concerned legislators were told not to openly discuss the bill or mobilize public opinion.

The final form of the legislation, now entitled the Islamic Judicature Bill, ran to 108 sections and it was subsequently passed by parliament unanimously on 19 December 1989. Integrating the state’s bureaucracy with the formal and informal institutions of Indonesian Islam created a new institutional dynamic of “state Islam.” The legal scholar Mark Cammack’s retrospective analysis of 1989’s Religious Judicature Act in 1997 also sheds light on the state’s hegemony in this three-sided relationship:

> Although the government’s attitude toward official Islam had seemingly reversed itself, its more basic objective of acquiring control over Indonesian family law remained unchanged. Having settled on a policy of

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23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
cultivating rather than confronting Islam, the government set about to assert greater influence over Islamic courts and to establish itself as the authoritative interpreter of a distinctively Indonesian Islamic legal tradition. Rather than competing with Islam for legislative authority, the government is seeking to appropriate the power to declare Islamic law. Instead of defeating Islam, the regime has decided to confiscate it.26

Another component of the New Order’s turn towards Islam that generated significant attention was the establishment of the quasi state ICMI (Association of Indonesian Islamic Intellectuals) in Bandung on 7 December 1990. ICMI’s formal organizational status in New Order Indonesia was always quite ambiguous, as it constituted neither a new political party nor a new socio-religious organization. In any case, ICMI functioned as an effective vehicle for “state Islam” in Indonesia, placing important personnel in the ruling party of Golkar, the governmental bureaucracy, the military, and also within the major formal and informal institutions of Islam in Indonesia.

The official narrative states that the founding of the organization was a spontaneous and daring endeavor. In 6-9 December 1990, about 500 important Muslim intellectuals attended a three-day symposium at the University of Brawijaya in Malang, East Java, where they established a new vehicle of Muslim expression. This new institution was envisioned as a body that could integrate new religious perspectives on modernization and technology; it would also serve

as a vehicle of unity to bridge all Indonesian Muslim opinions, from pluralist traditionalist to orthodox modernist.27

However, the establishment of ICMI was quite clearly a state-sponsored component of the New Order’s multi-pronged turn towards Islam. On 29 November 1990, plans in fact for the establishment of ICMI were mooted in the domestic Indonesian press before the national symposium of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals took place a week later.28 On 6 December 1990, Suharto himself came to Malang to open the symposium, indicating how seriously the regime took the establishment of ICMI. After a few days of discussion, the name of B. J. Habibie, then Minister of Research and Technology was elected ICMI’s new Chairman on 6 December 1990.29

The establishment of ICMI was not another rehearsed and choreographed ritual of *faux* political participation as the New Order’s regular “festivals of democracy.” For participants of the symposium, ICMI felt like a real new beginning for the state and Islam in Indonesia. A *Jakarta Post* reporter at the meeting spoke to participants afterwards; he described the euphoria of the

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occasion with participants shouting *Allahu Akbar* (God is Great) and shedding tears of joy after ICMI was made official.\(^{30}\)

Adi Sasono, later Minister of Cooperatives and Habibie’s successor as ICMI Chairman in late 1990s democratic Indonesia, followed very closely the career and intellectual trajectory of Habibie. Sasono was another trained engineer with no formal religious training outside the informal instruction gleamed from peers study groups at university. His successful technical career in Habibie’s pet project of developing a domestic airline industry brought him into the orbit of Habibie and ICMI. Discussions with Sasono in Jakarta in early 2008 granted much insight into the heady days and excitement accompanying the founding of ICMI in 1990.

While Sasono was eager to recount ICMI’s political utopia of integration religion and technology, he was silent about the institution’s potential for political reform and democratization. The type of religious expression engendered by ICMI read implicitly into Sasono’s remarks was strictly of the political conformist variety, of channeling Islam for the New Order’s political ends and as decorative cultural cachet. Autonomous political action by ICMI was not even considered by the organization.\(^{31}\) In fact, the organization’s very existence depended on close ties to the Suharto regime and the patronage of Habibie as its titular leader.

This lack of a sustained and articulated political vision and agenda became more important when discussions moved to assessing ICMI’s long-term


\(^{31}\) Personal Interview with Adi Sasono, Jakarta, 1 May 2008.
institutional impact. When ICMI was first launched in 1990, much of the international and domestic press contemporaneously latched onto its potential of inspiring a greater encroachment of Islam into Indonesian public life. Reports of the expanding influence of the “ICMI lobby” or the “ICMI faction” at the highest levels of the New Order was a major trope of the academic literature of the time as observers tried to anticipate the shape of a post-Suharto Indonesia. The possibility of transforming ICMI into a real political party was squashed publicly very early on in December 1990, but speculation nonetheless continued when Suharto inducted several prominent members of ICMI to join Habibie in his major cabinet reshuffle of 1993.

The expanding influence of ICMI within the Indonesian military and the emergence of the self-identified “green faction” also generated much speculation, beginning with the appointment of General Feisal Tanjung as Indonesian Military Commander in 1993, who was considered sympathetic to ICMI. Reports about ICMI’s increasing power and influence in Indonesia in 1990-1993 were a frequent staple of academic study and press reports. The declarations that ICMI would somehow subsume traditional divisions in Indonesian Islam, and transcend the traditional socio-religious organizations of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, were very much premature. However, ICMI as an institution was nevertheless successful on its own terms by anchoring the new political and institutional

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infrastructure of “state Islam” in Indonesia, a move that would effectively bend religious interests to the political establishment of the New Order.  


A major factor crucial to the successful consolidation of a viable infrastructure of “state Islam” in Indonesia would be an attempt to assimilate Indonesia’s long entrenched mass socio-religious organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, under its carefully controlled umbrella. Theoretically, the emasculation of these two entrenched socio-religious institutions would then strengthen the new state approved competitor of ICMI. However, “state Islam” encountered significant problems in assimilating these two socio-religious institutions, most notably in its attempt to politically marginalize Abdurrahman Wahid. The struggles of “state Islam” point clearly to the ultimate resiliency of an Indonesian Islam that maintains its autonomy from the Indonesian state. In this respect, the foundations of a pluralist institutional legacy as embedded in a post Suharto contemporary Indonesia would also emerge during its unsuccessful attempt to oust Wahid as Nahdlatul Ulama leader in 1994.

Nahdlatul Ulama and its controversial leader Abdurrahman Wahid were significant political targets for Suharto and “state Islam” because they were most willing to fight to retain some autonomy in the authoritarian political landscape of

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33 Other important cultural concessions to Islam included the lifting of the ban on wearing of veils or jilbabs in all Indonesian public education institutions in January 1991, and abolishing the state lottery in November 1993.
the New Order. Accounting for Wahid was part of a larger strategy in the 1990s of containing potential Suharto opponents through often-blunt political repression; Megawati Sukarnoputri of the PDI (Indonesian Democratic Party) and the leftist PRD (People’s Democratic Party) were other significant political targets for an increasingly assertive Suharto security apparatus in the mid to the late 1990s.

NU’s great rival, Muhammadiyah avoided direct confrontation with the New Order government. The Sukarno government had banned its avowedly associated Islamist parties, such as Masyumi, much earlier in the early 1960s, putting it at a great political disadvantage in terms of political mobilization and the regeneration of a ready political cadre. The New Order government continued to enforce this ban, leaving Muhammadiyah to essentially concentrate on its educational institutions and eschew a formal political challenge to the government. In addition, due to existing repressive legacies, the glaring absence of a compelling and charismatic leader who could rally the organization, was another factor in its taciturn response to the New Order’s systemic repression.34

The targeting of Wahid was ironic because he was originally considered to be one of the New Order’s strongest allies in Indonesian Islam, as demonstrated by the organization’s non-confrontational approach to Pancasila socialization earlier in the decade. One of Wahid’s first most significant decision at the helm of NU in December 1984 was to take it formally out of politics by withdrawing it from active participation in the PPP, the New Order’s official Muslim political

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34 Personal Interview, Raja Juli Antoni, April 2008, Jakarta.
At the time Wahid’s stated reasons for this landmark decision was the need to return to the NU roots as a socio-religious organization and swear off any formal participation in Indonesian politics. Without much internal discussion or dissent, Wahid followed up NU’s decision to forsake active politics by heartily endorsing Pancasila as its new guiding ideology—a position welcomed by the New Order government.

Greg Barton, Wahid’s official biographer, had some interesting insights into the real nature of Wahid’s early and ostensibly friendly relations with the New Order. While the New Order saw Wahid and the NU as unquestioningly ratifying its political injunctions, Wahid saw them as necessary political compromises that could extract NU from the New Order’s institutional supervision and regulation. They could at the same time carve out some independence for the organization in the realms of social and civil affairs. With institutional autonomy granted to a leader of a socio-religious organization that at least formally had eschewed politics, Wahid paradoxically could then gain a huge amount of political advantage to speak out and critique some of more questionable initiatives of the New Order.

Wahid’s most singular political challenge to “state Islam” and ICMI was establishing the “Democracy Forum” on 4 April 1991. This new organization was an overtly non-sectarian grouping of forty-five prominent Indonesian intellectuals, ostensibly created as an educational association to “nurture political and cultural

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
consciousness among the Indonesian public.”37 The government’s first response to Democracy Forum was cautious. On 9 April 1991 then Interior Minister Rudini warned of damage that the forum could potentially do to the New Order’s political institutions, should it take on a more expansive role defending religious pluralism and Indonesia’s minorities. The warning sent the first message that the group’s activities would be severely circumscribed. Final approval of the group’s formation from the labyrinth bureaucracy of the Interior ministry came the next day, with two conditions. It must not exist outside the supervision of the New Order and it must change the name of “democracy forum.”38 The emergence of a critique and voice from within Indonesian Islam questioning the direction of the state Islamic policy put the New Order temporarily on the defensive. The resonance of Wahid’s critique forced the New Order to initially accept the Democracy Forum and stay muted in the face of Wahid’s provocative press statements. “State Islam” as anchored by ICMI had lost prestige and become damaged by Wahid’s pointed critiques.

However, Wahid’s personal leadership position was now made vulnerable by his public opposition to the New Order as internal dissent within Nahdlatul Ulama was becoming pronounced. Dissent centered on two major issues. The first issue was of NU’s original landmark decision in 1984 to withdraw from active politics and return to the organization’s roots as a pure socio-religious

organization. The decision was initially hailed at the time as a politically perceptive decision to extract NU from its position of political weakness in the PPP. Nevertheless, as the years of political wilderness continued for the NU, the commensurate lack of access to the New Order’s political patronage began to be resented by a significant minority of NU’s religious officials and Imams on the ground in Java. Wahid’s political interventions by directly confronting the New Order over its turn towards Islam drew critics who accused him of moving too far away from NU’s still largely conservative base of supporters. In addition, Wahid’s singular and iconoclastic leadership style relied on political bluff and improvisation that often exasperated supporter who longed for a rational and orderly decision-making style of leadership to control the often unwieldy and archaic NU organizational structure.

While in previous years Wahid could largely ignore and dismiss these criticisms outright, he could not afford to do so this time when NU’s 29th Muktamar NU (National Congress) was scheduled to meet on 1-5 December 1994 in Tasikmalaya, West Java. The National Congress would meet and vote for NU Chairman, effectively serving as a referendum on Wahid’s decade long stint as its leader. In this political context, the New Order saw its opportunity to assert the control of the “state Islam” nexus over Nahdlatul Ulama by ousting Wahid. However, it needed a proxy, another senior figure in the group’s hierarchy who could make a convincing stalking horse and credible contender to defeat Wahid as chairman.
However, Wahid’s decade long incumbency gave him a domestic and international visibility that no other plausible challenger could counter. In addition, Wahid’s family lineage as the grandson and son of previous *Nahdlatul Ulama* leaders granted him a deep loyalty and wide latitude in leading NU from most of the rural grassroots of the organization. The Indonesian domestic press could identify a growing backlash against Wahid’s leadership along the slogan “*asal jangan Gus Dur*” (anybody but Gus Dur) but internal divisions within the anti-Wahid sentiment significantly weakened their challenge. As the congress officially opened on 1 December 1994 most of the domestic and international media predicted an easy re-election victory by Wahid.39

To illustrate the very political significance of NU and this particular national congress, President Suharto once again traveled to Tasikmalaya to open the congress where 4,000 delegates had gathered. A week earlier the government had pledged that it would not interfere in the congress, but the scheduled arrival of ten cabinet ministers, along with the then Indonesian military commander, to attend the proceedings also guaranteed that it would not be entirely neutral in the coming referendum on Wahid’s leadership. Conflicting reports from the domestic Indonesian media on the second day of the congress painted a chaotic and tense

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picture of regional delegates being both physically and verbally intimidated by shadowy forces to not vote for Wahid’s election.\footnote{\textit{Merdeka}, “Gus Dur Diteror; Sejumlah Panitia Pusat Tinggalkan Muktamar,” 3 December 1994.}

Opposition to Wahid had now coalesced around the candidacy of Abu Hassan, a largely unknown 59-year-old businessman from East Java who was active in his local NU branch, but had little national profile. Hasan was an intriguing proxy for the New Order to use to undermine Wahid’s leadership. A widely successful businessman in telecommunications, transport, and contracting, he had little religious training. Having lived for seventeen years in the United States after obtaining a Master’s degree in Public Administration at Cambridge University, Hasan had a touch of cosmopolitanism in him.\footnote{What little that could be gleamed on Abu Hasan’s background are sourced from \textit{Suara Karya}, “Gus Dur Tetap Diperlukan Memacu Perkembangan NU,” 2 December 1994; \textit{Republika}, “Jatim Rela Lepas Gus Dur Asal Zaini Naik,” 2 December 1994.} Although he had little personal charisma to match that of Wahid, his reputation as a successful businessman, along with this experience and education overseas, made him a so-called “dark horse” challenger for Wahid.

The congress vote on the leadership of the NU was scheduled for 4 December 1994. Voting stretched into the early hours of the next day, on Sunday morning. Finally, at around 3 am, the results were announced. In the closest election for a NU Chairman ever, Wahid was reelected with 174 votes, defeating the “dark horse” and New Order proxy candidate Abu Hasan, who had 142 votes.\footnote{\textit{Republika}, “Gus Dur 174, Abu Hasan 142,” 6 December 1994; \textit{Kompas}, “Gus Dur Terpilih Lagi Jadi Ketua PBBNU,” 6 December 1994; \textit{Reuters}, “Indonesian Moslem Group Re-Elects Popular Leader,” 5 December 1994.} Wahid’s small but clear victory in the face of intimidation from
Suharto’s security organs confirmed the institutional autonomy that as an organization NU was able to maintain during the height of the New Order. However, it also indicates flawed state policymaking towards Islam to achieve a monopoly on the practice of Islam in Indonesia through extinguishing the autonomy of major representative sects and organizations such as the NU.

Once Wahid’s victory was clear through the Congress, Suharto’s “state Islam” faced a stronger and more resilient Wahid and NU. The New Order’s attempt to ferment more internal dissent from Hasan and his supporters were afterwards perfunctory. After being excluded from Wahid’s NU executive board, Hasan immediately formed his own rival NU executive board and pushed for another extraordinary NU congress to repeal the results of the close vote. Accusing Wahid of rigging the election and other irregularities, on 11 January 1995 Hasan filed with the Jakarta police a case of political slander against Wahid, who had accused him of embezzling development funds in Jakarta.43 The New Order threatened to further destabilize the NU by fanning more internal factionalism. It sent another clear message to Wahid, that he back off from further public visibility and criticism of the regime, in particular the growing nexus of “state Islam” as anchored by Habibie’s ICMI. Wahid strategically retreated from direct confrontation in order to maintain his immediate freedom and political viability in a prospective post-Suharto Indonesia. On 4 April 1995,

Wahid pledged the loyalty of *Nahdlatul Ulama* to Suharto and to his reelection.\textsuperscript{44} Abu Hasan disappeared from the political scene almost immediately after this declaration.

During the later stages of the New Order, the inherent weakness of the growing confluence of interests between the state and Islam was emblematized by its most determined opponent, Wahid. An intriguing figure, he was one of the regime’s most visible and outspoken critics, but he was supportive at times. He made sure to protect Indonesian Islam’s larger interests by carving a political space for Indonesian Islam outside of state mandated limits, carefully maintaining his political independence and the autonomy of his long-standing socio-religious institution. Wahid eventually managed to outmaneuver the regime at every turn and undermined the “state Islam” project by refusing to emasculate *Nahdlatul Ulama* under the repressive umbrella of “state Islam.” However, the muting of Democracy Forum proposed an alternative means of Indonesian Islam engaging with politics and the Indonesian state. Wahid’s efforts in this respect helped to push Indonesian Islam thoroughly into the political mainstream and establish its viability as an important political force in a post Suharto democratic Indonesia.

This chapter charted the long and complex relationship between the New Order government and Islam from 1980 to 1994. An initial political repression of Islam through *Pancasila* socialization was wholly unsuccessful in undermining the social cohesion of Islam. It provoked a vociferous backlash by Islam during the Tanjung Priok massacre that demonstrated the brute repression of the security

\textsuperscript{44} *The Jakarta Post*, “NU Pledges Allegiance to Suharto,” 4 April 1995.
The creation of a new “state Islam” dynamic after 1989 was a qualitative change in institutional repression that sought to bind Islam to the New Order’s corporatist authoritarian ethos. “State Islam” moved to grant substantive institutional concessions to Islam, which included the reforming of sharia religious courts and the establishment of a new state approved institutional vehicle for Muslim expression, ICMI (Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals).

Wahid’s very public political challenge to the New Order and the growing political and social consensus about “state Islam” provoked a concerted attempt to reassert direct political control of Nahdlatul Ulama by overthrowing Wahid. The New Order’s unsuccessful attempt to sack Wahid illustrated the ultimate resiliency of an Indonesian Islam under assault from coercive institutional repression and covert subterfuge. This New Order strategy would eventually impose a strong pluralist institutional legacy that would frame a post-Suharto democratic political landscape. The next chapter will move to cover comparative developments of the entangled relationship between the state and Islam in Malaysia during a similar period in 1981-1994.
Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad’s swearing in as Prime Minister of Malaysia on 10 July 1981 marked a political watershed in the difficult and contentious post-independence politics of Malaysia. It also served as a personal redemption of sorts for Malaysia’s most controversial and unconventional politician of his age. Under Mahathir’s leadership the Malaysian state embarked on a strategy of active institutional accommodation of Islam. The relationship between the state and Islam in Malaysia had always been cordial, but Islam held no political connotations and its status was purely symbolic. However, under Mahathir’s aegis, Islam moved from a passive decorative institution of the Malay community to becoming an active pillar of Malaysian governance as it transformed a neutral actor to a proactive agent of political and social Islamization.

State and Islam in effect became fused through substantive policy terms, creating a “state Islam” that would preempt any political challenges from the socio-political turmoil unleashed by the Islamic revival. In addition to advancing the ongoing Islamization of Malaysian state and society, this “state Islam” also served Mahathir’s political interests. It helped support Mahathir’s often embattled
and polarizing political leadership against internal UMNO Malay opponents and external challenges from the opposition Islamist political party of PAS.

My dissertation builds on and extends the academic treatment of Malaysia’s state Islamization project, but my emphasis is on the ideological and institutional implications of the project through a historical comparative analysis of a sequential and historically contingent narrative of Malaysia from 1981 to 1994. In contrast to the existing academic and secondary literature that posits state Islamization as ultimately a smooth and rational process by a savvy Malaysian state and self-interested politicians, I contend that the Malaysian state Islamization was a politically improvised strategy that neglected to anticipate long-ranging political and institutional consequences.

The decision to embark upon a systematic institutional accommodation of Islam was arrived at during a critical juncture in 1982. As in the Indonesian case, the critical juncture was driven by three antecedent conditions. The first was the prevailing international geopolitical constraints on the rise of the Islam, as translated domestically through the *Dakwah* movement. The second was the arrival of a new period of leadership transition and prospective elite factionalism, as embodied by the rise of a politically insecure and sensitive Mahathir. Thirdly, new political entrepreneurs gained prominence, most notably Anwar Ibrahim, who

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served as a driving agent of policy change as he moved the Malaysian government into a more favorable relationship with Islam. After this critical juncture, what drove this path dependence were issues of political leadership and elite factionalism that centered around Prime Minister Mahathir and, to a degree, his protégé Anwar Ibrahim.

In this chapter I show how the Mahathir government first embarked on a parallel institutional accommodation of Islam. From a political and institutional perspective, a “state Islam” was configurated when Anwar launched the state’s twin Islamization and Islamic Values campaigns in 1982-1985. Mahathir’s declining political position was driven by internal Malay UMNO factionalism and a political challenge anchored around the Islamist political party, the Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS, Partai Islam Se-Malaysia) that attempted to undermine the government’s Islam credentials. But the political and cultural interests aggregated around this very Malaysian “state Islam” rendered powerless the two leadership challenges.

The creation of a new anti-pluralist institution was a direct consequence of the state’s accommodativeness with Muslim piety and practice. The state attempted to eliminate the diversity in Malaysian Islam while repressing any free and open debate on the implications of state Islamization. An anti-pluralist bias of state Islamic policymaking can be observed in Mahathir’s political travails from internal UMNO factional enemies and external PAS political opponents in 1987-1993. It is also apparent in the government’s persecution of the controversial Darul Arqam Muslim minority sect in 1994.
4.1 Critical Juncture: Dakwah and the Rise of Mahathir, 1982

With the rise of new Prime Minister Mahathir in the early 1980s, Malaysia approached a new political era, at a point where the confluence of three factors worked together to open a critical juncture that would reshape state policy towards Islam in substantive and fundamental directions. Prevailing international geopolitical constraints on the rise of Islam, as translated domestically through the Dakwah movement, changed the political calculations of the entrenched Barisan Nasional government. Secondly, a new period of leadership transition and prospective elite factionalism can be observed in the rise to power of a politically insecure and sensitive Mahathir. Thirdly, new political entrepreneurs, most notably Anwar Ibrahim, actively employed Islam to gain political visibility as he worked to position the Malaysian government to a more favorable relationship with Islam.

The greater Islamic revival of the Muslim World served as an external geopolitical constraint. Its impact on Malaysia was demonstrated through the domestic Dakwah movement that played a large role in opening a critical juncture to the qualitative shift of state policy towards Islam. The Dakwah movement’s deep cultural and political inroads into the ethnic Malay community helped change a domestic political calculation that the national state should not play a role in state Islamic policymaking. The Dakwah movement’s increasing hold on a newly devout Malay community forced the state to respond, as it positioned itself as the community’s guardian and protector.
*Dakwah* is an Arab terming meaning “the call and refers to a Koranic injunction to spread the faith primarily through missionary activity. However, *Dakwah* in a particularistic Malaysian context represented a highly influential grass roots and national movement led by Malay youths. They wanted to bring the Islamic Revival to Malaysia by reinforcing Islamic precepts and principles primarily for the Malay ethnic majority. The *Dakwah* had roots similar to those of the Middle East, as seen from the aftershocks of economic modernization and development strategies that the Malaysian government committed to after 1970. The developmental strategies derived from the domestic institutional context, where the UMNO political establishment served as guardians and sole political and cultural representatives of the Malay community.

The constitutional negotiators of the postwar period had designed a power-sharing system and complicated coalition politics to balance Malay and *bumiputra* political supremacy with Non-Malay citizenship rights. This political compromise was a British mandated, pre-requisite for independence, but it was always a fragile and tenuous agreement known to locals as “The Bargain.” Non-Malays mounted political challenges to Malaysia’s elite, consociational coalition government, but Malays largely stood on the sidelines. When the Malays felt the impact of economic marginalization and declining political supremacy, communal riots erupted and threatened to break the connection between the Malay community and the Malaysian state.

The introduction of the far-reaching New Economic Policy in 1970 was an attempt to mollify Malay economic grievances through the economic planning
and redistributive mechanisms of the state. Although the New Economic Policy was not explicitly conceptualized as an accommodation of Islam, it did reinforce the precedent of the state to act wholly in the interests of the Malay community by tending to its political and economic grievances. As Dakwah began to gain widespread cultural resonance and influence from within the Malay community, policymakers felt compelled to move towards Islam in furtherance of the traditional role of the state as a Malay instrument. Therefore, later moves by the state to appropriate Islam were not greeted with much hostility, as the state was perceived to be acting in the best interests of the Malay community. This also reinforced earlier popular narratives of a benign state. As a state project, the New Economic Policy reflected a historical continuity from the British period, when the colonial state was explicitly positioned as a “protector of the Malays” or guardian of the community in opposition to the burgeoning commercial interests of the ethnic Non-Malays.

Modernization through uplifting the Malay community was driven by the New Economic Policy. It was explicitly framed as the primary political and policy response to Malay political and economic grievances that led to the 13 May 1969 race riots and the temporary suspension of parliament government. One of the major objectives of the NEP in terms of public policy was an emphasis on education and the rapid empowerment of the Malay community though beneficial quotas, subsidies, and scholarships for post-secondary education. By 1975, through these generous programs of allowances and scholarships, local Malay
university enrolment had reached 57.2 per cent, by 1978-79; new Malay enrolments for all five universities had reached a peak of 66.4 per cent.²

The NEP’s emphasis on education was important because the Dakwah movement was centrally a movement driven by youth and university students. In contrast to earlier more leftist student mobilizations, the Dakwah movement was more small scale and politically less visible in terms of outright protest and political mobilization. Influenced by existing modernist currents emanating from the larger Muslim World, the Dakwah pushed for Islamic purity and religious revival at the community and individual levels. Its leadership was initially centered on Malaysian students studying overseas on NEP government scholarships and assistance. Studying in the West, primarily in the United Kingdom, this new generation of Malay students was exposed to other Muslims studying in the same higher educational institutions. Not only did this new class of Malaysian students returned to Malaysia with upgraded educational skills and technical expertise to drive forward Malaysia’s greater modernization project, they brought home a new dedication and focus on greater adherence to Islamic piety and practice.³ Veteran and returning student leaders would use the inspiration of the movement to found their own local and national grassroots Dakwah centric groups.

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² The major local works by Malaysian academics worth noting on Islam and Dakwah are Zainah Anwar, Kebangkitan Islam di Kalangan Pelajar (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: IBC Buku, 1990); Chandra Muzzafar, Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia (Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti, 1987).
³ Muzzafar, Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia.
Some of the most important spin-off Dakwah groups include *Darul Arqam*, *Tabligh* and *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia*, and the Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM). *Darul Arqam* began as a small sect that in time became an important domestic political and religious challenger to the Malaysian government in the late 1980s. *Tabligh* was an interrelated sect of no more than 5,000 local members by the late 1970s. ABIM was the largest single representative of the Dakwah movement in 1979 it claimed to have 35,000-40,000 members. The ABIM leader was Anwar Ibrahim, a former leftist and Malay nationalist student activist, who had a strong public profile and was courted for high office by both the opposition Islamist political party PAS and the political establishment of UMNO. The larger Dakwah movement and local grassroots spin-off organizations provided the ideological stimulus of the greater Islamic Revival. Most importantly, the Dakwah political leadership and personnel drove the state of Malaysia, under the Mahathir government in 1981-1982, to move to a close engagement and collaboration with Islam. Dr. Mahathir now guided the larger cultural diffusion of the Dakwah ethic to Malaysian society to harness Islam; this ethic emerged as a major dynamic of the early Mahathir years.

Secondly, the rise of Prime Minister Mahathir marked a new development in Malaysian politics that increased elite factionalism. Mahathir was unlike any

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4 Zainah, *Kebangkitan Islam di Kalangan Pelajar*.
Prime Minister and UMNO leader before and after him. He was a professional and self-made man with no family connections in UMNO, a commoner with no Malay royal blood, and a politician with a singular ruthless and divisive leadership style that was often at odds with a traditionally languid and consensus building Malay political culture. As Mahathir bulldozed his way through the UMNO Malay elite establishment to implement his singular vision, his leadership style exacerbated elite factionalism.

His political rise was as rapid as it was significant. In 1970, only a decade earlier, he was a backbench MP newly expelled from UMNO with little political clout. After a brief period of political rehabilitation as a senior functionary in the Razak and Onn government from 1974-80, he was now the Prime Minister. Mahathir had began his political rise when he took a detour from his once promising medical career and budding success as an entrepreneur, when he was dispensing both medicine and advice to his mostly Malay patients at his burgeoning and successful medical clinic. He turned to politics when driven by ideological convictions to arrest the material decline of the Malay race and empower it through a material and intellectual modernization. In 1964 he was elected as an UMNO backbencher from his home of state of Kedah, Malaysia’s proverbial Malay heartland and agricultural rice bowl. His political career almost ended soon after it began, when he lost his parliamentary seat to an opposition PAS candidate in the 1969 elections. Mahathir quickly blamed his unexpected defeat on Malaysia’s clubby and insular multi-ethnic governing coalition at the time, then known as The Alliance. His defeat occurred as part of the wave of
Malaysia’s greater national political crisis in 1969, when the opposition came near victory and the resulting racial conflict upended the political establishment and its cozy consensus on ethnic relations. The discrediting of Malaysia’s political establishment provided the political opening for Mahathir’s most strident ideological convictions. Mahathir, now in the political wilderness, spoke out against the senior UMNO led establishment and was subsequently expelled from the party by Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman.6

The stated cause of Mahathir’s expulsion from UMNO on July 26, 1969 was his criticism of what he saw as Tunku’s complacent and over conciliatory reaction to the race riots in Kuala Lumpur on 13 May 1969. Mahathir championed Malay economic and political grievances and questioned the Prime Minister’s general approach to ethnic relations. In his *The Malay Dilemma* (published in Singapore in 1970) Mahathir wrote about Malay grievances and methodically and systematically examined what he understood as the biological and colonial origins of Malay economic malaise. With scant historical documentation or scholarly attribution, *The Malay Dilemma* points to a need for the government to introduce strong affirmative action programs to rectify minority disadvantages that derived primarily from the Malaysian Chinese dominance of urban, industrial, commercial sectors of the economy. The “dilemma” of the *Malay Dilemma* is whether Malays should accept this government support, and Mahathir concludes that they should.

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In July 1981, Mahathir’s ascension as Prime Minister of Malaysia brought renewed attention to *The Malay Dilemma* for documentary evidence of his personal ideological orientation and beliefs, as well as for clues on the political and policy directions that Mahathir was preparing to take the country. Later in the decade, Mahathir’s divisive leadership style would increase elite factionalism and almost topple his power. On 22 August 1981, eleven years after its ban and the political exile of its author, Mahathir, the Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister, Musa Hitam, lifted the official ban on *The Malay Dilemma.*

Mahathir’s conclusions in the *Malay Dilemma* are as cutting as they are racially inflammatory. Colonial racial stereotypes of Malays and Non-Malays are brought to the fore again, as seen in these passages: “The Malays are spiritually inclined, tolerant and easygoing” and “The Non-Malays, and especially the Chinese, are materialistic, aggressive and have an appetite for work.” Other passages claim absolute political hegemony of the Malay community over Malaysia. He reminds Malaysia’s minorities sternly: “if citizenship is conferred on races other than the Malays, it is because the Malays consent to this.” But the role of Islam in Mahathir’s thinking is ambivalent. He traces the economic stagnation of the Malays to the modern age, saying that the reason why the Malays had borne indignities inflicted on them by other races is Islam and its “fatality of people of the Islamic faith.”

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9 Ibid., 16.
feelings over Islam, Mahathir saw convergences between his modernization project, Islam, and the *Dakwah* movement’s effective political mobilization and activism. Channeling Islam to modernize Malaysia fits the larger political project of resolving long-standing Malay political and economic grievances and as such, it became a central political dynamic of many of the Mahathir years.

Mahathir’s meteoric rise in a decade, from obscure backbencher in 1964 to Prime Minister in 1981, was premised on his role as a strong Malay nationalist, an *Ultra*. That is, he was a vociferous nationalist champion who articulated Malay grievances very publicly and against the grain of what was seen to be a far too conciliatory political establishment helmed by Tunku Abdul Rahman. Therefore, Mahathir’s political rise was driven by the power of political ideals that pushed for the Malays themselves to develop intellectually and shed their rural, agricultural mindset to embrace the values of capitalism and entrepreneurship. Initially these lenses of modernization and capitalist accumulation drew Mahathir to the potential of a mutually beneficial, institutional accommodation between the Malaysian state and Islam.

However, Mahathir’s political rise was also a clear repudiation of the elite secular Malay establishment that has prospered since independence. During his long Premiership Mahathir would accumulate many political enemies from within this formerly dominant ruling establishment. The accommodative turn of the Malaysian state towards Islam through the “state Islam” nexus served Mahathir’s ideological goals of modernizing Malay society and the country at large, but it also developed along a parallel political track of protecting and promoting
Mahathir’s personal political position against an onset of both internal factional enemies and external political opponents.

Finally, the rise of new political entrepreneurs in Malaysian politics with political bases anchored firmly in Islam was another factor crucial to the creation of a critical juncture that would reshape Malaysian state policy towards Islam. The rise of Anwar Ibrahim in UMNO circles as Mahathir’s deputy would embody this new class of political entrepreneurs, who were ready to push firmly Islam as a political and policy agenda into elite Malay and UMNO circles. In early 1982, the 34-year-old Anwar was already a veteran of Malaysian politics, who had begun his career in the late 1960s to early 1970s as a Malay nationalist and student activist at the University of Malaya, when he protested about language policy. In 1973-74, Anwar was carried by the tide of student radicalism and then morphed into a leftist dissident who voiced concern over falling rubber prices and landless Malay peasants in Kedah.

In 1974-75, the onerous Internal Security Act (ISA) subjected Anwar to a twenty-two month stint under indefinite detention and suspended his budding political career. It also precipitated his third transformation into a dedicated Islamist activist with his own non-governmental organization. During the second half of the 1970s Anwar was preoccupied with his Yayasan Anda, a private religious school where he served as principal, and his personal political vehicle, ABIM (Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement). Officially founded in 1972, ABIM had grown to almost 40,000 members and by the end of the decade, had become significantly influential among the returning class of Dakwah students. Senior
Malay leaders recognized Anwar’s political talent for mobilization and organization. As a son of a minor UMNO political official from Penang, and educated in an elite English medium preparatory school, Anwar was a pillar of the Malaysian political establishment, but now temporarily estranged. By the beginning of the decade, Anwar’s active political involvement was limited to mobilizing fellow non-governmental organizations and independent organizations against the new restrictive legislation through the Societies Act in 1981. He also flirted with the opposition Islamist party, PAS.

Therefore, Mahathir’s announcement on 29 March 1982 that Anwar was immediately resigning as President of ABIM and joining UMNO was a political coup for the government. Mahathir and Anwar’s joint press conference on the following day was big news and a political spectacle that clearly rebounded in Mahathir’s favor.\textsuperscript{11} The recruitment of Anwar damaged the opposition PAS, as it portrayed a newly reinvigorated administration promising a substantial policy change on Islam that was to be guided by the star recruit, Anwar. The subsequent political landslide for a government reinvigorated by the Anwar defection went even beyond the coalition’s best scenarios. It captured almost 90\% of the country’s parliamentary seats with a decisive 60\% share of the popular vote - the greatest ever election victory for the coalition in Malaysia’s history.\textsuperscript{12}


Anwar’s election to parliament in the 1982 landslide from his home state of Penang facilitated his entry into government as a deputy Minister and close aide to Mahathir. At his introductory press conference of 29 March 1982, Anwar praised Mahathir effusively: “I believe strongly that he [Mahathir] has brought about a healthy climate for the development of Muslim society, for the development of Malays, and for the progress of justice and unity.” The remark shows an opportunistic political flip-flop for Anwar, who had once been a determined opponent of the government. Mahathir had tapped Anwar as his symbolic representative of the *Dakwah* generation with a wide mandate to introduce so-called Islamic precepts and principles into the Malaysian state and its associated institutions.

These Islamic precepts were then packaged for the Malaysian public and the outside world as Malaysia’s new “state Islamization program.” Speaking at length to the *Financial Times* journalist Kathryn Davies at the end of August 1982, only five months after his entry into government, Anwar was confident and typically verbose when commenting on the major changes ahead:

[Question] What is the role of Islam in modern Malaysian political life?

[Anwar] I think Islam has always been a force to be reckoned with by the ruling parties and by opposition parties—even non-Moslem parties. The Malay identity and Islam are somewhat indivisible. But of course, the awareness, the consciousness and the relevance of Islam in terms of our economic and social life are felt more now. More and more of our intellectuals, even those that are trained in the West, are calling for meaningful Islamic reforms.

[Question] How will the Islamisation process affect minority races?

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[Anwar] It depends on how you perceive the religion in the first place and then how we implement many of these policies. What is unfortunate is that in many Moslem societies the perception is very doctrinaire and dogmatic. What we mean when we talk about a general programme of Islamisation in this country involves institutions like the Islamic Bank. The Islamic Bank is just a modern banking system, without levying interest or usury on people: I think it is, therefore, free from being exploitative. But in terms of participation and management, non-Moslems are free to take part. We do not want to be portrayed as a bunch of fanatics somewhere on the lunatic fringe. I do not deny that there are some excesses even within the Islamic propagation movement but I don’t think they can be put forward as representing the general thinking and trend in the country. The Government is committed to having some Islamic programmes but we are also committed to ensure it is a rational view, that it is justly done with a measure of tolerance and to accommodate the wishes and ambitions of the non-Moslem people here.

[Question] What are Malaysia’s long-term plans for Islamisation?

[Anwar] In a system like ours it is competitive co-existence. People are free to choose. Many Moslems now, for example, have a problem because they feel that they cannot participate in the present modern banking system. But they cannot be deprived just because they disagree with the interest that is levied. Similarly, we are talking about a moral code in our society. This is not something that is difficult for the non-Moslem to comprehend. Moral code means to be concerned with the welfare of the poor, to be against any form of exploitation, to be active in combating racism, corruption. Of course I would see it from the Islamic perspective, while the Christian would say he wants to look at it from the Christian perspective. I’d have no qualms about that, as long as we try to put a better standard that’s generally acceptable to the community. I think it’s more significant to ensure that this Islamic movement transcends the Malay and the Moslem mood to become the general Malaysian mood.14

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4.2 Mahathir and Anwar: Overt State Islamization and Islamic Values, 1982-1987

In 1982, a critical juncture was created when the external geopolitical constraints changed the domestic political calculations of the Barisan Nasional government, a new period of leadership transition and elite factionalism arrived (as represented by the singular rise of a divisive Prime Minister in 1981), and new Islamic friendly political actors cum political entrepreneurs became prominent (as represented by Anwar Ibrahim). This critical juncture acted as an impetus that reshaped the Islamic policymaking of the Malaysian state in a fundamentally accommodative manner.

After 1982, the contours of Malaysian governance were based on restructuring formal political institutions and informal ideational institutions to be more accommodative of Islam. The accommodation process was centralized, top down and elite driven, dismissing right away potential opposition and any public debate. The first and most visible manifestation of this process was passing new statutes and creating new state bureaucracies that centered on Islam at the federal level. The second and more thinly disguised part of this process was embracing Islam with political rhetoric while harnessing its political and cultural ethic through social value change.

The success of both aspects of the process can be credited to Mahathir’s recruitment of Anwar Ibrahim, the most visible political representative of the Dakwah generation, as his personal protégé. He designated Anwar to be the leader of what was soon to be packaged to the Malaysian public as “state
Islamization” and a revolution in Malaysian governance. In July 1981, upon becoming Prime Minister Mahathir’s first major political objective was to obtain a personal electoral mandate for his leadership. Late that year, hints were dropped before Mahathir announced in March 1982 that Malaysians would be going to the polls on 22 April 1982, more than a full year before the government’s five-year term expired. The ruling Barisan Nasional’s landslide victory was a given fact, but growing internal UMNO factionalism and disquiet over Mahathir’s leadership convinced observers that the coalition would not replicate its stunning electoral victories of 1974 and 1978. Mahathir projected unquestioned confidence for the coming election because he was also simultaneously wooing and recruiting Malaysia’s most charismatic dissident and Islamist firebrand, Anwar Ibrahim, to UMNO and his government.

On 12 July 1982, Anwar announced that a delegation of Muslim scholars and experts would arrive in Malaysia the following week to consult on the government’s new plans to create a new International Islamic University in the country to diffuse and socialize the ideals of Islam. As one of the first attempts to tackle and implement an expressively Islamic centric financial system, these plans pushed Malaysia into the forefront of the Muslim World and clearly expressed the government’s new intentions to create and experiment with new forms of institutional Islamic expression to be based on value change. The government’s subsequent announcement of the introduction of mandatory Islamic civilization courses for students in all of Malaysia’s post secondary institutions was another
high profile effort to transform Malaysian society, particularly the Malays, in a more expressively Islamic-centric image.

Anwar spoke to a youth conference in November 1982, where he defended the government’s ongoing Islamization drive as simply “bringing Muslims to the Islamic Way of Life, and not turn[ing] them into religious fanatics.” On the recent decision to require mandatory instruction in Islamic studies, Anwar denied “attempts at religious conversion nor religious indoctrination…it’s a process to inject more spiritual values into our lives.” Anwar defended the government’s new approach to Islam, saying that it simply “ha[d] to upgrade spiritual and religious development, a field which has been largely neglected in society’s pursuit of material wealth…we must seek to understand the country’s vision because when there is vision there is light.” He transformed the political language of values and spirituality into a drumbeat of “Islamic Values” which now began to dominate the government’s political rhetoric.

Anwar’s speech to the youth assembly was significant because it was the first documented and elaborated speech from a major Malaysian political figure that premised state Islamization as an ideological campaign to socialize and indoctrinate values among Malaysians, primarily Malay youth. Later a moderately successful Malaysian Islamist politician with the opposition party PAS, Ahmad Awang was then an important civil servant in the Ministry of Education and the Islamic Division of the Prime Minister’s office in the early

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16 Ibid.
stages of the institutional accommodation of Islam. In an interview in 2008 in Kuala Lumpur, Awang confirmed the singular importance of Anwar as the political actor driving the institutional accommodation of Islam under Mahathir’s close aegis. He also spoke of the major ideological implications of such high profile campaigns on Islamic Values.\(^\text{17}\)

Awang felt that the close cooperation between the Malaysian political establishment (helmed by Mahathir and Anwar), a nascent state religious bureaucracy from where Awang was positioned, and Islamist grassroots movements closely associated with Anwar (such as ABIM, The Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement) drove Malaysian state policy towards Islam. For the most part, these three interests remained distinct from one another. The Malaysian political establishment exercised complete, unchallenged authority, but as Malaysian institutional accommodation proceeded through the decade, a nascent state religious bureaucracy gradually became more influential. This alliance of self-interested Malaysian politicians and their liked-minded grassroots activists formed a close alliance that would gradually dominate the Malaysian political establishment and its state bureaucracy. This alliance would eventually create the contours of a “state Islam” dynamic, which would quickly drive state Islamic policy and ultimately subsume Muslim politics in the country.

As part of the growing state rapprochement with Islam, the government then turned its attention to restructuring the formal political institutions and legal statutes of the state. In December 1982, Mahathir and Anwar pushed through

\(^{17}\) Interviewed at his office, Kuala Lumpur, 8 December 2007.
amendments to the penal and criminal procedure codes to give the national Malaysian state the sole discretion to interpret all religious tenets and precepts. The amendments passed included one giving the state the wide discretion to impose onerous punishments on any individuals or groups said to cause “disharmony” or “feelings of ill will,” or “whose actions prejudice … the maintenance of harmony or unity on the grounds of religion between people of the same religion or different religions.”

Not only would dissenting opinion and objections to the government’s Islamization program be essentially criminalized, the government also guaranteed by statute that “anything lawfully done by any religious official appointed, or by any religious authority established, constituted or appointed by any written law” could not be legally questioned or appealed. These two stunning legal and institutional reforms essentially opened the floodgates for unchallenged national state supremacy in religious affairs. They also precipitated the uncontrolled and wide-ranging process of Islamization throughout all Malaysian political and social institutions in 1982-1987.

In 1982-1983, one major touchstone of state initiatives in the early period of state Islamization was a new Kuala Lumpur master plan that contained no provisions for new burial grounds of non-Muslims while restricting the future expansion of Christian Churches to areas containing more than 40,000 Christians. New government regulations also mandated that all imported meat, irrespective of its consumption by religious community, be slaughtered according to Islamic rites.

Halal. The rights of non-Muslims to freely practice their religion came under fire with a decision to ban a Malay language version of the Bible. The use of “Allah” in the Malay language was subsequently reserved only for Islam. In addition, preliminary proposals by states to punish non-Muslims for offenses proscribed under Islamic Law, most notably Khalwat (close proximity to a member of the opposite sex not an immediate family member or spouse), indicated that state Islamization would now fundamentally reshape all of Malaysian society, be it Malay or Non-Malay. On the occasion of his 80th birthday on 8 February 1983, the princely Tunku Abdul Rahman (founding Prime Minister of Malaysia and bete noire of Mahathir) was alarmed over these major shifts in Malaysian governance and went so far as to urge the government to halt further Islamization for fear of inflaming non-Muslim sensibilities.

This pressure building from the former Malay political establishment did not by any means halt further state Islamization, but it did cause Mahathir himself to speak out at length about the project and once again downplay the major institutional implications of these shifts. Once again, the government employed the language of “Islamic Values” couched in non-confrontational and non-communal terms, as a major rhetorical strategy to undercut any emerging grassroots challenge to state Islamization. On 15 July 1983, at the end of the fasting month, Ramadan, Mahathir gave a lengthy English language interview to state television, and a transcript of his answers was widely reprinted in all the

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20 Ibid.
English newspaper dailies the next day. Mahathir’s lengthy response to the first query posed is very revealing and it is instructive to reproduce it here at length:

[Question] Can you tell us more about Islami[z]ation? The [Non] Malay community might have some apprehension about this policy. What are your views and what is the government’s objective in this matter?

[Mahathir] *What we mean by Islami[z]ation is to inject Islamic Values in the country’s administration.* The injecting of Islamic Values is different from imposing Islamic laws. Islamic law will apply only to Muslims. Although the laws of the country are not Islamic, they are not contrary to the needs of Islam and in certain situations are in consonance with Islam.

Islamic laws can only be imposed if all the people agree to it. We cannot force people to accept Islamic laws because there is no forcing in Islam. There is nothing wrong for a Muslim living in a non-Muslim country to obey laws of that country although they are not Islamic laws. In our country not all our people are Muslims. But I am confident that the Non-Muslims would not reject the Islamic Values because these values are good values. What Islam wants is justice, tolerance, recognition of other religions and respects for the beliefs in others, respecting the places of worship of other people, so that they too will respect our religion.

All these are line with Islamic Values and these are the things we can instill in the administration and the people. This I think could be accepted just as justice, tolerance, harmony among the various communities can be accepted. These are all Islamic Values.

So the process of Islami[z]ation does not mean the imposing of Islamic laws on non-Muslims, but merely injecting Islamic Values in the country’s administration and these values are acceptable to all.

The problem is that non-Muslims did not get a clear picture of our intentions because some people have been talking about the imposition of Islamic laws on them. The government does not intend to force this on anyone. As such, there is [sic] no reason for the non-Muslims to be alarmed.\(^{21}\)

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After 1982 the state’s qualitative shift towards intimate accommodation steadily began to take on serious anti-pluralist implications. Any potential political and cultural challenges to the national state’s monopoly on Islamic policymaking were repressed. The diversity of the practice of Islam in Malaysia, in terms of a wide representation of interests and open public debate on the merits, pro and con of state Islamization, began to be severely constricted. In this respect, Mahathir’s remarks in his July 1983 interview neglected to mention the clear constitutional implications of Malaysia’s new institutional accommodation with Islam. In December 1982 the amendments to the criminal and criminal procedure codes essentially served to impose the unchallenged supremacy of the national government in religious affairs.

However, this statutory reform also clearly violated the prerogatives of local states, and most particularly their Malay rulers, who by tradition and colonial practice retained complete autonomy in religious affairs. Moreover, the Malay Rulers had traditionally been tasked in Malay culture to be the protectors of Islam, as opposed to the secular authority granted to the national government.²² The Malay Rulers certainly held no real political power in Malaysia’s very rigid constitutional monarchy, but secular politicians in UMNO had traditionally deferred to the Malay Rulers in most cultural and religious matters. Now, the centralization of state Islamic policymaking made a political conflict more likely. A clash between the Rulers and the national government was brewing, but it

manifested itself in the most unlikely and trivial places—a dispute over setting the dates for the end of Ramadan, set to finish in mid July 1983.

The Malay Rulers of the states of Perak and Johor were incensed by the national government’s overreach into religious affairs. In early June 1983 they preemptively declared that they would each set the date for the ending of Ramadan, regardless of decisions or input by the national government on this matter.\(^{23}\) This open and major symbolic challenge to Mahathir and the national government now provoked a major political showdown between the constitutionally limited but often politically influential Malay Rulers and a confrontational national government eager to legislate them into political irrelevance. At stake was not only the political loyalties of the Malays and dominance of the Malaysian executive by Mahathir and UMNO, but also by proxy, the absolute discretion to govern Muslim piety and practice in Malaysia.

When parliament returned to session on 25 July 1983 after its break for Ramadan, the response of Mahathir and his government to the open dissent of the Rulers was clear. With great haste and absolute secrecy, the government formulated and then introduced some twenty-two constitutional amendments that subsequently passed on 10 August 1983.\(^{24}\) The amendments specifically targeted

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\(^{23}\) One of the major issues that still continue to plague the Muslim World is the lack of standardization of dates of important religious holidays and rituals. Dependent on a lunar calendar, and a myriad of standards related to astronomical observation and scholarly interpretation, Muslims throughout the world have often celebrated their important religious holidays on different days. The specific origins of the Malaysia dispute of 1983 is outlined in K. Das, “1028 and All That,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 14 July 1983.

the national office of the constitutional monarch of the Agung, by eliminating any provision for royal assent of legislation at the national level. If any legislation sat unsigned by the Agung for more than fifteen days, the legislation passed automatically. Other amendments also eliminated the Agung’s power to declare a national emergency. Instead, this statutory power was granted not to the formal head of state but to the constitutionally designated head of government, the Malaysian Prime Minister.25

On 20 November 1983, Malaysia’s constitutional crisis escalated to the next level when the Conference of Rulers, representing all nine of Malaysia’s Rulers met. The group publicly announced their final opposition to the passage of the proposed constitutional amendments that would decisively curb their powers.26 Mahathir’s response to the defiance of the Conference of Rulers was incendiary, and the local media were now granted permission to publicize the constitutional crisis without censorship. Discretion was now granted to report luridly on the personal excesses and scandals of Malay royalty. The resulting lengthy exposes on the personal scandalous conduct of Malaysia’s royalty discredited them as leaders of the Malay community, contrasting them against UMNO’s new image of religious sincerity and technocratic skill. The government now began to mobilize its partisans and supporters in public demonstrations across the country. On November 26, 1983 Mahathir himself returned to his

25 Rawlings, Malaysian Constitutional Crisis.
hometown of Alor Star, Kedah to speak to a demonstration of 50,000 supporters. He declared that he would not resign under any circumstances for provoking the constitutional crisis, as “I have no right to step down unless the people want me to.”

The government’s expectations of a new wave of public disgust towards Malay Rulers’ defiance were premature. The state media widely publicized selective mass protests organized by Mahathir and his allies, thereby increasing the political pressure on the Malay Rulers. On 8 December 1983, a protest in Batu Pahat, Johor, attracted some 100,000 protestors to hear Mahathir and his major allies in cabinet present their case against the Rulers. A week later Malaysia’s constitutional crisis ended with Mahathir and the national government the clear winners. The government compromised slightly by retaining the Rulers’ prerogatives of royal assent at the state level, but their assent was eliminated at the national level, with the safe harbor of fifteen days extended to thirty days when all federal legislation took effect with or without the Agung’s assent. The government essentially offered a compromise: the formal power to declare an emergency remained in the hands of the constitutional monarch, but this power became contingent on any advice proffered by the Malaysian Prime Minister.

Competing claims of jurisdiction over Islam made by Malaysian royalty and UMNO politicians, and between local states and the national government, had precipitated Malaysia’s constitutional crisis of 1983. The decisive victory for

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Mahathir all but confirmed the greater macro-shifts in Malaysian governance that the Mahathir-Anwar project of “state Islam” had engendered. The National government now held complete sway over Islam, with all dissent from the former Malay political establishment of secular Malay politicians and Malay royalty safely dispatched.

4.3 The Political Challenge to Mahathir, 1987-1993

In 1983-1987, with all statutory and symbolic political obstacles eliminated, state Islamization and its growing anti-pluralism proceeded relatively smoothly. This creation of a “state Islam” dynamic would centralize state Islamic policymaking, narrow the diversity of interests represented in the practice of Islam in Malaysia, and preempt any public debate on the consequences of Islamization in an often arbitrary and repressive manner. However, “state Islam” would also be influenced by concerns of political leadership, as observed in how Mahathir defeated several sustained and significant political challenges to his leadership. The challenges in 1987-1993 came from his own internal Malay UMNO detractors as well as from the opposition Islamist party PAS, which sought to take the mantle of Islam, and by implication, the loyalty of the Malay community away from Mahathir.

Mahathir felt empowered by his decisive defeat of Malaysia’s traditional Rulers and the ostensibly startling success of his state Islamization project. His leadership style became increasingly personalistic and autocratic, and soon he alienated even his closest cabinet colleagues. His personal triumph against the
Malay Rulers in the 1983 constitutional crisis marked a significant turning point and the beginning of a whole set of newly self-inflicted political wounds. The successful outcome of the constitutional crisis in Mahathir’s favor not only guaranteed that the state Islamization would continue unimpeded, it also marked the transformation of Malaysian governance into the rule of one man, as Mahathir and his steadily influential “kitchen cabinet” of political associates and advisors now dominated the Malaysian executive. The colleague that Mahathir secretly admired the most but increasingly resented was his political and party deputy, Deputy Prime Minister Musa Hitam. Tunku Abdul Rahman and the Malay UMNO political establishment marginalized Musa for his dissent over the Alliance’s policies. Musa’s punishment was not political expulsion from UMNO (as was Mahathir) but a period of overseas study before returning to the UMNO fold.

In 1982, Musa’s election as Deputy President of UMNO in an open internal UMNO party election automatically made him Malaysia’s next Deputy Prime Minister. Mahathir’s resentment of his high visibility was apparent early on, when the local press was instructed to drop any references to the “Two Ms” and highlight Mahathir only. Musa’s role in the early years of the administration largely focused on his portfolio as home minister, but he was also an eyewitness to the greater macro shifts of Malaysian governance driven by Mahathir and Anwar’s Islamization project. On occasions, Musa repeated the

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30 Bruce Gale, Musa Hitam: A Political Biography (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Eastern Universities Press, 1982).
political dogma of “Islamic Values” as he vaguely made assurances that the state’s new project was not going to turn out “fanatics.” However, after his retirement from politics, Musa recounted retrospectively that his heart was not in the project and he had no personal stake in its outcome. Nevertheless, Musa interpreted the state’s institutional accommodation of Islam in purely political terms.

The nascent political and cultural challenge of the Dakwah generation, as emblemized by the rise of Anwar, was an accidental by-product of Malaysia’s modernity project and the urbanization of the Malay community. Institutional accommodation of Islam therefore made for good political strategy, but he rejected the portrayal of the project as an attempt to fundamentally restructure Malaysia as an Islamic centric state, neither in terms of formal political institutions nor in adopting “Islamic Values” as the new ideational direction embedded in society. Musa was Malaysia’s Deputy Prime Minister for the early years of the state’s institutional accommodation of Islam. Surprisingly, Mahathir and Anwar had marginalized him while the two formulated policy approaches to Islam largely on their own, without the collective input of the rest of the cabinet and the Malaysian UMNO establishment.  

This evidence of a factional split between Mahathir and a more secular, nationalist UMNO establishment led by Musa would polarize Malaysian politics and almost topple Mahathir as Prime Minister.

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31 Personal Interview, Kuala Lumpur, 8 January 2008.
Mahathir’s hubris and the perception of his growing personal autocracy finally had to give. Musa could endure with great difficulty Mahathir’s continued degrading of the Malaysian cabinet, but he could no longer put up with Mahathir’s increasingly personal vindictiveness that demanded frequent and often humiliating demonstrations of personal loyalty to him from his subordinates. Musa’s official resignation came in an internally circulated letter to Mahathir that was leaked on 27 February 1986. In public he remained quite guarded about his political differences with Mahathir. His clear public reticence to engage in open factional conflict with Mahathir explains why he did not emerge as Mahathir’s direct challenger for the leadership of UMNO. The role of challenger increasingly fell to Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, the incumbent Minister of Trade and Industry and former longtime Minister of Finance. It was in this political context of undeclared factional conflict and unconfirmed rumors of deep personal rifts at the very heart of the UMNO political establishment that the ruling coalition faced Malaysian voters in the election that Mahathir called in 3 August 1986. Remarkable for a party and government damaged by growing factionalism, Mahathir secured another landslide victory, just losing 3% of the popular vote from the 1982 results and securing some 57.4% of the vote.\footnote{Diane K. Mauzy, “Malaysia in 1986; The Ups and Downs of Stock Market Politics,” \textit{Asian Survey} 27, (February 1987): 231-241.}

However, the real political contest in Malaysia in 1986-87 was not its national general elections, but the growing and deeply divisive UMNO factionalism. With national elections now completed, factional conflict erupted in
public. The now open political challenge to Mahathir tore UMNO apart and split the government, the cabinet, and the party. As competing sides formed open factions dubbed Team A (Pro-Mahathir) and Team B (Anti-Mahathir), Mahathir quickly reshuffled his cabinet and leveraged his credibility as an Islamic figure to outmaneuver his powerful factional opponents. Malaysia’s second political crisis of the 1980s culminated with UMNO’s internal party elections, now set for late April 1987. UMNO’s so called “Battle Royale” was the narrowest of Mahathir victories, as he secured only a razor-thin 43 vote majority in his reelection as UMNO party president over Razaleigh. Mahathir’s new deputy, Ghafar Baba, also secured a more surprising victory by knocking off the entrenched Musa for the deputy president post by a similarly slim margin of only 40 votes.33

As observers digested the narrow political survival of Mahathir and his allies, the larger results for the full panoply of minor UMNO party posts and supreme council seats demonstrated a major shift in the political and cultural orientation of the majority of grassroots UMNO delegates and its party cadres. Anwar Ibrahim, future Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, and Wan Mochtar Ahmed became the three Vice-presidents; contemporary press reports described them as representatives of the “Islam” faction slowly making waves into the formerly secular nationalist UMNO party establishment.34 Anwar’s visibility in the state Islamization project and background as a Dakwah activist clearly

34 Suhaini, “Vital Forty Three.”
identified his political orientation as a perhaps covert Islamist, but both Abdullah and Wan Mochtar could also claim allegiance to Islam through their family backgrounds as the children of revered and respected Malay religious scholars.

With his victory narrowly secure and his partisans now securely installed in some of the senior UMNO leadership positions, Mahathir was grateful for political Islam’s support and now accelerated Islamization. On 15 March 1988 in Selangor’s new state capital of Shah Alam, the Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah mosque that had been under construction since 1974 was officially opened. As the second largest mosque in Southeast Asia, the new mosque could accommodate 16,000 worshippers at one time. It fortuitous official opening publically and symbolically demonstrated that Malaysia was moving towards a more overt Islamic direction as it firmly put its colonial and secular past behind the imperatives of Islamization.35

More concrete and statutory steps followed in the acceleration of Malaysian state Islamization. In 1988 the introduction of the “Control and Restriction of Propagation of Non-Islamic Religions Enactment Law” in Selangor was part of a broader legislative onset by the government across all of Malaysia’s states, that officially banned non-Muslims in Malaysia for proselytizing or trying to convert Muslims.36 Built within this implicitly hostile legislation against

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36 The states of Trengganu and Kelantan had passed similar ordinances earlier in 1980-1981, but during the period 1988-1991, the remaining seven states, Kedah, Malacca, Perak, Selangor in 1988, Pahang in 1989 and Negeri Sembilan and Johor in 1991, rapidly passed their own anti-conversion statutes; Abdullah Saaed and Hassan Saaed, Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and
religious minorities were new statutes that expressively restricted twenty-five specific words in the Malay language (mostly religious terms and beliefs) from being included in any non-Muslim worship and literature. In 1989, the “Islamic Law Administration (Amendment) Act” was further evidence of the acceleration of the government’s state Islamization program and its anti-pluralist implications. In June of that year the Selangor state legislature that was controlled by UMNO passed a law permitting the conversion of minors to Islam without the consent of parents or guardians. The law effectively violated a constitutional guarantee that gave parents the right to determine their children’s religion. It created a predictable huge outcry among opposition political parties and non-Muslim, Non-Malay lobby groups to cancel or alter the law. Mahathir privately met these groups to hear their concerns, but state policy remained unchanged, as any larger public contestation over the implications of Islamization was not permitted. In March 1990 the Malaysian Supreme Court eventually ruled that Malaysian parents did indeed have the constitutional right to determine their children’s religion.

However, because of the weakness of the Malaysian judiciary and clashing courts’ jurisdictions, the government effectively ignored the decision and clearly violated the spirit and letter of the law. On 5 June 1990 Selangor’s Chief Minister

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Muhammad Taib simply announced that the conversion law was still valid, despite the Supreme Court’s decision.\(^{38}\)

The messy aftermath of the close party vote dominated Malaysian politics in the late 1980s. Mahathir’s internal and defeated opponents questioned the veracity of the vote and sought judicial intervention for their claims. The Malaysian Supreme Court eventually ruled that UMNO itself constituted an illegal organization as result of demonstrable irregularities during the party vote and subsequently ordered the party dissolved. This potentially devastating judicial intervention had little practical effect on Malaysian politics. Instead, Mahathir proceeded to create an entirely new political party that kept the UMNO moniker, UMNO Baru (“New UMNO”). Mahathir’s factional opponents then created a new opposition political party to oppose him, named Semangat 46, or “spirit of 46” after the the founding date of the original UMNO.

The long political fallout of this crisis is not directly pertinent to this chapter’s analysis.\(^{39}\) Mahathir’s calling of a national general election for 20 October 1990 to resolve any lingering questions on his stewardship of the country further politicized Malaysia’s ongoing state Islamization project. Mahathir’s victory was almost total in the 1990 elections. However, the Islamist party PAS, a minor coalition partner of Semangat 46, defeated UMNO in the conservative

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northern state of Kelantan. PAS’ surprise victory then allowed it to take control of that state’s machinery and government for the first time since it had governed it in coalition with UMNO between 1969 and 1978. This was a significant political development, as PAS only had a negligible presence in the national parliament with seven seats as a minor opposition party. However, PAS’ narrow victory at the state level in Kelantan could now serve as the only political jurisdiction where a sustained opposition to Barisan Nasional could thrive. Malaysia’s federal system and constitutional statutes ensured that PAS would also have a great deal of autonomy and latitude to run the state in whichever way they pleased. PAS’ political and policy inclinations were clear. The major electoral promise of its 1990 electoral platform was to impose an Islamic State in Kelantan through the introduction of Islamic or Sharia law directly into the criminal code.

Mahathir’s response to the challenge of PAS from Kelantan was quite disingenuous, but often politically astute. He kept his opponents off-guard through a series of frequent and often contradictory policy shifts and flip-flops. The government’s initial reaction to PAS’ stated intentions were cautious and rather strangely deferential. The scale of the political challenge from PAS, based on its rather vigorous assertion of an alternative Islamization, was significant for Mahathir and UMNO. PAS’ moves to impose an Islamic state at the state level in Kelantan, by introducing accelerated and concrete steps towards political and

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40 Mauzy, *Barisan Nasional; Means, Malaysian Politics.*
legal Islamization regardless of Malaysia’s secular constitution and its non-Muslim minorities, threatened to steal the mantle of Islam away from UMNO. This move would consolidate an already emerging anti-pluralist impulse, because any wider public debate on the pros and cons of state accommodation of Islam was severely restricted and solely confined to an intra-Malay political party competition, i.e., between an ostensibly secular UMNO and an avowedly Islamist PAS.

The input of Non-Malays and non-Muslims in this debate would not be sought. However, Mahathir initially dictated compromise and conciliation. In early January 1991 after a UMNO party meeting, he spoke to the press, seeming to indicate that UMNO and the national government had no immediate objections to PAS’ plans:

The Federal government has no intention of interfering with the plan by the Kelantan state government to introduce Islamic hudud (mandatory) laws, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

“We are not in power there. It is under Parti Islam and we leave it to them to rule,” he added. Dr. Mahathir who was speaking to reporters after chairing the monthly supreme council meeting of UMNO-the head of the National Front coalition-said that the PAS-led government in Kelantan had the jurisdiction to introduce Islamic laws in many areas of life.

“If they want to go to court to clarify their powers, it is up to them. We do not forbid,” he added. In such an eventuality, Dr Mahathir said that the federal government was prepared to go to court to help in determining what the Kelantan state government could do and could not do under the Federal Constitution. “It is up to the judge to decide whether they can cut hands and heads and whether such punishments should only be restricted to Muslims.”

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Mahathir then almost immediately went behind the scenes to sabotage PAS’s plans. The international uproar over *sharia* and *hudud* may have also played a factor, but mixed signals from Mahathir and the national government in public, vaguely supportive but constitutionally uncommitted behind close doors, may have also played a decisive role in delaying the legislation. PAS’ plans to introduce *sharia* law, along with those onerous *Hudud* punishments, was then put on hold in February 1991, in order for the party to build political and institutional momentum to draft and implement the appropriate legislation.\(^43\) In April 1992, the PAS government’s final tabling of the *sharia* and *hudud* legislation in the Kelantan state legislature created a new uproar among the national government’s minority constituent parties. It forced a confrontation between the Kelantan state and national government over the heart and souls of Malays between UMNO and PAS.

Mahathir’s surprising response was to shift gears and endorse PAS’ plans for *sharia* legislation. In effect, as the confrontation stretched from April 1992 to its final resolution in March 1994, Mahathir and his allies harnessed the political and institutional resources of “state Islam” to defeat the PAS challenge by co-opting the Islamist party’s political program. Substantively there now existed little daylight between PAS’ and UMNO’s positions on the *sharia* and *hudud* issue as Mahathir sought to outflank his PAS opponents by playing the “state Islam” card. Initial reaction from a minor UMNO politician in the Prime

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Minister’s office on 4 April 1992 seemed to indicate that any sharia or hudud legislation passed by the Kelantan state government had to be approved by the national government because it involved passing amendments to the constitution, thus effectively scuttling PAS’ plans.44

However, on 19 April 1992 this statement was contradicted directly by Mahathir himself who, in the midst of a contentious by-election campaign against PAS in neighboring Trengganu, spoke out that the national government would now not oppose any of PAS’ moves in Kelantan. Many political observers at that time commented that Mahathir’s statement seemed to strengthen UMNO in the by-election campaign as it effectively took PAS’ criticisms of UMNO’s Islamist polices off the table. A subsequent narrow UMNO victory in this marginal Malay majority constituency seemed to ratify Mahathir’s emerging strategy not to challenge PAS on the merits of sharia and Islamization, but to take issue with PAS’ interpretations and implementation of sharia—a subtle, but most important distinction. Implicitly, such Islamization must only proceed on the national level, as controlled by UMNO, and not through any local state jurisdiction under the control of PAS, as in Kelantan.

On 2 May 1992 Mahathir’s strategy first appeared when he directly warned PAS to exercise caution and study its plan in depth before implementing Islamic law in Kelantan.45 However his then Deputy Prime Minister Ghafar Baba was more explicit when he declared on 12 May 1992 that UMNO had “at all times

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put Islam first and is not against *hudud* laws which PAS plans to implement in Kelantan.”

Explaining further, Ghafar indicated, “UMNO supported *hudud* laws in principle but it would first study whether PAS’ move to amend the federal constitution to pave way for such laws would create strife and violate the people’s basic rights.” The government’s major response to the challenge of PAS was a shift in political strategy, reversing UMNO and the government’s long-standing opposition to *hudud* with the proviso that any technical or constitutional issues must be worked out first on a national level before its eventual implementation. This shift greatly upset UMNO’s traditional minority partners, but their increasing political irrelevance made any internal coalition opposition mute. When the PAS state government in Kelantan finally tabled and passed their version of *sharia* and *hudud* law in the legislature in 25 November 1993, it felt like a bit of a gigantic anti-climax after three long years of political struggle and controversy.

Mahathir then ordered the national government to change positions once again, after the immediate political confrontation with PAS had ended and the state *sharia* legislation had passed. The need to appease the coalition’s Non-Malay constituent allies now outweighed the coalition’s need to outflank its Malay PAS political opponents. The national government turned to a strategy of

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47 Ibid.

an uncharacteristic silence. In comments to the local and regional press Mahathir indicated his skepticism that the state government had not considered all doubts and stated opposition to its *sharia* bill, while also remaining non-committal that the national government needed more time to study the full implications and consequences of PAS’ legislation.

The final government response came on 5 March 1994 with Mahathir personally declaring that the national government had rejected the state government of Kelantan’s *sharia* legislation on the basis that it was incompatible with the Malaysian constitution. Mahathir’s strategic political savvy and political machinations had resolved a potentially sticky situation for his government. The final outright rejection killed the *sharia* as a potentially political issue; it also satisfied all of the government’s component minority partners. The government could also project to the international community of the continued “moderate” and secular direction of Malaysian governance. However, the government’s earlier endorsement of the state *sharia* legislation, later repudiated, also ensured that its chastened PAS opponents could not label the coalition “anti-Islam.” In this respect, Mahathir’s specific explanation for his government’s rejection of PAS’ Islamization initiatives served to maintain the government’s credibility as “Pro-Islam.” The stated reasons for the rejection of the legislation were essentially technical concerns of implementation and not on the substance of accelerated legal and eventual political Islamization:

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said that the hudud laws formulated by Kelantan’s Parti Islam (PAS) should be rejected, as they are not based fully on Islamic law.
The federal government had carried out a study on such laws and found that they did not fulfill fully “the laws, spirit and characteristics inherent in Islam.”

“PAS laws not only cannot be accepted but, at this point, should be rejected,” he said in his speech during the opening of the Majlis Ilmiah Ramadan, an Islamic-understanding seminar, at the Arab Language Centre in Nilam Puri on Thursday.

But he said this did not mean that the government rejected the hudud laws.

“We only reject the interpretation and laws of Kelantan PAS which are not compatible with the sharia. The rejection of something that is wrong is compulsory if we are to hold on to the teachings of Islam.”

The initial internal UMNO political challenge to Mahathir in 1985-87 was first and foremost a personality and factional conflict with little expressed policy implications, but his turn to Islam for political survival would make now accelerated Islamization an inevitability. New political challenges would emerge from the opposition Islamist party PAS who took advantage of favorable conditions for Muslim politics in Malaysia to try to outbid Mahathir and UMNO for Malaysia’s newly Islamized Malay constituency. Mahathir’s response was based upon his control of a growing nexus of “state Islam” in Malaysia. Mahathir simply reiterated an institutional accommodation based upon the national state, which claimed more political prestige and institutional resources than PAS’ similarly inclined project, which was based upon a local state. Mahathir and his UMNO allies had effectively neutralized PAS’ political challenge, based on a reassertion of national state centric Muslim politics. The next and final challenge

to Mahathir’s “state Islam” would come at a more local and diffuse level: the Muslim minority sect of Darul Arqam.

4.4 Darul Arqam vs. UMNO: Malaysia at Brinkmanship, 1994

The state’s strategy of an intimate institutional accommodation with Islam began to have lasting and unanticipated consequences by the end of the decade. The consolidation of a new anti-pluralist institutional legacy was not immediately apparent following the critical juncture of 1982, but it would come to be consolidated through the subsequent sequential acceleration of Malaysia’s state Islamization project. The state now turned to marginalize Muslim minority sects in Malaysia in an effort to closely regulate and supervise the practice of Islam in Malaysia.

This anti-pluralist impulse in repressing diversity would be illustrated most prominently by the state’s treatment of the sect of Darul Arqam. Darul Arqam was a Muslim minority sect that had begun to penetrate successfully into the heart of the Malay UMNO establishment. It was also emerging as an alternative focal point for the practice of Islam and a type of Muslim politics expressly outside state supervision and regulation.50 Darul Arqam’s potential for

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50 The Malaysian government had a series of running confrontations with other Muslim minority sects throughout the 1980s, including most notably the “Memali Incident” of 19 November 1985 when police clashed with 400 members of a sect led by Ibrahim “Libyan Ibrahim” Mahmud, a former PAS functionary. It left 14 civilians and 4 police dead. In addition, Jemmah Islamiyah is an infamous Southeast Asian terrorist organization linked to Al Qaeda. It was founded by Indonesian epatriates in Malaysia in the late 1980s. Although both sects were notable for existing outside the purview of Malaysia’s state religious institutions, Darul Arqam’s relative resilience, its highly visible national network across Malaysia, and its direct linkages to the state
posing an immediate sustained political challenge against UMNO alarmed policymakers to such a degree that it caused a bit of an overreaction from Malaysia’s concerned political establishment. Mahathir’s firm control of the “state Islam” nexus allowed him to ban the sect outright during the summer of 1994 without any major political consequences for the government’s credibility on Islam. I contend that the lasting impact of the state’s experience with Darul Arqam would later enshrine state Islamic policy in an authoritatively anti-pluralist direction. This policy was propelled by a newly scendant state religious bureaucracy that increasingly positioned itself on the look out for such sects and groups similar to Darul Arqam.

The presence at the Malay grassroots of small groups or organizations that dissented from the state and its religious establishment had a long history, stretching back to colonial Malaya where Malays were attracted to “invulnerability cults.” These assorted groups preached that through a mixture of rigid Islamic discipline and magical incantation, Malays could receive divine sanction and protection in both their internal feudal clan conflicts and in their conflicts with the British colonial authorities and the Chinese.51

In the modern age, Malay “invulnerability cults” expanded their scope and beliefs to encompass a contradictory mish mash of different religious beliefs and practices stretching from mystical Sufism, all manner of messianic Shia Islam

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factions, with some even Christian or Buddhist influences included. These groups were not outright political as they often based themselves around a singular charismatic preacher turned leader. Nonetheless, these groups were extremely successful in attracting Malay youths to their study groups by holding out promises of often-immediate spiritual and material gratification. Newly urbanized and disaffected Malays sought spiritual relief from these often very savvy and also sympathetic groups; the most prominent example of these increasingly influential religious groups was Darul Arqam. In the early 1980s Malay political leaders frequently warned in the local media that these “deviant” or “deviationist” cults could destabilize Malaysia’s greater modernization project.

Ustadz Ashaari Muhammad, the group’s first and only ever leader, founded Darul Arqam in Kuala Lumpur in 1969 as an informal religious study group. Ashaari had previously flirted with a political career with the Islamist party PAS before abandoning mainstream politics to take up his very exclusive and esoteric venture. In 1971 Darul Arqam became the group’s new official moniker and signaled its transition from a small group just based around Ashaari, his friends, family, and neighbors to a full-fledged organization. The group also had a strong exclusionary ethos, driven by a notion that it had abstained from a contemporary Malaysian society where Islam was not being practiced according to Prophetic traditions. Darul Arqam urged a rejection of modern society in order to rebuild in microcosm their version of a perfect Islamic society. Sufism and other forms of Islamic mysticism that harkened back to the colonial era Malay “invulnerability cults” were also influential in the group’s practices. Also
important to the group was a specific Ashaari messianic prophecy that Imam Mahdi, a 15th century Arab religious leader and important historical figure in Shia Islam, would reappear as the reincarnation of the Malaysian theologian, Mohammad Abdullah As Suhaimi, who died in 1927. Later doctrines preached by the group claimed that Ashaari himself was this hidden imam or hidden messiah presently in hiding but would return to redeem society. The group subsequently set out to establish the perfect Islamic society on a five-acre compound in the village of Sungai Penchala, about 20 km from central Kuala Lumpur. The financial resources of Darul Arqam’s membership funded the move to the new and more isolated compound. The group, however, was not entirely hostile to outsiders, as it gradually began to build a missionary arm of the organization to attract followers and new supporters.

The sect expanded its social welfare activities, establishing first an educational foundation in 1975, public relations and media arm in 1977, and then a medical centre in 1978. By the beginning of the Mahathir administration in 1981, Darul Arqam had achieved a strong domestic visibility in Malaysia while also building an international presence in such locals as Pakistan, Thailand, Singapore, and even Australia. Darul Arqam’s business empire, through its subsidiary of Al Arqam Trading, consisted of international branches in 18 countries, interests in 21 “core business activities” including food and beverages, import and export, liaison and tours, medical and health services, Al-Wadiah

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53 Hamid, “Political Dimensions.”
(Islamic finance), property and development, publication, transportation, livestock, electronic media, mini markets and textiles. By the mid 1990s, the estimated worth of the group’s economic assets reached 300 M RM in local currency.54

Darul Arqam’s relationship with the organs of Malaysian “state Islam” began to change when Ashaari began to flirt with politics and took a rather aggressive and confrontational approach against Malaysian authorities from the late 1980s. This was premised by Ashaari’s increasing personal ideological conviction that Darul Arqam had to make the transition from a Tho’ifah (movement) into an Ummah (community), the foundation of which was the Dawlah (state).”55 The group’s new political orientation was supported by its growth to almost 6,000 members, posing a direct challenge to the state’s monopoly on all Muslim piety and practice in the country. The response of “State Islam” to the sect became increasingly repressive. First, the government in 1986 stepped in and banned the sect’s major religious and political text “Aurad Muhammadiyah: The Path of Arqam.” By withdrawing all permits for Darul Arqam’s magazines and newspapers, the government subsequently put an end to the group’s public relations and publications subsidiary.56

By 1988, the government issued a ruling that prevented Darul Arqam from spreading its teaching and declared the sect to be “deviationist” and in non-compliance with the appropriate practice of Islam. Curiously, the government did not make any real attempt to enforce its ruling on the group’s deviant status, as the

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
group’s sizable strength and visibility just outside Kuala Lumpur prevented the government from taking any overt action. Instead, Ashaari left the country in exchange for the government not moving directly against the organization in Malaysia for the time being. The ad hoc truce between Darul Arqam and the Malaysian government broke down in less than three years. The Straits Times reported on 13 September 1991 that the government had finally decided to enforce its prohibition on Darul Arqam’s activities by banning the group from holding any public talks or holding any of its activities in any government offices at the national and state levels. The government further introduced tighter restrictions that prevented the sect from distributing any of its teachings and material through any type of broadcast media or public exhibitions.

On 16 September 1991, the government announced on state television that it would immediately halt any broadcast of programs related to Darul Arqam and destroy the sect’s existing archival material held by the state broadcaster. The extensiveness of these very specific prohibitions on Darul Arqam’s activities was testament to the organization’s success in spreading its influence throughout the country. Mahathir personally addressed the new threat of Darul Arqam on 6 October 1991:

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said that the government will explain to the people its ban on Al Arqam’s activities in government offices.

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57 Hamid, “Political Dimensions.”
This was necessary to avoid confusion among the people about the movement’s teachings, he added. Many had been influenced by the movement and believed that all its teachings came from Islam, he said.

“We feel it is a deviationist teaching and it is not sufficient just to ban Arqam’s activities without explaining,” he told reporters after opening the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation here. The Arqam movement was also on the agenda at a meeting of the National Council of Islamic Dakwah chaired by the Prime Minister.

He warned that the government would act against the movement if it continued to confuse the people. The government has also prohibited the distribution of Arqam literature.59

The government’s subsequent claim on 10 November 1991 that the group had hidden political motives posing a direct security challenge to the country further escalated the pressure on Darul Arqam. At the end of the year, the government publicly declared that it was monitoring several suspects, including startlingly, some prominent politicians and high-ranking government officials who were involved with Darul Arqam. However, the government continued to be exceedingly careful, as it now scrambled to uncover the full extent of the sect’s recruitment of government officials. It recommended counseling for suspected Darul Arqam adherents in the civil service, instead of arrest, imprisonment, or dismissal. The sect’s success at penetrating the government was later illustrated when local media reported that an estimated 7,000 civil servants were involved as active members of the sect.60

Subsequently, while the government declared that Darul Arqam was illegal as an organization and that its teachings were “deviant” and false, it took

59 The Straits Times, “Govt. to Explain Ban on Arqam’s Activities in Office,” 6 October 1991.
60 New Straits Times, 6 July 1994.
no national legal action against the membership for the time being. The government’s ongoing under-the-radar campaign against Darul Arqam then escalated into open public confrontation when evidence emerged that the sect was now successfully penetrating into the heart of UMNO through its recruitment of both grassroots party members and prominent politicians. Informed press speculation at the time related that many Arqam members had voted for UMNO in the last two elections and were quite active at the lowest levels of the party machinery. The threat posed by Darul Arqam to Malaysia’s political and religious establishment became more alarming as more UMNO figures were exposed to have links to the sect. Such prominent men in the Malay political establishment included Sanusi Junid, former Agriculture Minister, ex-UMNO Vice-President and Chief Minister of Kedah after June 1996; Kaharuddin Mokmin, former state executive councilor for Selangor; and Tamrin Ghafar, former chairman of MARA, MP for Batu Berendam in Malacca, and son of then incumbent Deputy Prime Minister, Ghafar Baba.

On 17 June 1994 Mahathir opened the final phase of the confrontation between the Malaysian state and Darul Arqam. He launched a rhetorical attack against the group on national television, putting all his personal prestige on the

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line, along with the fate of his government and the Malaysian state. His targeted

*Darul Arqam* directly and unambiguously:

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday that Darul Arqam—the country’s biggest Islamic movement—was aspiring to take over the country and he hinted at impending action against it.

Speaking to the press after opening the World Islamic Civilisation Festival, he accused the group’s leaders of having such ambitions because of growing public support. He said no action had been taken against Arqam in the past despite its deviationist teachings because it was a small group and therefore posed no danger.

But with its expanding influence and the establishment of its own army, he said the government could not afford to ignore the threat it posed to the country’s stability.

These movements start off small but before long, they grow and aim to take over the government just like in other Muslim countries. We have to prevent this.63

After a pause of ten days, the government launched a national public relations and education campaign to shift public opinion decisively against the group in anticipation of the coming security crackdown on *Darul Arqam* and its membership. On 7 August 1994 another nation wide and blanket ban on the sect again came into force. The stampede of government and institutional repression against *Al’ Arqam* moved steadily forward during the summer of 1994. The government raided the group’s major compound at Penchala. Asshari himself was deported from Thailand on 3 September 1994 due to pressure from Malaysian authorities. Upon his arrival home from Thailand after his voluntary exile, the government indefinitely detained him under the ISA (Internal Security Act). A

few months later on 24 October 1994 he surfaced on state television with a full confession of his deviant beliefs, followed by an appeal to his followers to forgive him for leading them astray. After the confession, he was partially freed by the Malaysian government and quickly became politically irrelevant. *Darul Arqam* itself disbanded on 1 November 1994. Its moment in Malaysian politics had decisively passed.64

This chapter has covered the relationship between the state and Islam in Malaysia from 1981 to 1994. Under the leadership of Mahathir and Anwar the Malaysian state from the very beginning sought an intimate institutional accommodation with Islam. This direction was directly related to the emergence of new anti-pluralist institutional and political organizations. The decision to embark upon a systematic institutional accommodation of Islam was arrived at during a critical juncture in 1982.

This critical juncture was first initiated by exogenous forces of the Islamic revival that fed into a domestic revivalist *Dakwah* movement. It changed domestic political calculations for the government. The divisive Mahathir was responsible for the leadership transition and elite factionalism. The presence of subordinate political actors such as Anwar Ibrahim served as sources and drivers of policy change. A major part of this early institutional accommodation was an ideological campaign of “Islamic Values” aimed to shift the informal ideational

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landscape of Malaysian politics away from colonial era notions of state secularism into a state informed and driven by explicitly religious values. The primacy of the national federal government was asserted in the realm of religious affairs, when this authority was unilaterally taken away from local states and their traditional Malay Rulers.

The confrontation between Mahathir and the Malay Rulers accelerated as Mahathir turned to Islam as political leverage against his internal UMNO establishment opponents. The decisions taken towards accommodation facilitated the emergence of a new “state Islam” dynamic in Islam that consisted of Malay politicians, their state religious bureaucracies, and the formal and informal institutions of Muslim piety and practice. This “state Islam” was intensely anti-pluralist as it sought to constrict the diversity of Malaysian Islam by sidelining potential political rivals (such as the Malay Rulers) and marginalized significant Muslim Minority sects (such as Darul Arqam). It also sought to restrict any open political debate concerning the long-term consequence of state Islamization, as illustrated by the UMNO-PAS competition for accelerated Islamization in 1990 regardless of the consequences for non-Muslims and Non-Malays.

“State Islam” effectively neutralized challengers such as the Malay Rulers, internal UMNO Anti-Mahathir factional interests, or Darul Arqam. The anti-pluralist consequences of this institutional accommodation were not immediately apparent, but they emerged gradually through sequential historical and political processes. We next turn to Chapter 5 to look at post-Suharto democratic Indonesia to see how its experience under the Suharto years shaped a pluralist
consensus that influenced the state’s more loosely constructed approach to Islamic policy in the corresponding period.
CHAPTER 5


It was a seminal and landmark decision taken in lengthy deliberation by Indonesia’s state religious bureaucracy in consultation with all of Indonesia’s major state institutional stakeholders. The government issued a long awaited and highly anticipated joint ministerial degree on 10 June 2008 about the future of the Muslim minority sect Ahmadiyah in Indonesia. The joint decree co-signed by Indonesia’s then Home Minister, Religious Affairs Minister, and Attorney General, banned dissemination of the sect’s teachings, but left it intact as a legal organization.¹

This ruling on Ahmadiyah was the culmination of an unlikely chain of events that rocked the political landscape of a post Suharto democratic Indonesia and conversely, scarred Indonesia’s previously well-deserved tradition for socio-cultural pluralism and tolerance. The irony of a democratic and freely-elected government taking the unprecedented step to restrict the activities of a largely

peaceful and non-violent religious minority on mostly highly politicized grounds of religious orthodoxy and religious heresy was not lost on most observers of contemporary Indonesia. An examination of the lengthy and deeply compromised process leading up to the June 2008 banning decision sheds light on the evolving political and institutional dynamic of the state and Islam in contemporary Indonesia.

A focus on this particular political controversy surrounding Ahmadiyah in 2005-2008 is important because it reveals how the mixed institutional and historical legacies of the Suharto era of repression have directly shaped the contemporary relationship between the state and Islam and left behind a complicated institutional legacy of pluralism in Indonesia today. The collapse of the Suharto regime on 21 May 1998 following Suharto’s resignation amidst economic depression and civil disorder empowered an evolving institutional dynamic between the state and Islam. A repressive and coercive security apparatus that had kept Indonesian Islam under close political scrutiny suddenly evaporated overnight.

A new resurgence of Muslim politics in Indonesia emerged to contend for political power and influence in a now more fluid and open democratic political landscape. However, the relationship between Islam and state in contemporary Indonesia, while being more constructive, is highly politicized and attracts diverse interests and political actors. The institutional legacy of the transformation of Muslim politics into a “state Islam” during the Suharto era is largely responsible for the shift from confrontation to intense politicization in the contemporary era.
These political battles pit a reluctant Indonesian politicians against Islamist socio-political forces with increasingly conservative and anti-pluralist political agendas. Nevertheless, pluralism remains an enduring institutional legacy navigated by political actors and interests in contemporary Indonesia. Avowedly anti-pluralist interests work largely within a democratic Indonesian political landscape that values pluralism and adopts lobbying tactics and interest group politics in order to push their conservative orientated agenda.

This chapter demonstrates how Suharto’s institutional repression directly created the conditions for a pluralist Indonesia, through the emergence of a pluralist political landscape of Islamic politics in 1998-2001, in direct visceral reaction to the authoritarian legacy of Suharto’s New Order. The rise of the new conservative quasi-state organization of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia post 2001 reconfigured and ironically revived the old Suharto political and institutional vehicle of an informal ad hoc “state Islam” for democratic pluralist politics. The role of mainstream Indonesian politicians, such as President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, in courting the MUI through a hard line approach to the Muslim minority sect of Ahmadiyah, is perhaps the most interesting political development in Indonesian politics.

I contend that the MUI in turn became a major player in the emergence of an informal “state Islam” nexus. It attempted to impose its conservative and anti-pluralist policy agenda on a willing state bureaucracy and through opportunistic mainstream Indonesian politicians. However, the underlying pluralist institutional dynamic of Indonesia, nurtured as a visceral reaction against previously
entrenched Suharto era repression, endures as a major structural constraint on political actors such as the MUI and their allies in the “state Islam” establishment.

Pluralism as an institutional constraint embedded in contemporary Indonesia reflects the state’s recognition of multiple socio-political interests and a diverse degree of opinion on the relationship between the state and Islam. In a pluralist state, the vigorous contestation of these groups over their diverse ideas would be conducted through an open and frank debate, with the resolution of these conflicts taking place openly, transparently and democratically. The advancing of the case against Ahmadiyah was laborious and often frustrated by this pluralist institutional constraint. In 2009, on the eve of President Yudhoyono’s reelection campaign, favorable political conditions allowed the MUI to partially realize its policy agenda through “state Islam” and move contemporary Indonesia away from embedded socio-and political pluralism.

5.1 Post-Suharto Indonesia, 1998-2001

The path to forging a new pluralist institutional legacy in post-1998 democratic Indonesia was directly conditioned by the sudden political fall of Suharto and Indonesia’s democratic revolution of 1998-1999. The final denouement of the democratic revolution and the final collapse of the New Order are far too broad and complex to be covered in depth in my dissertation.² Suffice

² Most of the brief narrative is extracted from Aspinall, Opposing Suharto; Kevin O’Rourke, Reformasi: The Struggle for Power in Post Soeharto Indonesia (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen &
it to say, Suharto’s continued defiance of the international financial community and resolute refusal to clip the wings of his family and the business interests of associated cronies exacerbated Indonesia’s economic crisis.

Suharto’s aura of invulnerability broke down irrevocably when the regime’s ability to maintain law and order collapsed in the face of warring internal factions jockeying for power. On May 12, 1998 the shooting of unarmed student protesters at Jakarta’s elite private Trisakti University spiraled into the 14-15 May 1998 Jakarta Riots that fatally compromised the regime. On 21 May 1998, Suharto’s sudden resignation put an end to an era. The abrupt implosion of Suharto’s position after three decades of political hegemony startled most domestic and international observers of Indonesia. The driving forces behind Suharto’s departure were a myriad of economic devastation, political factionalism, elite disunity, and a startling grassroots civil society revolt. Indonesian Islam was relatively absent as a major factor driving resistance in the New Order’s last days. However, the democratic breakthrough that the May 1998 Revolution heralded would have major ramifications for Indonesian Islam. Relatively untainted by corporate and military excesses, the New Order of Indonesian institutional Islam emerged as a major player—perhaps the key player in the early years of Indonesian democratic consolidation in 1998-2001.

Suharto’s sudden resignation in May 1998 led immediately to an astounding interregnum of B. J. Habibie as Indonesia’s most unlikely President.

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Habibie’s brief tenure in office from May 1998 to October 1999 witnessed a striking transformation in Indonesian politics where some of Suharto’s mostly loyal functionaries dismantled the authoritarian edifice of the New Order literally in months. However, the two major socio-religious institutions, *Nahdlatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah*, both played crucial roles in stabilizing Indonesia’s then tenuous democratic transition from May 1998 to June 1999. Through the political commitment and prestige of the two major leaders, Abdurrahman Wahid and Amien Rais, the two organizations helped to forge a pluralist consensus for a post-Suharto Indonesia.

Pluralist undercurrents in these institutions were already present in the late Suharto period, the mid 1990s. Indonesian Islam in the New Order’s waning days was less a united and coherent political player than a series of factions and adjuncts aligned to the dominant political players of the day. Robert Hefner in his masterful *Civil Islam* did a seminal job of portraying this political landscape as divided between pro-Suharto elements he termed “regimist Islam” and a nascent opposition that he termed “civil Islam.” The latter was developed by prominent liberal intellectuals (such as Nurcholish Madjid) and religious leaders from *Nahdlatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah*. Regimist Islam was more narrowly construed, consisting of remaining intellectuals associated with ICMI. ICMI had now been mostly abandoned by most of the earlier supporters. Once touted as a vehicle for true and unrestricted religious expression, with the potential of driving political change in a post-Suharto era, ICMI had steadily lost prominent supporters and influence in 1993-1997. Its unpopularity was directly related to its
failure to achieve institutional autonomy as a vehicle for political change and freedom of expression. ICMI’s remaining supporters were mostly careerists and close personal associates of Habibie who had brought them into ICMI. The remaining elements of “regimist Islam” comprised mostly of political reactionaries and communalist provocateurs that were mostly politically irrelevant and spent much of their time and effort disseminating anti-Christian and anti-Chinese political propaganda.3

The dynamism of “civil Islam” conversely shaped its countervailing struggles to map a place for Islam through democratic politics. The major political actors of a “civil Islam” persuasion, including then ailing NU leader Abdurrahman Wahid, did their utmost to advocate a prospective democratic vision for Indonesia. But their efforts were mostly overshadowed by the larger political context of the last days of a deteriorating and corrupt New Order regime that was pushed to the brink of political crisis and social revolution. Civil Islam walked a very fine line in the late New Order, striving to affect democratic change while paradoxically maintaining cordial relations with the New Order. New reforming legislation introduced by the Habibie government ended the political monopoly of the ruling party Golkar and its associated official opposition party adjuncts, the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) and Unity Development Party (PPP). Most significant to this democratic transition was the tenous withdrawal of the state from any substantive regulation of Islam in all its political and social expressions.

Emboldened by this new political openness and now unencumbered by the New Order’s faux secularism of adhering to *Pancasila*, Indonesia Islam began the process of founding a new set of political parties centered on Islam.

The most striking characteristic about this period of political reform and democratic openness was the new political and ideological diversity of Muslim politics. After months of speculation about the future of overt religious politics and the potential dangers of sectarianism arising from these new aggressive parties, senior leaders of Indonesian Islam, led by Wahid and Rais, decided to take the plunge into active party politics. On 23 July 1998, Wahid used his leadership and the vast organizational resources and prestige of NU to officially establish the National Awakening Party (PKB) in Jakarta.\(^4\) After some hesitation Rais turned down an offer to head the long-entrenched and official Islamic Party of the New Order (the PPP) and founded his own National Mandate Party (PAN) on August 17, 1998.\(^5\) The high profile and visibility of these two religious and national leaders made their parties’ pluralist and non-sectarian, attractive to both Muslims and Non-Muslims.

On 27 July 1998, the Crescent Star Party (PBB) was established and led by a former minor state legal functionary, Yusril Ihza Mahendra. His party aimed to reclaim the mantle of the pre New Order *Masyumi* party, through a combination of modernist lineage and intransigent politicking to establish a new institutional


role for Islam up to and including an “Islamic State,” if necessary in a post-Suharto democratic Indonesia.⁶

On 10 August 1998 the founding of the unknown and relatively minor Justice Party (PK) by a collective of unknown and highly educated Muslim professionals heralded a new, potentially fruitful political direction for Indonesian Islam in the post democratic era.⁷ By offering an alternative outside the traditional institutions and organizations of mainstream Islam, this new Justice party also pushed a striking and unrepentant modernist policy agenda to Islamize Indonesia, hoping to appeal to voters dissatisfied with the existing alternatives.

Indonesia’s upcoming democratic elections, originally planned for May 1999 but postponed to a month later to June became the primary focus of most Indonesian politicians instead of the minutia of economic and public policy. The election in June 1999 was Indonesia’s first, free, and fair democratic elections since the inaugural elections in 1955. Rather than resolving the political confusion that existed since Suharto’s resignation, the 1999 election further polarized the Indonesian political landscape, and no clear winner emerged from either the secular nationalist or religiously inclined parties. Megawati Sukarnoputri’s secular nationalist Indonesian Nationalist Party of Struggle was the winner of the elections, with a plurality of 34%, followed by Habibie’s Golkar

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with 23% and Wahid’s NU based PKB at 13%. Megawati’s victory made her the presumptive front-runner for the presidency.

From July 1999 to October 1999 the polarization between the former Suharto establishment (as represented by Habibie) and a largely untried secular nationalist opposition (the underwhelming Megawati Sukarnoputri) led to a remarkable intervention by the organizational establishment of Indonesian Islam. Largely managed and directed by Amien Rais, this intervention succeeded at corralling a “third force” in Indonesian politics comprising of political parties asserting a connection to Islam. Given the title Poros Tengah (Central Axis), it controlled 168 seats in parliament.

On October 20, 1999 conglomerated political support enabled the third force to circumvent the two established presidential candidates (Habibie and Megawati) and elect its own alternative candidate, Abdurrahman Wahid as the President of Indonesia. Earlier, Rais’ own surprise, a narrow 26-vote victory as MPR Chairman had previewed Islam’s new political power. However, Wahid’s emotional and dramatic triumph over Megawati was the final victory of The Central Axis and the final integration of the major socio-religious organizations (Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah) into the highest reaches of the Indonesian political establishment.9

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5.2 The Rise of MUI

In 1998-2001 post-Suharto democratic Indonesia was dominated by the likes of B. J. Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, and Amien Rais, all veterans of the organizational establishment of Indonesian Islam who occupied the highest offices of the state. Each of the three moderated his Muslim politics and deemphasized his religious credentials in order to appeal to the wider Indonesian political spectrum as secular and nationalist figures. This in turn helped to nurture an embryonic pluralist political consensus that would emerge as a powerful structural constraint on the ability of future political actors and interests to challenge pluralism.

This pluralist consensus mandated that the state grant wide autonomy and freedom to a diverse set of new socio-political interests that sought to represent Islam. New wide-ranging and often contentious debates between these groups played out fully in public. However, through the democratic process of elections and lobbying, some resolution to these debates would finally be mooted. In this respect, Indonesia in 1998-2001 marked only a fleeting moment in the political triumph of moderate organizational Islam, as represented by Wahid and Rais.

After 2001, new conservative and orthodox forces emerged as important players on contemporary Indonesia’s competitive, pluralist landscape. Ironically, the political struggles of Indonesia’s moderate political establishment provided an opening for this growth of conservative and orthodox forces. Wahid’s initial attempts at forging a national consensus through a national unity government and
an accompanying coalition cabinet quickly ran into major hurdles of incessant political factionalism. The flaring of old separatist insurgencies and vociferous communal violence across the archipelago from Aceh to Maluku to Papua fatally damaged Wahid’s short Presidency. The political unity of the The Central Axis splintered resoundingly, with Rais, previously Wahid’s greatest proponent, morphing into his most determined opponent.

Wahid’s impeachment as President in July 2001 destroyed the short-lived Central Axis political experiment and fractured Islam into component subgroups that reflected long-entrenched traditionalist and modernist orientations. The political implosion of much of the Indonesian Islam institutional establishment led to a power vacuum that was opportunistically filled by a new force in Indonesian Muslim politics-the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI, Indonesian Ulama Council). Resolutely conservative and anchored by an old Suharto umbrella institution, the MUI in turn eclipsed its competitors and emerged as a decisive player in a revived “state Islam” axis.

The MUI began its existence in the Suharto era on 26 July 1975 as a relatively minor umbrella quasi-governmental institution representing all the major institutions of Indonesian Islam. It was tasked with the administration and regulation of Islamic law, most notably through issuing fatwas, or non-binding legal opinions on controversial social and political issues for Indonesian Muslims. The MUI was also structured internally to treat all major institutional stakeholders and socio-religious organizations of Indonesian Islam equally and with weighted representation, regardless of cultural and historical pedigree. The establishment
of the MUI was seen by some observers as an early attempt by the New Order to preempt conservative interests through this new regulatory organization. However, the early history of the MUI in the Suharto era, and its mostly singular political and cultural irrelevance, points to its establishment mostly as a technical and administrative convenience rather than as part of some overreaching political strategy to constrict or regulate conservative Islam. In this respect, the MUI was always generally supportive of the New Order’s dictates regarding Islam. It was involved at the highest levels of decision-making by circulating *fatwas* and other regulations in support of the New Order’s later, limited opening to Islam in the post-1990 period.

Yet the focus of the Suharto government and most of the institutions of Indonesian Islam were not on the MUI, a mostly managerial vehicle, but on the new and contentious institutions created post-1990 (notably ICMI) to reconcile Islam and the state, very much on the Suharto regime’s terms. For much of this later Suharto period in the 1990s, the MUI was assigned to mostly technical rulings concerning the beginning and ending dates of the fasting month of Ramadan, and dealing with other minor censorship controversies.\(^\text{10}\) The MUI would only become politically relevant in the immediate post-Suharto democratic era, a somewhat startling development from a once moribund organization.

The MUI’s rising political and cultural influence was directly derived from Indonesia’s democratic pluralist context. Within the intense competition of pluralist politics, the MUI emerged as a strong conservative counterpoint to the political rise of mainstream Muslim politics figures such as then Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid and MPR Speaker Amien Rais. The origins of the MUI’s new political and cultural assertiveness were evident from the earliest days of the democratic consolidation period of post Suharto Indonesia. In October 1998 about a thousand scholars, Ulamas, leaders, and officials of Indonesian Islam attended an MUI meeting. Purported to be the largest such gathering since 1945, this event signaled the group’s new, increasing public profile.  

True to its ostensible political independence as the representative umbrella organization of all the institutions and groups of Indonesian Islam, the MUI for the time being refrained from taking an overtly partisan political role, such as supporting or mobilizing grassroot support for a specific political party. However, this clear injunction did not prevent the organization from taking a political role, mostly through circulating fatwas (recommended but non-binding directives) to individual Indonesian Muslims. The announcements of these fatwas were framed as non-political technical advice to individual Indonesian Muslims, but nonetheless they served as strategic political interventions for the MUI by putting subtle pressure on mainstream Indonesian politicians, while also shifting the policy debate about Islam in Indonesia in increasingly conservative directions.

Steadily, the MUI moved to monopolize its jurisdiction over Islamic law through a new *fatwa* council. It also expanded its influence to other more lucrative sectors of Islamic administration that had traditionally and solely been the prerogative of the Religious Affairs Ministry. These new administrative ventures included increasing the MUI’s monopolistic jurisdiction at the national level over the *halal* labeling of food, cosmetic and drug products. The MUI established a regulatory role for itself over the emerging financial products market offered by Indonesia’s now booming Islamic banking sector.\(^\text{12}\)

The accumulation of these new sources of funding made the MUI very wealthy and financially independent of the government for the first time. The transition to a new visible and more outspoken leadership at the top echelons of MUI accounts for the startling rise of the MUI in Indonesian politics. The rise of the MUI’s new general chairman, Sahal Mahfudh, and the new chairman of the internal Dewan Syariah Nasional (National Sharia Council), Ma’ruf Amin, was crucial in completing the transformation of the MUI into an independent political force in Indonesian Islam.

Mahfudh and Amin notably were veterans of the NU, but they represented a conservative-leaning faction entirely opposed to Abdurrahman Wahid’s moderate pluralist agenda.\(^\text{13}\) Amin, a new distinct political actor making a name for himself in Indonesia, emerged the *de facto* leader and was the most public face


\(^{13}\) And indeed Sahal Mahfud was elected the new general chairman of NU, on 7 March 2010, completing a political rise that was driven by his titular leadership of the MUI. Ma’ruf Amin succeeded him as the MUI’s new general chairman.
of the MUI. A personal interview conducted with him in May 2008 was very revealing about his political origins and motivations. It was a personal grievance against Wahid, and a political grudge against much of the moderate pluralist brand of Islam that Wahid represented, that singularly animated Amin’s rise to political leadership at the summit of the MUI.

As he communicated in the interview, as incoming chairman of the group’s sharia advisory and fatwa deliberation body, he was also centrally responsible for a new push for professionalism in the MUI’s ranks. Indonesia’s now entrenched pluralist organizational legacy had a direct impact on the institution’s internal governing procedures and structures. This new professionalization entailed introducing a new set of open and transparent procedures for holding regular conferences and for drafting new fatwas. Interestingly, according to Amin, evidence pro and con for a proposed fatwa would be presented, and then voted upon democratically by members of the MUI advisory sharia body. In this respect, the reform of internal MUI procedures could be presented as a means of attaching democratic legitimacy to mostly anti-pluralist and conservative rulings.

The MUI now had a new leadership in place committed to expanding its prominence and voice in national affairs. With new financial resources giving it new organizational credibility, the MUI now moved to actively push a conservative Islamic policy agenda that in effect preempted the state and much of

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14 Personal Interview, May 2008, Jakarta.
15 Personal Interview, May 2008, Jakarta.
mainstream institutional Islam. The succession of Megawati Sukarnoputri and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono as Presidents further strengthened the influence of the MUI in Indonesian Muslim politics. In effect, the MUI would have much of the landscape of Muslim politics in Indonesia to itself.

Abdurrahman Wahid and Amien Rais, MUI’s most determined targets and competitors in Indonesia’s pluralist Muslim politics after 2001, were now discredited and spent political figures. Indonesia’s new political establishment, now dominated by the nationalist-military end of the Indonesian political spectrum, Presidents Megawati and Yudhoyono, provided no competition for the MUI in religious matters. Rather, the Indonesian political establishment now actively sought the co-operation and blessing of the MUI, which it interpreted paradoxically as compatible with its own secular nationalist interests. The Indonesian state and Indonesian Islam, as driven by the MUI, would now informally reconfigure the old Suharto institutional nexus of a “state Islam.” Retaining political power and outflanking enemies were the central driving motivations of Suharto era “state Islam.” Contemporary Indonesian “state Islam” would ironically serve the political interests of Indonesia’s now democratic establishment, led by President Yudhoyono after 2004.

5.3 The Crisis of Ahmadiyah

These new political and institutional dynamics of a revived informal “state Islam” in Indonesia would emerge through the major political controversy
surrounding the Ahmadiyah Muslim minority sect. The continued existence of the sect in Indonesia, along with its legal protections by the state, would become a new political wedge issue in Indonesian democratic politics after 2001. The MUI opportunistically targeted Ahmadiyah as a means of consolidating its new hegemony in Indonesian Muslim politics through the framework of a competitive pluralist landscape.

Parenthetically, mainstream Indonesian politicians, most prominently President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, courted the MUI as an important political interest group. These politicians played to the MUI’s political demands for the state to reverse its protections for the sect. After 2005 the converging political interests of the MUI and the President, as measured by the pressures of electoral competition and the power of lobbying, were crucial factors in the Indonesian government’s growing covert hostility to the Ahmadiyah sect. President Yudhoyono came to the Presidency in 2004, as a candidate of a new and minor party in coalition with a mixture of conservative Islamist and smaller nationalist parties. The MUI’s established prominence in Muslim politics, through its new institutional resources of fatwa and sharia jurisdictions, put pressure on these Islamist parties in the President’s coalition to adopt the MUI’s agenda vis a vis Ahmadiyah. This push and pull between the MUI, the political interests of Yudhoyono’s coalition, and a pliant Indonesian state religious bureaucracy (as

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16 Yudhoyono was nominated and re-elected President in 2004 and 2009 by a coalition of four political parties: his own Democratic Party (PD), a small nationalist party, and two small but influential conservative religious parties associated with the MUI, the Crescent Star Party (PBB) and Reform Star Party (PBR).
embedded under the rubric of an informal “state Islam” alliance) operated under the institutional constraint of a pluralist legacy, of which its very fabric was woven into the political landscape of a post-Suharto democratic Indonesia. The pluralist institutional legacy first guaranteed that the state would recognize a vast diversity of socio-political interests representing Indonesian Islam. The legacy would then facilitate a wide-ranging debate between contending interests over the future of Ahmadiyah, which would ultimately play out publicly through the mechanisms of an often messy, flawed but vigorous, democratic politics.

The story of the Ahmadiyah sect in Indonesia begins in colonial British Punjab (later Pakistan) in 1889 with one man, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. Mirza was an important religious official and teacher who founded the Ahmadiyah sect as a messianic revival sect of Islam that proclaimed himself a prophet and successor to Mohammed. Members of the sect considered themselves Muslims and actively practice most customs and rituals of Islam. However, the majority of Muslims worldwide dismiss the sect as heretical. The sect is considered to be heretical because of its belief in Mirza as a successor Prophet. This belief violates one of the principal tenets of Islam, which demands that only Mohammed is the last prophet for humanity. The Ahmadiyah sect in Indonesia was first introduced to the country in 1924, with the visit of two Ahmadiyah missionaries from Lahore. The mainstream Indonesian Islam initially received the two missionaries well, and they were allowed to address that year’s 13th Muhammadiyah Congress in Yogyakarta without incident.
The brief period of peaceful co-existence with mainstream Indonesian Islam ended five years later at the 18th Muhammadiyah Congress in Solo in 1929, where the sect was declared heretical. Disgruntled members of Muhammadiyah still loyal to the sect subsequently split from the organization and founded the separate *Jemaah Ahmadiyah Indonesia* (JAI, Indonesian Ahmadiyah Movement), which became the largest Ahmadiyah affiliated organization in Indonesia.

For much of Indonesia’s post independence history, successive Indonesian governments treated the organization and its Ahmadiyah adherents with kid gloves. In March 1953, the Indonesian Ahmadiyah Congregation, an associated offshoot of the main Ahmadiyah organization, received official recognition as a legal organization. Disagreeing over the role of Mirza as either a prophet or a fraudster rendered relations between Ahmadiyah and much of mainstream Indonesian Islam frosty but nonetheless still peaceful at first. Ahmadiyah’s beliefs were seen as just minor and esoteric deviations that did not threaten Islam proper, but later they became the core of MUI’s criticism and call for state intervention to disband the organization.17

The origins of the later reinterpretation and vilification of Ahmadiyah by the Indonesian state and the MUI lie in a law passed in January 1965 that for the first time defined the legal contours of blasphemy and its proscribed penalties in Indonesia. The circulation of Law No 1/PNPS/1965, “On the Misuse of Religion and/or Blasphemy against Religion,” officially empowered the state with the

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jurisdiction for the prosecution of doctrinal matters in Islam, matters of such had been solely the prerogative of individual Muslims and their voluntary supervisory bodies.¹⁸

By 1980, the MUI had already designated the Ahmadiyah sect as heretical and characterized its beliefs as “deviant,” “misleading,” and “a threat to national security” the new MUI at the time lacked the institutional endorsement and grassroots support to enforce the ruling.¹⁹ The Suharto government began to reassess its previously neutral and amiable position on Ahmadiyah. On 20 September 1984, the Religious Affairs Ministry issued a circular to the heads of Islam divisions at regional offices throughout the country, stating that Ahmadiyah was deviant because of its belief that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was a Prophet. The ministry also banned individual adherents from disseminating their teachings in Indonesia because “they may create conflict.”²⁰

Despite the shift towards establishment hostility against Ahmadiyah and without state funding or support, the sect thrived and even attracted new supporters as it built a network of mosques and educational institutions across the country. By 2003, the group claimed to have set up 542 branches across Indonesia, 289 mosques, 110 preaching centers and a membership of 200,000 to 500,000.²¹ After the fall of Suharto, in the new period of political openness and state retrenchment after the fall of Suharto, the position of Ahmadiyah in

¹⁸ Tempo, “Beyond Belief.”
¹⁹ Ibid.
²⁰ Ibid.
²¹ Tempo, “Beyond Belief.”
Indonesia in a post democratic reform Indonesia appeared to be politically and legally secure. In the new democratic spirit, the Home Affairs Ministry subsequently affirmed and recognized Ahmadiyah legally on 5 June 2003, thus ratifying the previous 1953 decision to repudiate standing MUI fatwas that had proscribed the organization as heretical.22

Contention surrounding the continued existence and legal protections for the Ahmadiyah sect would eventually transform the landscape of Muslim politics in Indonesia. The resiliency of the Ahmadiyah sect in democratic Indonesia was at the time a mostly marginal issue for the great bulk of institutional mainstream Indonesia. In a 2008 interview at his Yogyakarta home, Ahmad Shafii Maarif, who succeeded Amien Rais as chairman of the large mass socio-religious organization of Muhammadiyah in 1999, recounted his utter incredulity at how quickly the Ahmadiyah sect became a leading source of contention and resentment in Muslim politics.

After the 11 September 2001 terrorism at New York’s trade center and the 2002 bombing in Bali, Maarif and Nahdlatul Ulama’s chairman, Hasyim Muzadi, as the two most important men in Indonesian Islam, had spent much time reassuring state policymakers of the limited inroads of radical extremism and terrorism in Indonesian Islam. In particular, Maarif had established a personal priority of his leadership to move the Muhammadiyah organization away from its orthodox, modernist roots, towards an engagement with pluralist norms of democratic governance and minority protection. He would ultimately receive the

22 Ibid.
2008 Ramon Magsaysay Prize, Asia’s equivalent of a Nobel Prize, for his efforts at promoting religious tolerance in Indonesia.

According to Maarif, Ahmadiyah was a political diversion, a relatively minor nuisance issue that did not really speak to the “big picture” of forging a constructive role for Islam in Indonesia’s developing pluralist landscape. Questions of Ahmadiyah’s “deviancy” in any event, had been settled long ago, and the sect should be left alone to practice their faith as a protected, designated, religious minority within a larger pluralist Indonesian Islam.\(^{23}\) In the backdrop of state inaction in 2005-2008, as the Ahmadiyah controversy escalated to a political crescendo of ugly rhetoric, vigilante violence, accommodative voices such as that of Maarif went ignored. It was the beginning of a shift of influence from the traditional entrenched organizational establishment of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah towards the new and more aggressive MUI.

Much of the mainstream organizational establishment, as embodied in the leadership and membership of such groups as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, was wary of Ahmadiyah, but it was content to leave the matter of Ahmadiyah’s status as a distasteful but settled issue outside its immediate control. Ahmadiyah posed a significant lingering problem for Indonesian Islam because the sect’s core belief in another prophetic figure after Mohammad directly challenged the acceptable spectrum of Islamic piety and practice that the entrenched interests of the Indonesian Islamic community had established and enforced.

\(^{23}\) Personal interview, May 2008.
Initially, the ingrained hostility did not go beyond the level of rhetoric. Indonesia’s democratic pluralist consensus had protected and legalized the sect, despite an undisguised hostility towards the sect during the Suharto era. But beginning in mid 2005, intense political competition at the heart of a pluralist Muslim politics allowed the MUI to eclipse its more mainstream rivals. Hostility was greatest amongst conservative and orthodox interests, because the MUI considered the sect’s heresy and its protected legal status far from being settled issues. The MUI was quite willing to rehash Ahmadiyah’s protected status and exploit its power to issue administrative fatwas to target Ahmadiyah’s continued legal protection. MUI’s willingness to move beyond rhetoric to actively employ its new powers to delegitimize Ahmadiyah as a component interest of Indonesian Islam was unprecedented. It allowed the group, by proxy, to stake a claim to defend Islam’s interests and its informal ideational institutions. The institutional rivals of NU and Muhammadiyah became largely reactive to MUI’s aggressive strategy. They were largely eclipsed as the political issue of Ahmadiyah inflamed the country in 2005-2008.

On 16 July 2005, the political opening erupted without warning in Bogor, West Java. A local grassroots militant organization arrived at the local Ahmadiyah mosque and without warning attacked it while some sect members were still inside.24 After the attack, the authorities removed about 100 families from the complex for their own protection. The scale of the attack and its

unapologetic vigilantism shocked most mainstream Indonesian politicians and forced them to respond. Vice-President Jusuf Kalla condemned the attack for its use of violence, but noticeably absent was ringing endorsement for Ahmadiyah’s right to practice its own unique interpretations of Islamic piety and practice.25 Indeed, on 21 July 2005, the Attorney General Abdul Rachman Saleh openly mused about banning Ahmadiyah due to the threat it posed to public order. The ultimate manifestation of a “blame the victim’s ethos,” he stated: “our [Indonesian government’s] main concern is public order….we don’t care about the content [Ahmadiyah’s beliefs].”26

Emboldened by the ambivalent tone of the national state position, local authorities in Bogor subsequently ordered Ahmadiyah to halt all its activities in the area. On 30 July 2005, another Ahmadiyah complex in neighboring Kuningan village, also in West Java, was preemptively ordered by the local authorities to close.27 Interestingly, all three responses (one state and two local) on the Ahmadiyah complex in Bogor cited the original 1980 MUI edict declaring Ahmadiyah to be heretical to justify the tough preemptive treatment they dealt to Ahmadiyah. In a political atmosphere of tense recrimination, the announcement of MUI’s renewal of its original fatwa exacerbated the hostility assembled against

the sect. The grassroots pressure against Ahmadiyah was provoked by the MUI and it continued to escalate from 2005. In the period 2005-2008, the documented and repeat attacks against Ahmadiyah, the membership, and its property from West Java to South Sulawesi and to West Nussa Tenggara created a tidal wave of resentment and terror against the sect, which had little or no protection or intervention.

In turn, the Ahmadiyah now faced an onslaught of renewed state scrutiny and new legal proscriptions that severely limited its activities. In addition, other local jurisdictions inspired by the examples of Bogor and Kuningan began to draft local regulations to restrict it from operating in their local areas. Nevertheless, the MUI was repeatedly frustrated by the government’s reluctance to take more onerous legal action against the sect. On Indonesia’s Independence Day, 17 August 2005, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono finally spoke out, condemning the violent attacks on Ahmadiyah and urging ordinary Indonesians to “never resort to violence, as it may trigger new problems. In Islam, we have to fight anarchy or actions which run counter to Islamic religious tenets in a proper

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and elegant manner.”³³ Three days later Maftuh Basyuni, Religious Affairs minister, warned ordinary Indonesians not to commit anarchy and take the law into their own hands by again attacking the sect.³⁴

By early September, through its own internal bureaucratic deliberations the government floated a new approach to the Ahmadiyah sect, essentially reconstituting a Suharto era “state Islam” type of political and institutional configuration. In the new contemporary “state Islam” were the Attorney-General’s Office, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, and the National Commission for Human Rights. But this “state Islam” as an ad hoc institutional grouping brought out mixed messages emanating from the Indonesian state and its representatives, frequently exacerbating the situation.³⁵ For example, the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights considered Ahmadiyah a legally recognized organization, while the Ministry of Religious Affairs had declared it illegal and heretical.³⁶

In this respect, Indonesia’s pluralist institutional legacy imposed a significant structural constraint on Indonesian politicians and policymakers in the state religious bureaucracy. The sect could not be banned outright as

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³⁶ For instance, contrast the Attorney General’s defense of Ahmadiyah’s legal status in *Koran Tempo*, “Jaksa Agung Bantah Ada Larangan Ahmadiyah,” 24 August 2005; *Antara*, “Ahmadiyah Resmi Terdaftar di Depag,” 1 September, 2005, with the President and his Religious Affairs Minister’s previous outright declarations of Ahmadiyah’s illegality; the sect’s reaction to Yudhoyono’s parsed statement is outlined in *Koran Tempo*, “Ahmadiyah Sesalkan Pernyataan Presiden,” 22 August 2005.
policymakers searched in vain for some sort of compromise. Through the five-year Ahmadiyah crisis, attempts were made to resolve the political and policy conundrum, recognizing the right of Ahmadiyah to exist as a legal organization (as guaranteed under the equal pluralist framework) without constituting the sect as “properly” Muslim in accordance with the MUI’s definition of “state Islam.”

Indonesia’s newly reconfigured ad hoc “state Islam” establishment now began to tackle the larger question associated with Ahmadiyah and other Muslim minority sects: what specifically constituted acceptable Muslim piety and practice in Indonesia? The MUI case against Ahmadiyah touched on the question as it identified heretical groups in Indonesia requiring state intervention. Another pressing issue involved providing useful criteria for policymakers in the MUI and in the Indonesian state for the purpose of identifying such individuals and groups. Discussions on establishing criteria indicated that the MUI now was attempting to become the lead regulator of Islamic piety and practice in the spectrum of “state Islam” in Indonesia. Informal ideational institutions would be determined by the rigid textual impulses and orthodox beliefs of the MUI. Discussions reflected the constraints imposed by Indonesia’s pluralist institutional legacy and issues may have been contentious but debate and resolution occurred openly in the public sphere.

Establishing a framework for determining a heretical sect became a new priority for state Islam. The large socio-religious organizations of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah were the traditional guardians of acceptable piety and practice. By their nature as mass organizations, they were inclusive and largely
tolerant of minor religious deviations by its national membership, be they traditionally and modernist inclined. The MUI drafted and enshrined strict criteria for acceptable piety and practice that were informed by orthodox beliefs. The resulting new mainstream spectrum of Islamic piety and practice would inevitably shift the fulcrum of Indonesian Islam to a more conservative direction.

In November 2007, the MUI met at a national working meeting that was open to the public and began drafting the configuration, perhaps as a preview of the larger campaign against heretical sects in Indonesian Islam and targeting even more moderate and liberal elements. The MUI’s criteria for heretical or deviant consisted of ten fixed criteria:

1. Defying one of the six pillars of the faith.
2. Believing in or following teachings that are not in line with Koran or Sunnah.
3. Believing in God’s revelation after the Koran.
4. Denying the authenticity of the truth of the contents of the Koran.
5. Interpreting the Koran without prevailing principles.
6. Denying the Hadiths (the Prophet’s sayings and words) as the source of Islamic teaching.
7. Insulting, harassing, or looking down on the Prophet.
8. Denying that Mohammad was the last Prophet.
9. Changing, adding to/and or reducing the basics of worship already determined by sharia, such as alternative Hajj destinations to Mecca, or not having to pray five times a day.
10. Regarding other Muslims as infidels without textual arguments.37

The announced criteria for heretical or deviant groups addressed the Ahmadiyah sect directly with explicit references to accepting, or believing in, another Prophet after Mohammad. But denunciations of alternative interpretations of Koran that were not based on the vague phrase of “prevailing principles” seemed to attack the liberal Islam constituency of Indonesian Islam, while the last criteria implicitly denounced the beliefs and practices of Shia Islam. It was notable that these discussions of the MUI were internal to the organization itself, with little or no participation from the state religious bureaucracy. In their official capacities, Vice President Kalla and Religious Affairs Minister Basyuni attended the meeting. Short on advice to the gathered Ulama on constructive means of engaging Indonesians drawn to the so-called heretical sects, their participation was limited in the substantive discussions on setting up criteria to classify heretical sects.

Ceding authority on regulating Islam from the state religious bureaucracy to the increasingly assertive MUI (as in the supervision of heretical individuals and groups) represented a fundamental shift of authority in the relationship between the Indonesian state and Islam. The incumbent government was no longer in a dominant position to unilaterally dictate its wishes, as it did during the Suharto period. It now engaged in complex negotiations with the diverse component interests of Indonesian Islam. Chastened by the baggage of Suharto’s

authoritarian past and the recent heavy-handed interventions in the crafting of politically compliant Islam, the government now preferred to cooperate with the major interests of Islam Indonesian and drafts a consensus on heretical groups. I contend that this institutional dynamic turn served to revive the Suharto era “state Islam.” The state in effect granted the MUI (a formerly a technical administrative and ostensible non-partisan body) the authority to lead factional interests and to present a policy of Indonesian Islam to both mainstream politicians and a compliant state religious bureaucracy.

Despite the MUI’s best efforts, Indonesia’s prevailing pluralist consensus in its governing elite pushed the state to seek some form of a statutory accommodation and compromise with the Ahmadiyah sect. Prevailing political currents in Indonesia were strongly aligned against the sect. Ahmadiyah was now a political pariah in Indonesia. The President’s close political allies were hostile and the President himself was not well disposed towards the sect.

An informal pluralist compromise was forged despite the underlying misgivings of the important political actors. A new special inter-agency coordinating board, encompassing all major bureaucratic interests, the BAKORPAKEM, (Mystical Belief Supervisory Coordinating Board) was established specifically to draft a formal statutory compromise. For the most part the state was now conciliatory, as it pursued the dual tracks of informal acceptance of the group while simultaneously increasing the group’s legal scrutiny. The formal agreement drafted between the sect and the government was problematic. In early January 2008, while very firm that Ahmadiyah’s beliefs
were intrinsically heretical, the board offered the sect lenient treatment, with the proviso that it must issue a statement to acknowledge Mohammad as the last Prophet of Islam.

On 14 January 2008, senior members of BAKORPAKEM and Ahmadiyah representatives signed an agreement consisting of a 12-point statement to ensure that the sect would not face legal restrictions. The document stipulated point by point the sect’s recognition and acceptance that Mohammad was the last Prophet in their teachings, worship materials, and daily rituals.

However, in a notable concession to the long tradition and history of the Ahmadiyah sect, the government compromised by formally recognizing Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as the sect’s founder, learned scholar and activist, and a fully-fledged Muslim leader. It also mandated the sect drop the designation of “Ahmadiyah mosque” from all of its places of worship and that the sect open all of their mosques to all Muslims. The Ahmadiyah was in effect compelled to join the pluralist mainstream of Muslim politics in Indonesia. The government gave the sect three months to implement all stipulations in the agreement or face stricter legal sanctions.  

However, behind the scenes, the government and BAKORPAKEM were relieved to reach the agreement and were reluctant to strictly enforce every point of the agreement if the sect kept a low political profile.

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The MUI’s political connections essentially preempted the attempted pluralist agreement of January 2008. On 10 April 2007, President Yudhoyono had appointed Ma’ruf Amin, MUI’s titular leader and prime instigator of the MUI’s campaign against Ahmadiyah, to be a member of the Dewan Pertimbangan Presiden (Presidential Advisory Council). It was a prestigious but largely symbolic body with no real political power, but the appointment gave Amin and the MUI almost direct weekly access to Yudhoyono. Through Amin, the MUI could present its anti-Ahmadiyah case to Yudhoyono in person, unfiltered by Yudhoyono’s more cautious advisors.

For Yudhoyono, playing to the MUI and its conservative political allies in his coalition by covertly pushing its agenda regarding Ahmadiyah, was a perceptive strategy with much to gain and little to lose. Adopting the MUI’s views on restricting Ahmadiyah strengthened Yudhoyono’s credibility as a “Pro-Islam” politician, shoring up a crucial weakness he essentially had as a nationalist, secular politician.

For much of the Ahmadiyah crisis, Yudhoyono was conspicuously silent about the violence and public hostility against the sect, as he provided political cover for the MUI and its growing allies to sabotage the pluralist agreement of January 2008. The MUI had been intentionally left out of the discussions of

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40 Personal Interview, Jakarta, May 2008. Interestingly the Presidential Advisory Board recommended to the President later to cancel the then proposed April 2008 joint ministerial decree restricting Ahmadiyah’s activities-with one dissent-Amin’s. See Desy Nurhayati, “Advisors counsel SBY against banning Ahmadiyah,” The Jakarta Post, 23 April 2008.

BAKORPAKEM and was in no mood to compromise and accept the supervisory board’s agreement with Ahmadiyah. Its immediate response was to criticize the agreement as unsatisfactory, stating that the heretical status of Ahmadiyah remained unchanged. He advised the government to “stop playing” around with the Ahmadiyah issue.42

The MUI’s political connections in turn shifted Indonesia’s state religious bureaucracy firmly against the sect. Indeed, internal dissent from within the Indonesian government over BAKORPAKEM’s approach built up and floated in the Indonesian media. The Religious Affairs Ministry still refuses to recognize the legality of the Ahmadiyah sect, despite the clear political and legal implications of the 14 January 2008 draft agreement between BAKORPAKEM and Ahmadiyah. Faced with the objection from the Religious Affairs Ministry, BAKORPAKEM reversed course and declared that the Ahmadiyah sect was now illegal on 19 January 2008, a mere five days after the joint agreement was signed - a stunning political development and an astoundingly short time for complete reversal of policy.43

The Ministry of Religious Affairs created a special team to supervise the implementation of the 12-point agreement while the Indonesian police was also said to be closely monitoring Ahmadiyah for any infraction, however minor, of the agreement’s stipulations. Public escalation of the MUI’s lobbying activities


hardened the attitude of the state religious establishment towards Ahmadiyah. Interviews with senior bureaucrats within the Ministry of Religious Affairs were very instructive about how they fundamentally interpreted the Ahmadiyah sect and its future in Indonesia.\textsuperscript{44}

Less sanguine about making judgments whether or not Ahmadiyah fit the criteria of being a heretical sect, senior bureaucrats seem inclined to offer it only legal protection and recognition if the sect made the transition to becoming a religious non-Muslim minority existing outside the mainstream of Muslim piety and practice in Indonesia. The overwhelming concern of most leaders of the state religious establishment was with dealing with the fallout of how much Ahmadiyah’s current visibility had upset the politically mobilized and conservative interests of Islam based around the MUI. Any consideration of defending Ahmadiyah’s beliefs on their merits based upon religious freedom grounds were entirely absent from the state religious establishment’s deliberations.

In this respect, banning Ahmadiyah outright, or severely restricting its propagation abilities, was not aimed in any way at repudiating Ahmadiyah’s core beliefs, because the very unconventionality of a belief in another Prophet hardly makes it attractive for the vast majority of Indonesian Muslims. Rather, a new legal proscription on Ahmadiyah was justified on purely pragmatic grounds, in the name of maintaining law and order. In this curious rationalization, banning the sect would be a positive development for all sides, as it would ultimately serve to

protect the personal safety of Ahmadiyah sect members from the harsh reactions that the group drew from the most vocal, extreme and politically mobilized factions of Indonesian Islam.\footnote{These insights were gleaned from a series of interviews with a series of high ranking religious officials at the Ministry of Religious Affairs, including Personal Interview, Harun Nasution, Jakarta, April 2008.}

The politically compromised resolution to the five-year Ahmadiyah crisis was in many ways anti-climatic. BAKORPAKEM’s rigorous monitoring of the sect for its compliance of the January 2008 agreement was ongoing, but little doubt remained about the outcome of the so called “probationary period” for Ahmadiyah. Already by 18 April 2008, reports circulating in the Indonesian press recounted that BAKORPAKEM officials had recommended that the government officially ban the sect for violating the January 2008 agreement. They alleged that Ahmadiyah had violated the earlier compromise agreement by still recognizing their founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, as a Prophet. Deputy Attorney General Wisnu Subroto, head of the panel, was quoted: “BAKORPAKEM believes Ahmadiyah has continued to follow activities and interpretations that deviate from Islamic teachings...As a consequence, it has caused unrest and conflict within society.”\footnote{Kompas, “Ahmadiyah Dinilai Menyimpang,” 17 April 2008; Desy Nurhayati, “Govt. Drafts Joint Decree to Outlaw Ahmadiyah,” The Jakarta Post, 18 April 2000; Republika, “Ahmadiyah Dinilai Menyimpang,” 17 April 2008.}

The formal decision to began drafting such a declaration to ban Ahmadiyah outright began the next day, after a high level meeting of Indonesia’s Coordinating Minister for Security, Attorney-General, and Indonesia’s military and police chiefs. Objections to this harsh course of action sprang up immediately,
largely from human rights activists and more liberal, moderate interests of Indonesian Islam, most notably former President Abdurrahman Wahid, who even pledged publicly to defend Ahmadiyah against further state prohibitions.\(^{47}\)

The vocal public backlash against a mooted ban of Ahmadiyah and the political implications of renewed scrutiny from domestic and international human rights lobbies of Yudhoyono’s government caused it to delay a final decision on the sect. On 18 April 2008 the government swung into action and gave a definitive order to Indonesia’s National Police to protect Ahmadiyah sect members, their houses of worship, and sect property from violent acts and vandalism.\(^{48}\) Renewed political tension and violence was now a distinct possibility as hard line Indonesian Islamic interests and grassroots organizations again mobilized again to demand that the government follow through on its stated intention to ban the group outright. On 5 June 2008, a joint interfaith rally for religious freedom at the National Monument in Central Jakarta found Ahmadiyah members and their supporters being attacked by a stick-wielding mob led by the FPI (the Islamic Defenders Front) and another militant Islamic group. Dozens were injured in the fracas. The brazen attack was undertaken in the heart of Indonesia’s capital and it even attracted the stern rebuke and condemnation of President Yudhoyono himself the next day.\(^{49}\)


On 9 June 2008 the government’s final decision on Ahmadiyah (SKB/3 2008) was issued through an inter-ministerial circular of the Home Affairs Ministry, Religious Affairs Ministry, and Attorney-General’s office. It essentially ratified the recommendations of the standing BAKORPAKEM panel and banned any dissemination of Ahmadiyah’s beliefs and teachings in Indonesia. It also declared that Ahmadiyah was singled out for “spreading interpretations and activities that deviate from the principal teachings of Islam,” and restricted its activities as such in Indonesia.⁵⁰

Interestingly, the circular remained unclear about the legal status of the Ahmadiyah organization itself, a small and nuanced distinction that indicated that the structural constraint of a pluralist consensus ensured that the sect remained a legal organization in Indonesia. Onerous restrictions on the sect’s ability to spread its beliefs and teachings by recruiting new members also guaranteed that the sect would remain on the radar of the MUI and its allies in the “state Islam” establishment. The entire Ahmadiyah crisis and the state’s response to it through the establishment of the institutional mechanism of BAKORPAKEM was reminiscent of the Suharto era “state Islam” approach to state Islamic policymaking. However, new contenders such as the MUI also illustrated that the state was no longer the dominant interest in “state Islam” as during the Suharto era. Indonesia’s now pluralist Muslim politics was intensely competitive with the conservative MUI over the previous dominant organizational establishment of the

Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, because of its favorable political connections to President Yudhoyono’s ruling coalition.

The MUI tried to push against this pluralist consensus by targeting Ahmadiyah through their fatwas. Another attempt involved a close collaboration with the other interests of Indonesian “state Islam” to establish a narrower criteria for acceptable Muslim piety and practice in the country. Despite the MUI’s avowed determination to destroy Ahmadiyah, it was repeatedly frustrated by a complicated process in which the various component interests of Indonesian state Islam forged a compromise based on pluralist principles of accommodation and tolerance. Such a compromise may have been fatally flawed from the beginning, but it indicated that a pluralist institutional legacy was still somewhat resilient in contemporary Indonesia. Only extraordinary political contingencies related to President Yudhoyono’s pressing reelection campaign allowed the MUI to achieve its policy goals of more onerous legal restrictions on Ahmadiyah. Such political contingencies would not appear again in the near future, forcing the MUI to pay at least lip service to pluralism’s stated ideals.

The collapse of Indonesia’s New Order regime in May 1998 marked a political rebirth and renaissance of Islam during the immediate early democratic consolidation period. The absence of an intimate Suharto state supervision and

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51 The treatment of Ahmadiyah in Indonesia today continues to be troubled. The sect remains a legally recognized organization as no further state restrictions were introduced after 2008. However, the sect has been subjected to frequent mob violence and vigilante attacks, as the state has not been proactive about providing protection from the police and security services. Nevertheless, these attacks are widely publicized by both the domestic and international press. As a result, the Indonesian government has been under mounting pressure to protect the sect according to international law and human rights protection. Discussions are underway and there yet may be movement from the government to protect Ahmadiyah.
regulation of Islam led directly to the revival of a democratic Muslim politics mediated by a pluralist institutional legacy. The pluralist legacy mandated the state’s recognition of a vast diversity of socio-religious interests in Indonesian Islam, which included prominent, new conservative and orthodox Muslim politics from the MUI and the revival of the old Suharto vehicle of “state Islam,” as adapted to democratic pluralist politics.

The MUI was transformed by its leaders from a once antiquated administrative convenience and politically neutered advisory body to perhaps the most influential Islamic socio-religious organization in Indonesia, through an intense competition and battle for ideas of a pluralist political landscape. Indonesia’s newly adopted ethic of political and socio-cultural pluralism repudiated Suharto’s institutional, repressive legacy. The revival of the Suharto era vehicle of “state Islam” to once again reshape Muslim politics in Indonesia illustrates the very endurance of these problematic political and institutional legacies. However, ultimately pluralism endures as it imposes significant structural constraints on avowedly anti-pluralist political actors such as the MUI. Favorable political conditions related to the MUI’s unusual and close relationship to President Yudhoyono, as an important component of his reelection campaign in 2009, allowed the MUI to realize only partially its agenda of banning Ahmadiyah out of legal existence in Indonesia. Ahmadiyah has survived as a legal and very visible Muslim minority sect, due to influential supporters and significant public sympathy. The contemporary travails of Malaysia’s close institutional
accommodation of Islam, and its increasingly anti-pluralist tint from 1996-2008, is covered in the next chapter.
Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi’s political career peaked on the night of 21 March 2004. As the returns poured in from Malaysia’s 11th General Election, the scale of the government’s victory was increasingly apparent. With a combined popular vote of 63.9% nationwide and a massive majority of 198 out of possible 219 parliamentary seats, and sweeping victories in 12 of Malaysia’s 13 states, the coalition’s victory was a stunning personal mandate from Malaysian voters for Abdullah’s leadership.\footnote{John Burton and Douglas Wong, “Landslide Win for Badawi in Malaysia’s General Election: Fundamentalists Routed,” \textit{Financial Times}, 22 March 2004; Jane Perlez, “New Premier of Malaysia Gets Mandate All His Own,” \textit{New York Times}, 22 March 2004; Bridget Welsh, “Malaysia in 2004: Out of Mahathir’s Shadow,” \textit{Asian Survey} 45 (2005): 153-160.} The unlikely author of this electoral triumph was Malaysia’s Prime Minister of only six months, Abdullah Badawi, the unlikeliest of Prime Ministers in its post independence history.

Abdullah’s early initiatives to moderate the character of Malaysian “state Islam” through his Islam Hadhari program brought personal popularity and major electoral successes. Islam Hadhari was his signature project, but its attempt to reshape “state Islam” in more pluralist directions never went beyond the stage of nice political rhetoric. The Malaysian public quickly soured over Abdullah and
his increasingly meandering government, as alienation sunk in over his political
passivity and string of broken political promises. Abdullah would walk away
from the premiership quietly on 3 April 2009, just months after leading the
corruption to its worst ever electoral performance in the shocking and seminal
Malaysian elections of 2008.

The emergence of Abdullah as Malaysia’s new Prime Minister in 2003-
2004 demonstrates how a static institutional dynamic of the relationship between
the state and Islam in Malaysia operated. Through his central initiative of Islam
Hadhari, he attempted to provide a pluralist inspired direction, but ultimately he
was blocked by a resilient and entrenched anti-pluralist institutional legacy—the
state’s non-recognition of socio-political interests representing a diverse degree of
opinion on the relationship between the state and Islam. Absent was any open,
transparent, and democratic debate over different approaches to this relationship,
the future of Islamization in Malaysia, and the lack of resolution of pressing issues
related to the impact of Islamization.

Previously, Mahathir’s “state Islam” nexus was primarily an intensely
political project to modernize Malaysia on his ideological terms; it was later
deployed to protect his personal political position against determined internal and
external opposition. With Mahathir and his one close ally Anwar gone, any
political logic behind the institutional accommodation of Islam had now
evaporated. This chapter turns to the turbulent post-Mahathir era to examine how
“state Islam” distorted and enshrined a contemporary Malaysia that is now
resolutely hostile to political and socio-cultural pluralism. An unbalanced “state
Islam” in the hands of enfeebled Malaysian politicians, assertive and unaccountable state religious institutions, and pliant formal and informal institutions of Islam, largely dominates the landscape of Muslim politics in contemporary Malaysia.

The Darul Arqam experience was a major factor in the qualitative transformation of the Malaysian state strategy of institutional accommodation in the mid 1990s. Islam was a central matter of concern of the national government as the dynamic of “state Islam” in Malaysia had now reached maturity. An anti-pluralist institutional direction developed through the rise of JAKIM (*Jabatan Agama Kemajuan Islam Malaysia*), a new state religious institution and an independent bureaucratic entity that took full charge of state Islamic policy in 1996-1997.

In 2000, JAKIM revived anti-pluralist campaigns to prosecute Muslim minority sects, and as such took the step to consolidate a new institutional landscape. In 2004-2008, its role in defeating Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi’s Islam Hadhari project (that would bring more political and socio-cultural pluralism) highlights a striking political reversal from the pre-critical juncture of Malaysia in 1982. To the extent that the institutional framework of state religious bureaucracy and conservative value change blocked the political autonomy of actors, power had now passed from the politicians to anonymous state religious bureaucrats.

In effect, an anti-pluralist institutional force guided the structural constraint on the ability of autonomous political actors to strike out and change
policy. As representatives of the Malaysian political establishment in 1982, Prime Minister Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim were striking, charismatic political figures who introduced structural reforms guiding the state closer to Islam. In 2004, by contrast Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi was an uncharismatic and consensus-orientated politician, who struggled to introduce his policy reforms to Malaysian governance. The secular nationalist Malay establishment was by now thoroughly enfeebled. Islam Hadhari’s defeat and the ending of Abdullah’s political career illustrate the resilience of JAKIM and the unanticipated consequences of an institutional accommodation. The promised political stability and intellectual modernization produced, instead, policy drift and institutional stagnation.

6.1 The Rise of JAKIM: Islam’s New Bureaucrats

The political succession of Abdullah and the introduction of his central initiative of Islam Hadhari had to mediate a new institutional context and legacy in Malaysia in 2003. Any elaboration of state Islamic policy through the “state Islam” nexus had to be mediated and filtered through JAKIM, the new and growing state religious bureaucracy.

As a state religious institution, JAKIM employed unparalleled state resources to ensure that it could easily monitor suspected “deviant groups” while also serving to preempt any further political challenges from religious interests. JAKIM’s new prominence provided a contrast to the earlier Malaysian “state Islam” nexus that was dominated by politicians. The “state Islam” during the
Mahathir years was mostly a top down political process to provide political support and resources for UMNO politicians to claim ownership of Islam through such political campaigns as “Islamic Values.” In the late 1990s, the declining political fortunes of Mahathir and Anwar, who had been the prime political sponsors of the campaigns, brought about a political vacuum at the heart of “state Islam.” JAKIM was the growing state religious bureaucracy that seized the opportunity to reconfigure “state Islam” and sought to regulate the personal conduct and behavior of individuals and touch the lives of Malaysian Muslims in very profound ways.

The restructuring of the Malaysian state religious bureaucracy in late 1996 to early 1997 had coincided with the height of a new economic boom that was transforming Malaysian society and politics. The political factionalism and turmoil of 1980s had faded as Mahathir emerged as the uncontested strong man of Malaysian politics, with Anwar Ibrahim formally proclaimed as his Deputy Prime Minister in December 1993. The consolidation of the Mahathir-Anwar political alliance, a generational partnership of the old secular Malay nationalist elite with the younger Dakwah generation, had reenergized the UMNO dominated Barisan Nasional governing coalition. The government subsequently achieved a massive swing in the April 1995 General Elections and neutralized the ad hoc opposition alliance of the Islamist PAS, the UMNO splinter party Semangat 46, and the urban Chinese based DAP. With internal and external political challenges diffused, political stability at the very apex of the Malaysian political leadership
provided the political cover for the larger institutional restructurings of the Malaysian state.²

The restructuring process was anchored by providing more resources for setting up a national state religious bureaucracy. In 1968 Malaysia’s founding Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, had began the long, convoluted process of increasing national state encroachment into the regulation and supervision of Islam, when he first established the Urusetia Majlis Kebangsaan Bagi Hal Ehwal Agama Islam Malaysia (advisory council integrated within the larger ceremonial Malay Rulers’ council). In 1974 his successor, Prime Minister Tun Razak, renamed the council Bahagian Agama (the religious division) and integrated it as a unit within the Prime Minister’s Department. The infrastructure of the division came later in 1980, when it moved into its own four-story dedicated building, the Pusat Islam (the Islamic center), in the heart of the national government’s administrative complex and next to the National Mosque in Central Kuala Lumpur.

The inauguration of the Mahathir government in 1981 further facilitated the expansion of Malaysia’s burgeoning state religious bureaucracy. In 1984, the government renamed it Bahagian Hal Ehwal Islam (BAHEIS, Islamic Affairs Division) and prioritized its national importance as an institution now directly under the authority and purview of the Prime Minister. The employed only

² Harold Crouch, in Government and Society in Malaysia (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996) describes this period of Malaysian political stability (1990-1996) as an effective “repressive responsive,” political system that while the government maintained a firm authoritarian grip on Malaysia, the state was able to effectively respond to pressures for some openness and transparency and engineer effective governance and strategic policy change.
around 1,500 people at the time and its influence was more advisory than regulatory.³

BAHEIS mostly played a marginal role during first period of exuberant state Islamization, as it was overshadowed by the larger factionalist struggles of UMNO and the challenges that Darul Arqam presented to the government. The Darul Arqam crisis exposed the clear inadequacies of the Malaysian state in negotiating the expanding landscape of religious expression. The organization, along with the Malay UMNO political establishment, nevertheless escaped blame for the debacle. During the tense summer months of 1994, the quick and successful execution of the state crackdown on Darul Arqam relieved much of the pressure on policymakers, who became cognizant of the urgent task to restructure the embryonic national state religious bureaucracy to fend off potential threat, similar to that of Darul Arqam.

The ongoing Malaysian state Islamization project became more stressful for policymakers due to overlapping jurisdictions between the central government and each of Malaysia’s thirteen states. The initial Islamization thrust established new institutions and promulgated legislation at the national level. However, these new institutional innovations were created on top of the jurisdictions and codes that had been operating at the local level. For instance, ordinary Malays thus could be confronted with two sets of sharia codes,

depending on the location of their residence. In order to resolve the contradiction between the national and the local authorities, the second stage of Malaysian state Islamization firmly enshrined the supremacy of the national government in Islam. The first step of this substantive Islamization and centralization process took place in November 1996, when a federal *sharia* judicial department was created. All officers of *sharia* courts across the country, including judges, prosecuting officers, and clerks, became accountable to only the federal *sharia* judicial department.⁴ More importantly, the judicial department was created within the existing BAHEIS infrastructure and on 1 January 1997, it was officially renamed JAKIM (*Jabatan Agama Kemajuan Islam Malaysia*, the Malaysian Islamic Development Division).⁵

The government’s singular push for *sharia* consolidation under JAKIM’s aegis reinvigorated a previously moribund state religious bureaucracy. After decades of existence as a merely advisory appendage of the Malaysian government, it was now positioned to enforce religious doctrines and statutes. The first substantive evidence of the government’s new push for centralized *sharia* enforcement was demonstrated by drafting Act 559, *Sharia Criminal Offences (Federal Territories)* Act of 1997. In December 1996 Malaysia’s lower house of parliament (the Dewan Rakyat) passed the new act without much debate and on 27 March 1997 the act received royal assent and came into effect.⁶ The landmark

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⁴ *New Straits Times*, “*Syariah Courts To Come Under Federal Department,*” 2 November 1996.
⁵ Ibid.
⁶ *New Straits Times*, “*Not Much Debate When it Comes to Syariah; Note Dewan Rakyat,*” 20 December 1996.
legislation received little contemporary press coverage and scholarly attention was negligible in the decade following its passage. Arguably, this legislation was to a large degree responsible for shaping and empowering a new, expansive state religious bureaucracy in Malaysia. It subsequently moved state Islamic policy towards far more conservative directions than policymakers could have anticipated at the time.

The 28-page document methodically lays out Malaysia’s numerous criminal offences under sharia law and indicates the statutory punishments that were set along the lines of fines or short terms of imprisonment. Four categories of offences are outlined: those related to aqidah (Islamic theology), to sanctity of the religion of Islam and its institution, to decency, and to miscellaneous issues. While the offences related to aqidah were ingrained in Malaysian sharia jurisprudence, the new series of offences violating the sanctity of Islam and enshrining standards of public morality broke with past precedent by its more rigorous regulation of the private and personal conduct of individual Muslims in Malaysia. Some of these punishable violations included failing to perform Friday prayers, not fasting during Ramadan, gambling, and consuming alcohol in public. Punishable offences relating to violating decency included sexual intercourse outside wedlock, acts preparatory to sexual intercourse outside wedlock, liwat (sodomy), musahaaqhq (lesbians), male person posing as a woman, i.e.

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transgenderism, and khalwat (close proximity). Khalwat, defined as any man or women found to be in close proximity in any secluded place or room with a member of the opposite sex not a spouse or immediate family, became the most infamous and frequently prosecuted offense of the legislation. A number of Malay politicians or celebrities would be charged with these offences. Khalwat raids and charges frequently became salacious concerns for the local press as it gleefully reported on the accused and the punishments. But the press rarely scrutinized other statutory sharia punishments that were just as intrusive and restrictive.

The Mahathir-Anwar split at the very highest levels of Malaysian political establishment would dominate Malaysian politics at the end of the 1990s. As Malaysia began to be buffeted by the first effects of the region-wide 1997-98 Asian Economic Crisis, evidence of a split between Mahathir and his protégé became steadily apparent. In general Malaysia avoided the most destabilizing and damaging economic effects of the currency devaluation and capital flight, the same factors that nearly destroyed its neighbor, Indonesia. Nevertheless, Malaysia was not immune to the political upheaval driven by the Asian economic crisis. As the country experienced economic decline, Mahathir’s nagging doubts about the abilities of his potential successor, Anwar, magnified. On 1 September 1998, he officially dismissed Anwar from all party and government posts, with great ease and little internal UMNO opposition. His promising political career in

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ruins, Anwar mounted a public campaign to challenge his dismissal, but it was aborted and he was officially dismissed three weeks after. The full scope and details of the Mahathir-Anwar split and Malaysia’s political crisis of 1998-99 is beyond the scope of my dissertation. Suffice it to say that the overwhelming attention paid to these two political figures and their spectacular falling out dominated the landscape of Malaysian politics.

The particular nature of the accusations on Anwar’s private conduct, not coincidently covered under the 1997 Sharia Criminal Offences Act, were designed by Anwar’s opponents to destroy his moral and political authority as a representative of Malaysian Islam. Much of the Malaysian public, including the majority of the crucial Malay community, grew disenchanted with the heavy handiness of the government in the sacking of Anwar. In the subsequent 1999 elections, the narrow reelection of the Mahathir-led coalition government with largely Non-Malay support was in some respects a referendum on Mahathir’s continued leadership. Mahathir evidently became a damaged political figure as the prestige accrued to him for presiding over Malaysia’s economic boom and modernization suddenly evaporated. Anwar had shrewdly transformed his political defeat, in a mostly internal UMNO bitter factional context, into a vindictive and morally questionable political prosecution. But he still sat in a prison cell. With the political careers of Mahathir and Anwar damaged by this seminal confrontation, a vacuum emerged to clear the ground for another player to

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lead the country and implicitly hold sway over the governing of Muslim piety and practice.

Notwithstanding the Mahathir-Anwar political dramas that transfixed the Malaysian general public, the “state Islam” nexus began to consolidate an anti-pluralist institutional legacy that aimed to strike at the very heart of the diversity of Malaysian Islam. Operating clearly under the radar of a Malaysian political establishment that was distracted by ongoing elite factionalism, JAKIM turned its attention to the marginalization of Muslim minority sects, under the pretense of avoiding another Darul Arqam like confrontation. The focus on sidelining Muslim minority groups would be illustrated in the aftermath of the fallout over the Al’Maunah sect (Brotherhood of Inner Power).

This sect had become infamous for its theft of weapons from a Malaysian military arms camp near Temenggor Dam in Gerik, Perak. The shocking news of a breach in security and large-scale theft of some one hundred assault rifles, rocket launchers, and light machine guns broke on the evening 2 July 2000 and alarmed Malaysian policymakers. The government initially put the blame on a group of fifteen men dressed in official camouflaged Malaysian army uniforms. Arriving at the camp at 4:15 am in a convoy of three vehicles bearing official army plates, the men had convinced the guards to grant them access to the camp. The official government news agency Bernama reported that government officials were scrambling the night of the thefts to recover the weapons from the mysterious thieves, whom they first called “bogus soldiers.” Police eventually tracked the thieves to a densely forested part of the jungle 70 km south of the
army base camp where the thefts had taken place. On 4 July 2000 a 90-minute gun battle between the thieves and military personnel produced no immediate casualties, but reports of the thieves taking several local farmers of the area as hostages signaled an immediate escalation of the unfolding crisis. On 6 July Malaysian soldiers stormed the camp in a coordinated mortar attack and recovered the stolen weapons. The thieves surrendered but not before they had summarily executed their hostages.10

As the crisis finally dissipated, blame for the thefts began to fall squarely on the once obscure sect of Al’ Maunah. Further investigation of the Al’ Maunah sect revealed that the organization was not as elaborate or established as Darul Arqam. In 1998 a core group of fifty-four members had founded the sect in Klang, Malaysia, where it began its existence primarily as a martial arts self-defense group that aimed to fuse the traditional Malay arts of silat with spiritual mysticism. It was said that the founder of the group, Mohd. Amin Mohd Razali, at the age of sixteen took an interest in mysticism, occultism, para-normal and metaphysical science. Claiming at one time to have nearly 1,000 members across three countries, the sect would have escaped notice from the authorities had not been for the brazenness of its theft of these weapons.11 The government never spelled out the group’s motivations for the attack and thefts, but implied that the


combination of postmillennial angst, cultish fanaticism, and radical textual interpretations of Jihad motivated the acts.

The immediate revelation that former and current serving military personnel, a police officer, and a selection of high-ranking civil servants had been active in Al’ Maunah alarmed the Malaysian state establishment. The particular presence of armed forces personnel during the weapons thefts raised the possibility that whole sections of the Malaysian state had been penetrated and compromised by Al’ Maunah. JAKIM immediately raised the alarms to the perceived threats and within days of the crisis announced that some forty-four deviationist groups were active in Malaysia proper, among which seventeen were very closely related to the Al’ Maunah brand of martial arts and religious extremism.12

In the announcement of the director-general of JAKIM, Al’ Maunah was the only declared deviant group, an indication that the state religious bureaucracy was haphazard and deficient in monitoring such groups. While the state’s security organs went to great lengths to arrest and detain all the remaining members at large of the Al’ Maunah sect, the government launched a public relations offensive to reassure the Malaysian public that it had regained control of the security situation. Mahathir himself went on national television to speak to

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the Malaysian public and answered questions from a panel of sympathetic local journalists:

Question: Datuk Seri, probably, the people were indeed shocked for this is the first time in the post Merdeka history a group had robbed a military camp and had intended to use the weapons to topple the leaders and the government. Can Datuk Seri tell us why this has happened now?

Answer [Mahathir]: Now I feel this began with the effort to discredit the government and accuse it of being unIslamic. Without any basis allegations were made, which could arouse feelings of anger among Muslims who had hoped that this country would follow methods which they considered would be in line with Islamic governance. Hence, this began with the accusation that this government is unIslamic.

Question: According to Datuk Seri, this group aimed to topple the government and the leaders including Datuk Seri as Prime Minister? Did this incident then happen because of the campaign of hatred mounted by certain groups?

Answer [Mahathir]: Yes, it began with the allegation that this government is unIslamic and hence to win support for certain groups, they began this campaign of hatred against the government claiming it to be unIslamic. They nurtured this feeling of hatred for a long time, 20 to 30 years and during this period there were people who really hated the government and their hatred boiled over. As we, all know that something that nurtured in us while we are still small would stick with us and become part of our culture when we reach adulthood and it will be difficult for us to change our stand or beliefs. This feeling of hatred can be found in stages. There are groups which hate but do not do anything while the hatred of others is limited to rejecting the government party in the election but there are also extremists who are really angry to the extent of willing to topple the government, to kill and torture. In fact, they are ordinary people and not murderers or torturers but because of this hatred nurtured in them over a long period against the government, they have reached a level where they are willing to kill and resort to force to overthrow the government.13

The Al’ Maunah crisis and its messy political fallout was a significant development for Malaysia’s institutional accommodation of Islam. It served as a

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13 Bernama, “Full Text of Special Interview with the PM on Al’ Maunah,” 19 July 2000.
prime opportunity for the new state religious bureaucracy to reassert its predominance in the setting and implementation of state Islamic policy. This reassertion was illustrated by a nationwide revival of the “deviant” and “deviationist sects” debate in Malaysia’s political discourse. The new rush for the state religious bureaucracy to identify and disband religious sects operating outside the strict parameters set by JAKIM and its subsidiaries drove this revived political trope.

The 13 July 2000 announcement of the formation of a special action committee under the aegis of JAKIM, composing of senior state religious officials and police officers, was a first move to monitor the spread of deviationist sects or minority religious groups.14 Subsequent committee investigations of civil service personnel, students, and employees of state-linked companies either cleared or implicated some among them of involvement with the sect. All welfare and social clubs active in the civil service were banned from holding religious activities or talks without prior pre-approval of department heads under the direction of JAKIM.15 On 26 July 2000 the government announced further concrete steps and a strict approach to deviationist sects or groups. In monitoring suspected deviationist groups or minority religious sects in Malaysia, the government intended to employ provisions of national federal law instead of state sharia

Abdul Hamid Othman, both a minister in the Prime Minister’s Department and the ostensible political superior of JAKIM, made the announcements, a fact that indicates that of the state religious bureaucracy’s authority was now led by JAKIM. Most of the new powers assigned to the national government were mostly technical police powers granting the national police the right to act preemptively against suspected groups or sects without a formal state investigation.

Empowering the police to detain and arrest sect members upon the direction and information received by JAKIM’s preliminary investigators meant that any participation in sects or groups not formally approved by JAKIM was essentially criminalized. The state religious bureaucracy, which had previously relied on gentle ad hoc persuasion and optional religious counseling for members of such wayward groups, would now have the power to arrest and detain group members arbitrarily. Upon detention, sect members would be sent for a spell of mandatory rehabilitation where they would have to renounce their beliefs before being released.

From mid-to late 2000s, evidence of the government’s stepped up campaigns against deviationist sects and minority religious groups started to frequently appear again in the local press, but the reported numbers of bona fide suspect sects found to be operating in the country were often contradictory. On 19 July 2000 JAKIM increased preliminary estimates of 44 such sects operating to

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125 active deviant groups. Later in the fall, further information provided by a JAKIM spokesman indicated that 18 deviant groups were being monitored, with 36 groups under study and another 71 deviationist sects outrightly banned by JAKIM.

More figures were supplied by the government in response to an official parliamentary question by the opposition PAS in November. A government minister in parliament stated that the 125 groups that additional investigations identified contained several new deviationist sects. The government ordered 31 sects disbanded, put 18 sects under further investigation, and allowed another 18 sects to be active without apparent state action impeding them. The extent of often confusing and misleading information on the identification and subsequent detention of suspect groups indicated that the state religious bureaucracy was still largely unprepared and still growing in its new role as the enforcer of religious doctrine in Malaysia. In the coming years, the whole amorphousness of the process and distinct lack of transparency would become a staple feature of Malaysia’s state religious bureaucracy as it moved the control of state Islamic policy away from its ostensible political superiors.

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In November 2003 Abdullah Badawi became Prime Minister of Malaysia and marked a decisive break from the perennial political polarization that characterized the two decades of the Mahathir government. The final and fourth of Mahathir’s Deputy Prime Ministers in 1999-2003, Abdullah rose to power partly due to his innate political skills as a popular and inoffensive consensus-orientated politician. The son of a well-respected religious scholar from the state of Penang, Abdullah spent most of his early years as a respected civil servant, after graduating from the University of Malaya in 1964. His political superiors quickly spotted his keen administrative talent. In 1970 Deputy Prime Minister Tun Razak chose him to serve as secretary of the National Operations Council, which essentially governed Malaysia for eighteen months parliamentary government was suspended following the race riots of 13 May 1969. Abdullah’s background as a cautious civil servant before entering public life in 1978 was his best strength and his worse weakness as Malaysia’s new leader. It allowed him to steadily progress up the ranks in UMNO’s senior ranks, but it also left him with an indecisive and cautious leadership style that frustrated both his supporters and opponents.

Abdullah’s deliberative and sometime lethargic political style would be his eventual undoing but nonetheless in his early years it facilitated a very successful political career. Abdullah’s political trajectory moved from junior Deputy Federal Territories Minister in 1980-1981, then to Education Minister in 1984-86, Defense
Minister from 1986-1987, and finally to a long well respected stint as Malaysia’s Foreign Minister in 1991-1999. Abdullah’s only political misstep during his largely successful political career was to be on the losing side of the internal UMNO factional battles in 1987-1988. His opposition to Mahathir led to a short stint in the political wilderness after Mahathir ended up with a narrow victory in 1987 and vindictively fired all his opponents in the cabinet. Quickly rehabilitated in 1991, Abdullah attained a unique reputation in Malaysian and UMNO politics as Mr. Clean, a rare politician who was free of corruption allegations. The nickname strengthened his personal political credibility as an alternative to the political authoritarianism of Mahathir and the political reformism of the latest incarnation of the jailed Anwar. Abdullah was one of the clear political winners of the 1998-99 Mahathir-Anwar factional split. His status as an important Penang-based politician made him the prime candidate for elevation as Mahathir’s deputy in 1999, after fellow Penangite Anwar’s spectacular political implosion.

In the wake of Mahathir’s sudden retirement at the end of 2003, Malaysia’s long entrenched Barisan Nasional coalition faced a great challenge. The erosion of public support for the coalition, particularly from the Malay community, was a long-term concern that could threaten the very legitimacy of the Malay nationalist credentials of UMNO, the linchpin of the coalition. A new Abdullah government faced the public challenge of unresolved and nagging

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concerns about the rise of corruption and the lack of transparency and accountability during the Mahathir years. Questions abounded concerning the excesses and mismanagement of Mahathir’s often-grandiose infrastructure projects on the one hand, and on the other, the future of state’s growing closeness with Islam. The political dramas of the Mahathir-Anwar confrontation had enthralled most Malaysians and overshadowed “state Islam,” perceived to be a growing and unaccountable institution that constricted the space for Muslim piety and practice in the country and sought to regulate the personal conduct and private behavior of Malaysian Muslims at the individual level. Islam Hadhari was born in late 2003 and early 2004 within a distinct political and institutional context to regain public support for the coalition through a comprehensive reformist program to crack down on corruption and place value on pluralism and transparency in Malaysian governance.

Abdullah’s announcement of Islam Hadhari to be his government’s signature project took place at the most important political and public occasions in Malaysia, the 55th Annual UMNO General Assembly in September of 2004. The gathering of UMNO senior leadership, delegates, and grassroots members from across the country for the launching of Islam Hadhari indicated how seriously Abdullah and his inner circle viewed Islam Hadhari as integral to the success of Abdullah’s government. Abdullah’s closing speech to the assembly spelled out for the first time the core tenets of the Islam Hadhari approach.

Islam Hadhari was structured around ten well meaning but ultimately vague principles: faith and piety in Allah (God), a just and trustworthy
government, a free and independent people, mastery of knowledge, balanced and comprehensive economic development, a good quality of life for the people, protection of the rights of minority groups and women, cultural and moral integrity, safeguarding natural resources and the environment, and strong defense capabilities.  

Abdullah concluded his presentation with a vigorous defense of his new found progressive approach to Islam, relating in somewhat elevated language: “Islam Hadhari is complete and comprehensive, with an emphasis on the development of the economy and civilization, capable of building Malay competitiveness….the glorious heritage of Islamic civilization must be used as reference and become the source of inspiration for the Malay race to prosper.”

Abdullah had launched his signature project with great fanfare, but the overwhelming reaction of most of the Malaysian public was one of simple confusion.

Conflicting statements from senior government officials perhaps played a part in this subdued public reaction. Senior Malaysian politicians advised Malaysians to apply the basic principles of Islam Hadhari to their lives while also acknowledging that with Islam Hadhari “an implementation in any concrete matter would be problematic.” The advice was ineffective at socializing the concept amongst the Malaysian public. Throughout 2005, the government

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22 Ibid.
announced plans for holding national seminars and workshops across the country 2005 for educating the Malaysian public about the new signature initiative.23

The initial signs of the Abdullah government’s intentions were positive, as it seemed to lean in the direction of real substantive policy reform. The emerging documentation produced by JAKIM and widely disseminated in the country in 2005 through official government pamphlets and documents at least tried to expand the scope and conceptualization of Islam Hadhari’s stated ten vague principles as something resembling a concrete shift in state Islamic policy. Islam Hadhari was defined in the official government documentation as Al-Islam-Al-Hadhari (civilizational Islam), encompassing “a comprehensive approach for the development of mankind, society, and country based on the perspective of Islamic Civilization.”24 The publicity document outlined Islam Hadhari’s mission as an effort “to implement the development agenda of the country and Ummah (community) based on an Islamic approach which is universal, advanced, civilized, and tolerant and balanced.”25 Most intriguingly, JAKIM’s official documentation posited, “Islam Hadhari’s approach seeks to prove Malaysia’s capacity as a model Islamic country which practices the principle of moderation (wasatiyyah) in line with the teachings of Islam.”26 This explicit identification of Islam Hadhari with a more pluralist approach to Islam was noteworthy. JAKIM was careful to play down this pluralist commitment as “a complete and comprehensive approach in

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
comparison with sectoral Islamic approaches such as political Islam (*Al-Islam As-Siyasi*), mystical Islam (*Al-Islam As-Sufi*) and the like.\(^\text{27}\)

Nevertheless, Islam Hadhari in its final conceptualization did explicitly reject political Islam or more conservative Islamist approaches in favor of more pluralist perspectives. Islam Hadhari’s ten principles were once again restated, this time complete with relevant examples of Koranic exegesis to source every principle with its own religious credentials.\(^\text{28}\) Most of the ten principles of Islam Hadhari were inoffensive and bland political slogans largely irrelevant to the growing public concerns about the shape of Malaysian state Islamization. The principles dealing with a rigorous pursuit and mastery of knowledge, a just and trustworthy government, and providing for the protection of minority groups and women, did try to fulfill the pluralist promise of Islam Hadhari as outlined in its approach and mission.

The commitment to enshrining minority and gender rights within the specific context of an Islamic-centric approach to Malaysian governance through Islam Hadhari was indeed novel. It heralded perhaps a sustained commitment to mollifying the worst excesses of the government’s *sharia*-centric approach to substantive Islamization that often targeted the private behavior of women disproportionately. Certainly, the official government documentation tried to convey this impression. The documentation argued that “as minority groups and women are able to enjoy whatever is enjoyed by majority groups and men…they

\(^{27}\) Department of Islamic Development, *Islam Hadhari.*

\(^{28}\) Ibid.
have the right to participate in the development of the country and enjoy
everything that is enjoyed by other races…they can participate in administering
the country, and in economic, social, educational, religious and political
activities.” 29 The absence of any concrete language on the status of women in
future Islamization hampered this pluralist outreach from the outset. In February
2005, in a widely circulated interview with the state news agency Bernama,
Abdullah revealed both the strengths and limitations of an Islam Hadhari approach:
lofty in ideals but mostly timid in implementation. Asked by an interviewer what
he meant by Islam Hadhari, Abdullah embarked on a long rambling answer:

Islam Hadhari ... Islam is, of course, Islam, but when it is used together
with the word “hadhari” it stresses that Islam is civilized - (a religion) that
can contribute towards human civilisation because Islam is a religion that
is relevant at all times. (It’s) a religion that teaches us to acquire
knowledge so that we can improve ourselves to become a good person,
one who is successful, respected and capable of Thus, in this context,
Islam Hadhari is being used as an approach - it’s not a new sect, not a new
religion, it’s not that at all. It’s not a new ideology, it’s just a new
approach we have created to bring Muslims towards progress that is
blessed by Allah SWT. The approach that we are adopting is based on 10
principles that are most suited to the teachings of our religion. Principles
such as faith and piety, of course the hadis and Koran are not being
brushed aside. Principles that are related to a just and trustworthy
government, bringing development to the ummah and country-one that can
further enhance the position of Islam... 30

Abdullah’s response encapsulated both the promise and largely unfulfilled
potential of Islam Hadhari. Well-intentioned objectives were quickly
compromised by state bureaucratic infighting and pressing political practicalities.

29 Department of Islamic Development, Islam Hadhari.
30 Bernama, “Transcript of Bernama Interview with the Prime Minister,” 10 February 2005.
6.3 The Triumph of JAKIM and State Religious Anti-Pluralism, 2008

Consolidating Islam Hadhari as a new pluralist framework for revisiting state Islamic policymaking soon faced immense challenges as ingrained institutional resistance from within “state Islam” by JAKIM put an end to the brief pluralist experiment in Malaysian politics. In this respect, Malaysia’s now anti-pluralist institutional legacy of the Mahathir years severely limited the autonomy of new political actors, such as Abdullah, from striking out in pluralist political and policy directions. The entrenched anti-pluralist institutional legacy was demonstrated by the state’s continued lack of recognition of diverse interests within Malaysian Islam and the preemption of open public debate regarding contrasting approaches to the stresses imposed by the “state Islam” nexus. Consequently, open challenges to this anti-pluralist consensus, whether through the Islam Hadhari approach or channeled through ordinary Malaysians’ recourse to civil judicial remedies, were preempted by the murky and often non-transparent bureaucratic politics of the “state Islam” institutional dynamic.

As the Abdullah government went about trying to promote Islam Hadhari throughout the country in 2005-2006, it became increasing difficult to separate the electoral machinery and political patronage of the coalition from the implementation of Islam Hadhari as a purely institutional reform of existing state Islamic policy. Initial efforts at socializing Islam Hadhari through a series of lectures and workshops across the country fizzled as most Malaysians expressed indifference. Beginning in March the government turned to the promotional tool
of the “Islam Hadhari Village,” a traveling road show and carnival, complete with musical performances of local nasyid (Islamic vocal music) groups and assorted booths of various Malaysian companies promoting consumer products and local entertainment programs on Malaysian television.\textsuperscript{31}

The first two-day Islam Hadhari village in the strategic East Coast state of Trengganu was successful, attracting some 40,000 visitors to the carnival through a mixture of entertainment and material gratification. It convinced the government to take the carnival concept nationwide to better expose the Islam Hadhari concept to ordinary Malaysians.\textsuperscript{32} The domestic media reported that by 2007 the government had funneled 1.5 million RM in funds to establish a network of Islam Hadhari villages, with each parliamentary constituency receiving 50,000 RM to establish its own separate village.\textsuperscript{33}

The expansion of the Islam Hadhari village program paled in comparison to the government’s next prestige project promoting Islam Hadhari: \textit{Taman Tamadun Islam} (the Islamic Civilization theme park). Not coincidentally, the park was located in the heart of Kuala Trengganu, in the state of Trengganu, now governed by the ruling coalition after its opposition PAS state government was decisively defeated in the 2004 elections. The park cost the government some 250 million RM. The park stretched out to 24 square hectares, where 21 replicas of famous mosques from around the world stood.\textsuperscript{34} The park’s most notable

attraction was a misleadingly named Crystal Mosque, constructed entirely of steel
and tinted glass.\textsuperscript{35} The government claimed that the theme park had attracted in
total 1.9 million visitors in the year it had opened, to justify the expense of this
rather trivial prestige project. But accusations from the opposition pointed at state
mismanagement and shoddy workmanship in the park’s construction.\textsuperscript{36} It also fed
into a narrative of Islam Hadhari as an essentially superficial and opportunistic
patronage project substantially unrelated to state Islamic policy.

Former and serving senior UMNO politicians began to express concerns
that while its original conceptualization was innovative and laudable for
addressing the political and institutional drift of the later Mahathir years. Islam
Hadhari began to take on the stench of a well-worn but ultimately meaningless
political cliché.\textsuperscript{37} Abdullah’s now disgruntled predecessor, former Prime Minister
Mahathir, even spoke out against the approach: “you don’t need to introduce a
“new Islam” that is called Islam Hadhari; it is confusing the people.”\textsuperscript{38}
Opposition critics from across the political spectrum, from the Islamist PAS and
the urban Chinese based DAP, dismissed the project as conversely
overemphasizing secular material development, or alternatively a political Trojan
horse designed to conceal even more substantive state Islamization.

Public consciousness of Islam Hadhari was also diminishing. A
University of Malaya survey at the end of 2006 indicated that while most

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{New Straits Times}, “Islamic Theme Park Attracts 1.9 M Visitors,” 17 December 2008.
\textsuperscript{37} Personal Interview, Tun Musa Hitam, Kuala Lumpur, January 2008.
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{BBC}, “Malaysia’s Mahathir Describes Islam Hadhari as Confusing People,” 10 February 2007.
Malaysians were aware of the term, few could provide any clear definition of it as reported in the government press. 93% of Malaysians had heard of Islam Hadhari, but only 53.3% stated that they understood something of the concept.\footnote{Patricia Martinez, “Thumbs Up to Living in Malaysian Diversity,” \textit{New Straits Times}, 10 August 2006.} The state religious bureaucracy was also demonstrating its reluctance to embrace fully the Islam Hadhari approach. JAKIM and its senior leadership were mostly non-responsive and vague when asked about their efforts at promoting the concept. Attempts to draw these officials out by having them explain the real political and institutional implications of a pluralist approach to policy, as originally conceptualized by Islam Hadhari through JAKIM’s own public documents, were inconclusive.\footnote{Interviewed at his office, Kuala Lumpur, 29 January 2008.}

The sustained backlash over Islam Hadhari and the other cutting criticisms emerging from all corners of Malaysian politics and society began to wear down Abdullah. In public he continued to employ the rhetoric of Islam Hadhari as a template for moderation and openness, most notably in his November 2006 speech at the closing UMNO General Assembly, when he proclaimed that “Islam Hadhari is not a blank cheque to bring about conservative revivalism in this country … while I will protect Islam’s position and the role of the sharia courts from being undermined, I will also ensure that no one tries to hijack Islam in Malaysia in order to breed intolerance and hatred.”\footnote{\textit{New Straits Times}, “A Concept Made Simple, But Did People Get It?” 16 November 2006.} However, Abdullah’s still
lofty political rhetoric concealed an increasing political reality that the Islam Hadhari project and its implementation had reached a stalemate.

The political and policy stalemate was in large part driven by the underlying structures and institutional legacy of the two decade long Malaysian state Islamization project now anchored around JAKIM. JAKIM held hegemony over state Islamic policy and would block any real change, creating an unfortunately large credibility gap for the entire project. Islam Hadhari’s rhetoric often did not match the reality of Malaysian governance, as illustrated by the parallel judicial process of the Lina Joy case.

The Lina Joy case raised central questions over the freedom of Muslim Malaysians to leave their religion and the right to seek redress from non-religious civil institutions. Lina Joy was a forty-one year old woman, born Azlina Jailini, who was a plaintiff seeking official civil judicial sanction to leave Islam and officially convert to Christianity.\(^{42}\) In April 2001 a Malaysian lower court denied her claim on the basis that Joy should seek redress from a religious *sharia* court and not through a secular civil court.\(^{43}\) For Muslim Malays, leaving Islam was a statutorily impossible without the express permission of state religious authorities overseen by JAKIM. She appealed the lower court’s decision and the lengthy appeals process culminated in 2004-2007, at a critical time for the Abdullah government that was struggling to conceptualize and implement Islam Hadhari.


\(^{43}\) Ibid.
JAKIM and its subsidiary *sharia* courts system opposed even considering Joy’s petition, a crucial intervention that fatally damaged Islam Hadhari. Senior interviews with JAKIM’s Director General and his major deputies in June 2008 were instructional in revealing its general policy orientation in the Lina Joy case and related apostasy claims. The state religious bureaucracy considered such applications to leave Islam indisputably apostasy and a criminal offense according to the *sharia* code. Moreover, JAKIM felt the distinction negligible between Joy’s case and those professing membership in minority religious sects labeled “deviant” (e.g., *Darul Arqam* and *Al’ Maunah*). Fearing that granting Joy official permission to leave Islam would set an unwanted precedent, the state religious bureaucracy rejected the petition and put subtle pressure on the political establishment to reverse course and abandon the pluralist orientation of Islam Hadhari.

The technical issues raised by the Joy judicial appeal over whether individual Muslims could seek the removal of “Islam” from their mandatory national registration cards was overshadowed by a more politicized and sensitive debate which Malaysian politicians would jump to the defense of Islam, now seemingly under threat by a new wave of Muslim converts to Christianity. Alarm was sounded on, the missionary efforts of rival religions to recruit and steal adherents particularly from the Malay community.

Placed in an impossible position, the Abdullah government chose to defend Islam by invoking the state religious bureaucracy that held a monopoly on

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44 Personal interview, June 2008.
jurisdiction and unassailable prerogatives. In March 2005, the government made oral arguments and paper submissions to the Court of Appeals deciding on Joy’s case, taking a position of retrenchment on issues of religious freedom and pluralism. The Senior Federal Counsel Umi Kalthum Abdul Majid stated unequivocally that the sharia court or any other Islamic authority held inherent and exclusive jurisdiction to hear all applications from individual Muslims to renounce their religion.\textsuperscript{45}

Given that such religious courts had been hostile in the past to applications for individuals to renounce Islam, it was well known that converting to another religion in Malaysia was legally impossible. This was the likely outcome when the first appeals court dismissed Joy’s case in September 2005. Joy and her supporters were determined to continue the appeal until Malaysia’s highest judicial body could rule on the constitutionality of the matter. The two findings of the appeal court were significant. Firstly, the National Registration Department, or any civil institution, did not have the power to decide on Joy’s request to change her religious status on her identity card, because renunciation was a matter of Islamic law. Secondly and far more contentiously, any Muslim seeking the legal status of conversion must receive the specific approval of religious authorities.\textsuperscript{46}

In April 2006, the final resolution of the Lina Joy case began with the start of initial arguments and submissions before the Federal Court, Malaysia’s highest


court. Submissions by the Malaysian government reiterated its contention that any civil court could not hear any case renouncing Islam, as it remained the exclusive jurisdiction of religious *sharia* courts. Moreover, the submission argued that the specific federal or state law conferring this jurisdiction on *sharia* courts was unnecessary, as *sharia* courts held *implied* jurisdiction over all matters pertaining to renouncing Islam or apostasy by a previous constitutional amendment. 47 Counsel Sulaiman Abdullah elaborated on the government’s position by explaining that:

any Muslim who wished to renounce the religion, must resolve the issue of renunciation with the [state religious] authorities which protect and preserve the affairs and interests of Muslims first before raising the issue in the civil court... this was to prevent confusion between the administrative authorities which manage the affairs of the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. 48

More astonishingly, the government argued that the provisions of the secular civil constitution guaranteeing religious freedom (as proclaimed at independence in 1957) were no longer valid. Any comparison to other Commonwealth jurisdictions was rejected as “no assistance can be derived from the provisions relating to religion found in an expressly secular constitution such as India’s or from constitutional cases in Australia, Canada or elsewhere in the Commonwealth.” 49 On 30 May 2007, the Federal Court after much deliberation delivered the final verdict on the Lina Joy controversy. As widely expected, it ruled in favor of the government’s position and rejected Lina Joy’s appeal (2-1).

48 Ibid.
49 *Bernama*, “Counsel Contends Syariah Court only Forum to Decide Apostasy,” 3 July 2006.
It declared that the matter of individuals in Malaysia renouncing Islam (or apostasy) was linked to Islamic law, and therefore under the sole jurisdiction and prerogatives of the state religious bureaucracy and its assorted *sharia* religious courts and officials.\(^5\) Beyond the immediate relevancy to dissident Muslims such as Joy (who constituted only a tiny minority of the Muslim community in Malaysia), the larger institutional implications of the ruling were immense. The court ruling also confirmed that the state religious bureaucracy, through its *sharia* court system, held exclusive jurisdiction over all matters related to Islamic administration in the country. Moreover, by restricting civil bodies from playing a role in deciding such sensitive religious issues as apostasy, the ruling removed thus the checks that secular components of the Malaysian state had placed on the authority and prerogatives of the state religious bureaucracy. The ambiguity and overlapping jurisdictions of civil and religious authorities had been built into the system since independence to manage a diverse, multi-ethnic society. These were effectively dissolved in favor of two *de facto* administrative systems: religious *sharia* courts for Muslims and civil courts for non-Muslims.

The political and institutional aftershocks of the Lina Joy decision continued to reverberate after the May 2007 decision. First indications that the government was seriously rethinking the Islam Hadhari initiative came just prior to the announcement of the Lina Joy appeal verdict, when an international interfaith conference scheduled to take place in Kuala Lumpur in mid May was

abruptly cancelled.\textsuperscript{51} The conference had been organized by the Anglican Church of England on the theme of “building bridges” and bringing together senior Muslim and Christian scholars to discuss common ground. Liberal civil rights activists, many NGOs, and representatives of non-Muslim minority groups in Malaysia had long supported initiatives such as inter-faith conferences or councils to serve as forums to voice criticisms of Malaysia’s state Islamization project and the excesses of its intrusive state religious bureaucracy. Previously in 2006 Abdullah had enthusiastically welcomed holding the conference in Malaysia to use it as a platform to promote his Islam Hadhari concept. Now, the backlash and tension engendered from both sides of the Lina Joy case forced him to reverse his earlier stand. And so the conference was cancelled hastily, virtually at the last minute.

In November 2006 the government had categorically rejected, on the basis of potential threat to national and religious harmony, the proposal to form a similar inter-faith council in Malaysia proper. The cancellation of another like-minded but very visible international conference confirmed the government’s now unmistakable stand on state Islamic policy. In July 2007 more word leaked in the local media of the full implications of the state religious bureaucracy’s treatment of dissident Muslims in Malaysia seeking to leave Islam, which was nearly identical to rulings accorded to members of proscribed minority religious sects or groups.

Revathi Masoosai was a 29 year-old Malaysian woman, born to Indian Muslim parents, who had left Islam to marry her Hindu husband. The state religious bureaucracy detained her for 180 days in a “Faith Rehabilitation Center” to force her to recant her apostasy. Released after her detention expired, she remained unrepentant about her conversion and spoke of the “hell” that she had undergone in detention at the hands of the state religious authorities. Given that all civil remedies to apostasy had effectively ended with the High Court’s decision on Lina Joy’s appeal, the state religious bureaucracy’s harsh treatment of those seeking to renounce Islam was effectively enshrined and endorsed by the government. With the state religious bureaucracy having been granted absolute discretion to process all applications on apostasy, the shaping of state Islamic policy in Malaysia took a conservative, reactionary, and anti-pluralist turn.

The Lina Joy case accelerated the denouement of Islam Hadhari and directly ended the political career of its primary political advocate, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi. In the 2004 elections, he had been embraced by the Malaysian electorate and given an unprecedented political mandate to implement Islam Hadhari. The perceived failure of Islam Hadhari’s ignominious end destroyed Abdullah’s political appeal. His previous wide and expansive political base, from cosmopolitan, urban Non-Malays to rural, East Coast belt, agricultural Malays had grown disenchanted, and was ready for political reform.

Islam Hadhari’s failure fed into Abdullah’s personal weaknesses of indecisiveness and an over reliance on bureaucratic procedure. Once touted as

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strong characteristics of a consensus-orientated leader, they increasingly became liabilities that presented him as a weak and disinterested leader losing control of his government’s political and policy orientation. Abdullah’s obvious political weakness inevitably attracted the first stirrings of an internal UMNO leadership challenge, as the government’s political position began to erode as the general elections approached. Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak, Abdullah’s deputy and putative successor, began to distance himself from Abdullah and the discredited Islam Hadhari, carving out his own political niche as an unrepentant defender of the conservative interests of Malaysian Islam, and by implication, of the state religious bureaucracy’s absolute discretion. Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of an Islamic conference in Kuala Lumpur in mid July 2007, Najib proclaimed that “Islam is the official religion and we are an [Malaysian] Islamic state…We have never been secular because being secular by Western definition means separation of the Islamic principles in the way we govern a country…We have never been affiliated to that position…We have always been driven by our adherence to the fundamentals of Islam.”

In fact, Najib’s potentially inflammatory comments directly contradicted Abdullah’s earlier slightly more positive reassurances that instructed the state religious bureaucracy to be more sensitive in processing potential future apostasy cases. Abdullah had earlier said, “I have always told the religious departments to listen to their grouses why they want to leave the religion…We have to be ready

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to listen and to resolve the problem…This is not something that cannot be done (leaving Islam)…It has happened before…For those who don’t want to be Muslim anymore, what can you do?” Najib’s clear challenge to his ostensible leader went largely unanswered.

This apparent political split at the very summit of the Malaysian political leadership was never fully addressed as the government spiraled into a dangerous period of political and policy stagnation. Hoping to catch the opposition off guard, Abdullah called an early general election in March 2008 with the expectation of another comfortable victory for the government, although not at the level of the 2004 election. Quite bluntly, Islam Hadhari did not survive the 2008 elections. The opposition made significant inroads by winning power in four states, cutting the Barisan Nasional’s traditional national supra-majority to a narrow majority and clearly showing a stunning repudiation of the political drift and policy stagnation of the later Abdullah years.55

The Selangor state government, now under control of an opposition coalition in May 2008, barred all mosques and all Islamic institutes in the state from promoting the concept of Islam Hadhari as political payback. Personally shocked and repudiated by the Malaysian public for his government’s mixed political signals and sloppy policy vacillations, Abdullah was mostly sanguine as he accepted defeat and the quick end to his political career. Islam Hadhari was

already irrelevant as a policy, reeling from problems with concrete implementation and the reverberations of the Lina Joy case that effectively granted the state religious bureaucracy almost complete discretion to manage Islamic administration without intervention from the civil, secular components of the Malaysian state.

Now the concept was finished as a piece of political rhetoric. The end came several months later in April 2009, when Abdullah quietly resigned as Prime Minister. On the day of his swearing in, his successor and once restless deputy, Prime Minister Najib Razak, officially abandoned the policy and associated political project. He moved forward with his own concept of “1 Malaysia” that essentially covered the same rhetorical ground as Islam Hadhari, but in more florid but vague language.  

Most significantly, the Najib government abandoned Islam Hadhari’s important but limited commitments to repositioning state Islamic policy in more pluralist directions. Islam Hadhari and Abdullah’s brief era in Malaysian politics and governance thus ended without a whimper.

This chapter has traced the consolidation of anti-pluralist institutional legacy in contemporary Malaysia as developed in three sequential historical and political processes, from early 1996 to early 2008. We looked at the initial expansion of the state religious bureaucracy when JAKIM (Islamic Development Department of Malaysia) was set up in late 1996 and early 1997. JAKIM’s founding was intimately linked to other significant institutional reforms that

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56 Bernama, “Najib Vows One Malaysia; People First Performance Now,” 3 April 2009.
reshaped the Malaysian state and fundamentally altered its approach to conceptualizing and implementing state Islamic policy in an expressively rigid and anti-pluralist direction.

The anti-pluralist impulse narrowed the diversity practiced in Malaysian Islam while containing public debate about the ongoing impact of Islamization. The consolidating legacy was first demonstrated through the renewed state campaign in 1999-2001 to combat “deviationist” or Muslim minority sects. The defeat of Abdullah Badawi’s Islam Hadhari initiative to adjust state policy in more pluralist directions was evidence of the resiliency of this legacy. A political challenge to this legacy from the very summit of Malaysia’s political establishment could not ultimately alter an anti-pluralist consensus.

It was the firm, anti-pluralist legacy that ruled against an ordinary citizen, Lina Joy, who sought in civil courts to convert from a Muslim to a Christian. Abdullah’s Islam Hadhari was primarily an attempt to redress the Mahathir legacy of perhaps over excessive institutional accommodation of Islam. His personal and political failures reflected the weaknesses of a secular Malay political establishment that, under Mahathir and Anwar, was able to impose its political will and vision with only token opposition. The failure of Islam Hadhari and Abdullah’s political career signaled the resiliency of JAKIM and the anti-pluralist direction of state Islamic policy in Malaysia.
CHAPTER 7

STATE ISLAMIC POLICYMAKING AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

In addressing the larger theoretical questions of Muslim politics and integrated empirical studies of Indonesian and Malaysian politics, my dissertation has built on the current scholarship in the field. It employs a tested and rigorous analytical framework of historical institutionalism that premises the role of history and institutions as explanatory factors. My examination of contingencies of critical junctures and path dependence is channeled through a focus on specific state and quasi-state institutions (state religious bureaucracies, socio-religious organizations) and spotlights specific policy areas (Minority Muslim sects) often underplayed in previous studies.

My analysis illustrates the impact of unintended consequences, of how policies of repression can produce pluralism while policies of accommodation can work against it. State intervention in Muslim politics in ostensibly moderate and “democratic” Malaysia led to declining pluralism, while the authoritarian roots of control over Islamic matters in Indonesia ultimately brought in more pluralism. These unintended consequences, along with the promise and perils of political and
social engineering, suggest that state Islamic policymaking can produce unpredictable political and public policy outcomes.

In much of the Muslim World outside Southeast Asia, the relationship between the state and Islam has been contentious and often directly entrenched in continued authoritarianism. States in the Muslim World have long perceived an independent and autonomous realm of Islam as a direct threat to their hold on political power. Political repression, either through the long-term military dictatorship of Kemalist era Turkey, the absolute royalist authoritarianism of the Saud family’s Saudi Arabia, or conversely through the stagnant, Western backed authoritarianism of the late Pro-Western Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt, may illustrate the fallacies of any coherent attempt at understanding Islamic state policymaking.

The dangers of any compromise broached with Islam can be seen in the outbreak of civil war in revolutionary Iran in 1979 and in the civil conflict between the state and Islam in Algeria for much of the 1990s. In this respect, Iran’s revolution to overthrow the Pro-Western Shah’s regime was hijacked by the ideologues of Khomeini’s Islamic state, while political Islam in Algeria morphed into a ruthless insurgency campaign that bordered on terrorism with its attacks on ordinary Algerian civilians.

Indonesia and Malaysia present additional empirical case studies in the Muslim World. Mostly authoritarian governments have dominated Indonesia and Malaysia in their histories. The Suharto regime, backed by the Indonesian military, was singularly ruthless about dispatching domestic political opponents
from the last vestiges of Indonesian Communism to Indonesian Islam. The Alliance, later the Barisan Nasional coalition government in Malaysia, employed its stranglehold of the country’s political institutions and its divisive ethnic politics to marginalize any viable political opposition.

In these two states, the approach to state Islamic policymaking was developed under authoritarian political contexts. However, through the interventions of unique political actors and existing domestic historical and institutional legacies, the relationship between the state and Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia followed path dependencies that are distinct from much of the Muslim World, especially in the Middle East. Political and civil conflict was largely avoided. Political stability ruled as these states embarked on ambitious projects of political and social engineering. The once firmly nationalist and secular character of these two post-independence nation-states in Southeast Asia underwent significant recalibration, as they embraced Islam as a pragmatic pillar of governance. Authoritarianism, not entrenched through Islamic state policymaking, receded as new political and socio-cultural currents of pluralism flourished.

President Suharto and Prime Minister Mahathir were important factors as they were decisive and autonomous political actors who successfully shifted their states to adapt to the political and cultural challenge of the Islamic Revival. Driven by personal political motive, Suharto and Mahathir navigated through increased elite factionalism to position their states towards accommodation with Islam. Both actors operated through existing Islam related domestic and
institutional legacies that made state Islamic policymaking politically successful and institutionally viable.

However, state Islamic policymaking ultimately produced unintended consequences. President Suharto and Prime Minister Mahathir aimed to reinforce political control through a strategic accommodation of Islam by means of reengineering institutions. However, state Islamic policymaking steadily undermined their original intentions. Distinct political and institutional outcomes were created as new political actors replaced the entrenched secular elite and transformed the political landscapes. Authoritarianism declined in Indonesia through the fall of Suharto and the rise of the quasi-state MUI, but in Malaysia it increased as UMNO fractured and the conservative JAKIM rose to control state Islamic policymaking. Indonesia and Malaysia present case studies that supports my dissertation’s larger thesis, that shifts in state Islamic policy created the conditions for a pluralist Indonesia and an anti-pluralist Malaysia today. Pluralism, as defined in this dissertation, is the recognition by the state of diverse socio-political interests and its acceptance of open and frank debate, and transparent and democratic resolution, to conflicts between the state and Islam.

Contemporary Indonesia is marked by the presence of institutional constraints, while Malaysia is conversely characterized by the thorough absence of institutional conditions for strengthening pluralism. Indonesian state policy was based on the repression of Islam through the political marginalization and subversion of the formal and informal institutions of Islamic piety and practice.
On the other hand, Malaysian state policy shaped the accommodation of Islam through the promotion and co-optation of similar formal and informal institutions.

In the state Islamic policymaking of the two countries, such shifts were qualitative and they were promulgated by a “state Islam” nexus of mainstream politicians, state religious bureaucracies, and the formal and informal institutions of Muslim piety and practice. The most important areas where “state Islam” emerged was through the creation of new state statutes and bureaucracies regulating Islam, the curbing of the political autonomy of long-standing socio-religious organizations embedded in Islam, and the prosecution of minority Islamic sects.

The decisive turning points where these distinct path dependencies emerged took place at separate and distinct critical junctures, in Malaysia in 1982, and in Indonesia in 1989. In both countries, three underlying conditions facilitated the critical junctures. Firstly, the Islamic Revival created the external geopolitical environment that altered subtly the political ideology and repression of Islam. Secondly, in both states, leadership transition and elite factionalism tore apart the entrenched political elites. Thirdly, new political entrepreneurs, often friendly to religious Islamic ideals, pushed for state policy changes affecting the regulating of Islam.

At the critical junctures, Malaysia in 1982, Indonesia in 1989, formal and informal institutions were restructured through the “state Islam” nexus but took contrasting path dependencies: pluralism in Indonesia and anti-pluralism in Malaysia. The shifting political motives and orientations of individual political
actors affected the intensity and development of pluralism. Primarily motivated by concerns of leadership and responding to increased elite factionalism, Prime Minister Mahathir in Malaysia and President Suharto in Indonesia made choices that shaped path dependencies of pluralism and anti-pluralism. Pluralist and anti-pluralist legacies subsequently constricted the ability of the MUI in Indonesia and Prime Minister Abdullah in Malaysia in their efforts to bring out independent political agendas that contradicted prevailing institutions.

State Islamic policymaking in Indonesia and Malaysia produced fascinating political and institutional outcomes. President Suharto of Indonesia ruthlessly aimed to bind the formal and informal institutions of Muslim piety and practice through a new kind of institutional repression in order to perpetuate his teetering authoritarian New Order regime after the end of the Cold War. Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia embarked on institutional accommodation of Islam earlier in the decade of the 1980s to enshrine the loyalty of a newly religiously-conscious Malay community to the Malaysian state and his ethnic Malay political party of UMNO.

Both projects of state Islamic policymaking produced short-term political successes. The political and cultural challenge of the Islamic Revival in Indonesia and Malaysia was successfully integrated into the political mainstream of both countries. The political leadership of Suharto and Mahathir prospered to the extent that Islam ironically became one of the strongest constituencies of political establishments that previously sought to marginalize and isolate Islam from the political mainstreams of Indonesia and Malaysia. However, the emergence of
strikingly distinct path dependencies in each country underlines the importance of key decisions taken during crucial political and historical timelines. These critical junctures and the nature of the unintended consequences of state Islamic policymaking may invariably shed light on the finite limits for policymakers and their frequent ambitions to engineer polity and society. These unintended consequences also point to the inherent problem of prediction for political science researchers and forecasters.

The political consequences of Indonesia’s repression and Malaysia’s accommodation of Islam have continued to reverberate. After 1998, both states struggled to manage the ramifications of political decisions taken nearly twenty-five years ago. While the contours of Indonesia’s pluralism and Malaysia’s anti-pluralism have remained resilient, new political developments from 2009 to 2012 in the respective countries construct a more ambiguous picture of these increasingly contested institutional legacies. In this respect, Indonesia seems to be moving away from pluralism, while Malaysia paradoxically inches closer towards pluralism. Fascinating political developments in the several years since 2008 point to the power of unintended consequences in state Islamic policymaking. The nature of this evolving state-Islam relationship in Indonesia and Malaysia may warrant a reexamination in the near future.

Indonesia’s pluralist, but highly fractious institutional legacy, now only nominally protects the Ahmadiyah Muslim minority sect from the threat of outright legal proscription. From 2009 to 2012, the hostility of Indonesia’s political and legal establishment against Ahmadiyah remains unchanged, although
vigilante violence against the sect has decreased due to increased security provided by the police. The state’s June 2008 directive, legalizing the group but then banning its teachings, had effectively crippled the Ahmadiyah and prevented it from resuming its religious activities and recruiting new members. Without an influx of new members, the group’s fundraising became non-existent, as it could not overcome its pariah status in Indonesia today. Ahmadiyah as a political controversy has now faded from newspaper headlines and international attention. The very reason why Ahmadiyah has lost its visibility as a political issue is due to the current lack of pronounced and sustained vigilante violence against the sect by radical grassroots activists, as compared to the period in 2005-2008. Other political dynamics embedded in Indonesian presidential politics and coalition politicking contributed to this situation. Most importantly, Ahmadiyah’s enemies in the political establishment and the MUI have moved on after President Yudhoyono’s successful reelection in 2009. In his last term as President, Yudhoyono sought to create a lasting historical and political legacy by moving away from political controversy before leaving office in 2014. The leadership of the MUI has also changed. Ma’ruf Amin, largely responsible for designating Ahmadiyah as a heretical sect, became MUI’s General Chairman in 2009. The future of Indonesia’ pluralist legacy seems secure for now, but its survival from another anti-pluralist attack cannot be guaranteed. After the Ahmadiyah affair of 2005 to 2008, the damage to its core was after all substantial. In this respect, the political actors and forces most dismissive of Indonesian pluralism were rewarded for leading the attack against Ahmadiyah, instead of suffering lasting political
damages. With this political precedent enshrined, there is no guarantee that Indonesian politicians in the future may, in the spirit of religious pluralism and tolerance, rush to the defense of another Muslim minority group or any other groups.

In contrast, Malaysia’s anti-pluralist legacy has receded in 2009-2012. The new political leadership under Prime Minister Najib from April 2009 allowed the government to revisit pluralist policymaking. The pressing political needs of the embattled Barisan Nasional coalition were behind the political dynamic forcing the government’s hand to recover minority support from a resurgent opposition coalition of Anwar Ibrahim. Islam Hadhari was now not dismissed out of hand in late 2009 and early 2010. The label of Islam Hadhari was erased, but the project’s mission to make the state more sensitive to pluralist and minority concerns was renewed. Pluralist policymaking was subsequently launched, but under the auspices of Najib’s own signature “1 Malaysia” initiative. Formally announced on 16 September 2010, the program called for the cabinet, government agencies and state companies, and civil servants to adhere to ethnic harmony, national unity, and effective governance.

Ironically, the anti-pluralist forces that had once been embraced by and favored by the state immediately positioned themselves against the concept of “1 Malaysia.” A backlash grew from avowedly reactionary Malay and anti-Chinese politicians and political forces. Led by the new Malay NGO Perkasa, these forces were alarmed over the future of the Malay preferences of the New Economic Policy and of the unchallenged supremacy of Islam in national affairs. The
emergence of this Perkasa opposition, and its strident rejection of state policymaking to be more inclusive of pluralist concerns, may weaken my argument about the failure of Islam Hadhari as a new paradigm in state policymaking. Enduring institutional legacies and the weight of history may yet preclude the success of another attempt at introducing pluralist concerns into Malaysian governance. The importance of Islam to Malays as a basis of identity formation and community building, along with the historical precedent of the state acting as the “protector of the Malays,” may eventually force Malay politicians to return to anti-pluralism in a new more ethnically polarized and fractious Malaysian political landscape.

Islam, as expressed through formal and informal institutions, retains significant political and historical relevance in predominant Muslim-based societies. The relationship between post-independence nationalist secular states, and the political and cultural interests aggregated around Islam, remains perhaps the key political relationship that structure the underlying political and social dynamics of the contemporary Muslim World. Political conflict and enduring authoritarianism continue to shape the historical experience of many of the states of the Muslim World. Indonesia and Malaysia, at least to some limited degree, provide evidence that the state and Islam can reach some sort of equilibrium or a degree of political compromise and consensus. However, such a mutual accommodation between state and Islam, as demonstrated by my study of empirical political developments in Indonesia and Malaysia, is not without costs and closely interlinked benefits. Political stability, in the absence of political and
civil conflict, underlines the real success of Indonesia and Malaysia. These political and policy outcomes are derived from the mechanisms of strong state Islamic policymaking and subtly contrasting strategies of institutional repression and institutional accommodation.

The law of unintended consequences, of how specific policy choices can ultimately rebound on the original authors of these transformative policies, provides rejoinders that state political and social engineering is far from being a straightforward and linear policy choice and outcome. In Indonesia and Malaysia, the very act of prolonged state interaction with Islam served to radically transform the political and social landscape of these two formerly static Southeast Asian states. New political actors replaced the political establishments that had been nationalist and secular orientated. They were expressly empowered by the state’s very decision to engage with and ultimately grant significant institutional concessions to Islam.

Indonesia’s repressive authoritarian edifice of Suharto’s New Order eventually gave way to a fluid and pluralist democratic political culture where fractured interests of Indonesian Islam and democratic politicians negotiate and coexist with each other. Malaysia’s once dominant and all-powerful ruling Barisan Nasional coalition became significantly weaker as UMNO’s secular nationalist politicians contended with internal and rigidly conservative bureaucratic interests that frustrated attempts to revisit Malaysian state Islamic policymaking in more pluralist directions.
The Muslim World beyond Indonesia and Malaysia must be cognizant of the experience of Indonesians and Malaysians in their political consequences of state Islamic policymaking. These consequences include the displacement of old entrenched political actors and interests, and the erosion of stagnant political authoritarianisms. The shifting sands of regional democratic revolution, as witnessed by the Arab Spring of early 2011 in North Africa and the Middle East, might just provide the political and institutional impetus to embarking on a real dialogue between the state and Islam in the contemporary Muslim World. In this respect, the rising expectations and yearnings of the Muslim World’s masses for substantive democracy, after decades of dispiriting political stagnation and authoritarianism, may entirely rest on engineering a prospective and carefully delineated Islamic state policymaking.
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