



**ISLAMIC
REVIVALISM
IN MALAYSIA**

WAH AMONG THE STUDENTS

AINAH ANWAR

ISLAMIC REVIVALISM IN MALAYSIA

Dakwah among the students

Zainah Anwar



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Dedication

*To
Mak and Abah*

About the Author .

Zainah Anwar is currently a researcher with the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), conducting research on government, politics and foreign policy. She was previously a journalist with *The New Straits Times* specializing in political and diplomatic reporting. She received her education at the MARA Institute of Technology, Boston University and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University.

Preface

This book is a revised version of a Masters' thesis submitted to the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University in 1986. It is by no means a scientific attempt to explain and analyse the *dakwah* movement among university students in Malaysia. Neither is it my intention to advocate or to criticize. It is more the narrative of an observer; a modest attempt to tell the story as I see it.

The study traces the roots of the current Islamic revivalism in Malaysia, how it began among university students in the country and among the government-sponsored students who were sent by the thousands to study in England under a new education policy in the 1970s. It tries to explain how and why the students begin their turn to Islam and how the movement is organized and spread among fellow students. Finally, it examines the social and political impact of this new Islamic atmosphere in Malaysian society and what it means to the future of the country. I must emphasize that the conclusions are preliminary, based on limited fieldwork of a contemporary movement that is still evolving.

I am indebted to several people for making this study possible. I would like to thank Professor Leila Fawaz of the Fletcher School and Professor John Esposito of Holy Cross College for their guidance and criticism at every stage of the thesis. Also my thanks to Professor Muhammad Kamal Hassan of the International Islamic University, Dr Chandra Muzaffar of

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My deepest gratitude goes to the university students and young professionals who gave me their time and opened their lives, some with much persuasion, to my prying questions.

Naturally, mistakes and failings in this study are solely my responsibility.

Zainah Anwar

List of Abbreviations

ABIM	Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia)
FOSIS	Federation of Student Islamic Societies
GKK	Gerakan Kempen Kesedaran (Consciousness Raising Campaign)
HMI	Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam (Muslim Students' Association)
IRC	Islamic Representative Council
MATA	Majlis Islam Tertinggi Se-Malaya (All Malaya Supreme Religious Council)
MISG	Malaysian Islamic Study Group
MNP	Malay Nationalist Party
NEP	New Economic Policy
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Party Islam)
PBMUM	Persatuan Bahasa Melayu Universiti Malaya (University of Malaya Malay Language Society)

PKPIM	Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar Pelajar Islam Malaysia (National Association of Muslim Students Malaysia)
PMIUM	Persatuan Mahasiswa Islam Universiti Malaya (University of Malaya Muslim Students' Society, affiliated to the national level PKPIM)
PMUM	Persatuan Mahasiswa Universiti Malaya (University of Malaya Students' Union)
UKM	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia)
UM	Universiti Malaya (University of Malaya)
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia (University of Science Malaysia)
UTM	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (University of Technology Malaysia)

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Introduction

In many ways, Malaysia is no different from other Muslim countries caught in the throes of Islamic revivalism. In the streets of Kuala Lumpur, the capital city, young women covered from head to toe in the loose flowing *hijab* and young men wearing the *jubah* (ankle length garment worn over regular clothes) with turbans and little beards are a common sight. Partying and merry-making are no longer the popular social activities among the Muslim students on the university campuses. Alcohol is no longer served at government receptions. Sparkling apple juice now fills champagne glasses as the Prime Minister toasts his foreign guests. The Islamic opposition party stridently calls for the *syariah* to replace the British-based legal system of Malaysia and for the Quran and the *sunnah* to replace the man-made 'infidel' constitution. The government has embarked on its own Islamization programme to meet the new challenge.

In Malaysia, as in many other Muslim countries, Islam has become the major ideology of dissent. Western models are no longer sought for solutions to the ills of society. For the Islamic activists, a new ideological framework forms the basis of their beliefs and way of life. These beliefs include:

1. Islam is a comprehensive way of life. Religion is integral to politics, state, law and society.
2. Muslim societies fail because they depart from this understanding of Islam by following Western secular and materialistic ideologies and values.

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3. Renewal calls for an Islamic political and social revolution that draws its inspiration from the Quran and from Muhammad, who led the first Islamic movement.
4. To re-establish God's rule, Western-inspired civil law must be replaced by Islamic law, which is the blueprint for Muslim society.
5. While Westernization of society is condemned, modernization as such is not. Science and technology are accepted, but they are to be subordinated to Islam in order to guard against the infiltration of Western values.¹

Who are these activists? In Malaysia, the young people make up the most active members of Islamic movements. They are high school and university students, graduates and young professionals who form the most receptive social group to the ideology of Islamic revivalism. Thus, contrary to stereotypes, most Islamic revivalists are not uneducated, anti-modern, and society misfits, but are in fact well-educated, upwardly mobile and motivated individuals. In Malaysia, they form the backbone of Islamic revivalism. They range from highly qualified graduates in science and technology from British and American universities to graduates in Islamic theology and jurisprudence from al-Azhar. They come from diverse backgrounds, from upper- and middle-class urbanities to poor rural dwellers whose entrance into the country's universities brought them their first exposure to city life.

Islamic revivalism in Malaysia is not a monolithic movement. Islamic activists and organizations range from the moderate to the radical, from pro-government to anti-government. Their ideologies, strategies and activities differ. The moderate ABIM (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia) while advocating the formation of an Islamic state emphasizes the Islamization of the *ummah* first. The radical Islamic opposition party PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia) demands the immediate establishment of an Islamic nation with the Quran and

sunnah as the constitution of the country. The government and its supporters are branded as *kafirs* (infidels) who have no legitimate right to rule. In response to the pressures of resurgent Islam, the government embarks on an Islamization policy, a step-by-step process to inculcate Islamic values and introduce Islamic versions of institutions like banking, insurance and pawnbroking.

Islamic revivalism is not a new phenomenon in Malaysia. Islam has always been a force in Malay politics.² By the early twentieth century, life under British colonial rule, the influx of Chinese immigrants who dominated the local economy, a new system of land tenure which saw the granting of large tracts of land to European mining interests and the forests being converted into vast British plantations, the introduction of a Western-style school system to replace the old *pondok* boarding schools,³ and the spread of Islamic reformist ideas through the modern *madrasah* system⁴ had all contributed to the increasing politicization of the Malays and a search for solutions to Malay backwardness and domination by the Western colonialists. Influenced by the Egyptian modernist movement led by Syed Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Shaykh Muhammad Abduh, Malay reformists attacked colonial rule, criticized the religious bureaucracies and challenged the constitutional authority of the *sultans* (rulers) over religious affairs. They called for a return to the purity of early Islam and the development of a Malay secondary and tertiary education system.

But 'it was only after the Second World War, at the height of national agitation for independence from British colonial rule, that Islam in Malaya emerged as a direct source of political ideology.'⁵ Several reformist organizations and parties formed in this period, like the All-Malaya Supreme Religious Council (MATA – Majlis Islam Tertinggi Se-Malaya) and the Malay Nationalist Party (MNP), gained much popular support among the Malays. The religious, educational and social activities of these reformist organizations culmi-

nated in the formation of the first Islamic political party in Malaya, the Hizbul Muslimin. Formed in 1948, the party called for independence from British rule, the creation of an Islamic society and the establishment of an Islamic state. But British clampdown on the reformist organizations including the arrest of seven Hizbul leaders, effectively crippled the party, barely four months after its founding. But Hizbul Muslimin had laid the ideological and organizational foundation for yet another Islamic political party, the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), which emerged three years later as a breakaway from the religious wing of UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) – the dominant partner in the current ruling National Front government. Led by Hizbul-type reformists, PAS called for the creation of an Islamic state where Islam is not confined to the personal life, but covers the political and economic affairs of state.

There are, however, important new elements and differences in the current Islamic revivalism in Malaysia. First, not only are students playing a much more decisive role in leading and shaping the course of the movement now, the English-educated and urban-based Malay students are deeply involved in the present revivalism.⁶ Secondly, the movement is not dominated by the reformist attitude of the earlier revivalism. The West is no longer a source of emulation or the fount of solutions for Malay backwardness, even if couched in Islamic terminology.⁷ Islam now holds all the solutions to society's ills. Thirdly, there is no element of Malay nationalism at all in this current revivalism. The present-day *dakwah* people do not call for the improvement of the lot of the Malays. In fact, they oppose the New Economic Policy as it is based on race instead of religion. Nationalism which recognizes the artificially imposed man-made national boundaries is also considered unIslamic as it opposes the Islamic concept of the universality of the *ummah*. Fourthly, extensive government policies designed to promote

rapid Malay advancement in the Malaysian economy have thrown Malays, in large numbers and within a short period, from the familiarity of a peasant society into the anxieties of a modern, competitive urban life. All the attendant consequences of these policies have had a profound effect on the course and tenor of Islamic revivalism in Malaysia today.

This study focuses on Islamic revivalism among the youth in Malaysia, from the moment it began in the middle of 1969 to the current period. It is my thesis that the youth movement forms the backbone of Islamic revivalism in Malaysia. By youth, I mean in particular university students and young graduates, ranging from 18 to 35 years old, who, I believe, are the major determining force in providing an Islamic alternative and setting an Islamic agenda for socio-political change in the country. Most of them come from either urban middle- or lower middle-class backgrounds, and from small towns and villages and are thus recent arrivals in the city of Kuala Lumpur. This study will trace the roots of the latest Islamic revivalism in Malaysia, how it began among university students in the country and among the government-sponsored students studying in England in the 1970s. It tries to understand the reasons for the students' turn to Islam and how the movement is organized and spread among fellow students. The study will also show that the movement is not monolithic; that there are different intensities of practice and levels of commitment to Islam among the students. Finally, it will examine the social and political impact of this 'Islamic' atmosphere and what it means to the future of Malaysia.

Methodology

While there have been studies and numerous articles written about Islamic revivalism in Malaysia, they have mainly dealt with the phenomenon in general, focusing on the socio-economic and political reasons for the turn toward Islam, followed by lengthy descrip-

tions of the two main Islamic revival movements in Malaysia, ABIM (Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia) and Darul Arqam, a movement devoted to putting into practice an Islamic lifestyle through the setting up of self-sufficient communities.⁷ While these studies have been informative in giving a general understanding and providing an analysis of the impact and implications of Islamic revivalism in Malaysia, there has been no study that focuses on the movement among university students and young professionals who form the nucleus and backbone of the movement.

There are, however, several drawbacks in conducting such a study. First, there is a scarcity of data based on interviews or survey analysis on the various Islamic groups in the universities, their origins, activities and ideologies. Another drawback is the clandestine nature of most of these groups and also of the revivalists who do not belong to any group. I faced tremendous difficulty in trying to establish contact with them as they were suspicious that I was a government agent who would use the information they were giving me only to destroy their movements. My being a woman did not help either. Many of the more radical male students refused to talk to me. Those who agreed questioned my belief, my intentions, my dress and my commitment to Islam. Most of the students I interviewed during a summer of field research in Malaysia in 1985 were thus female and moderate males who were willing to sit across the table for lengthy interviews in the privacy of a room.

The problem of the dearth of information is compounded by the limited and one-sided coverage of these student revivalists in the mass media. The only times one hears about them are when they get into conflicts with university authorities or the government as they did over a concert by a popular local pop singer at two university campuses and over the annual University of Malaya food and funfair held during the convocation exercise.⁸ Despite their conspicuous presence

on the university campuses and streets of Kuala Lumpur, and the concern they cause to the government and parents and the secular society at large, the general public understands little of their motives, their beliefs, or their aims, beyond a generalized fear that they are against modernization, Westernization, and that they want to return to the days of Prophet Muhammad and the four orthodox caliphs of the seventh century.

This study should thus be read with these limitations in mind. The observations and analysis are preliminary conclusions based upon limited fieldwork and availability of data.⁹