

Political Islam and Muslim Militancy in Malaysia: Who Are the “Militants”?

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The rise of political Islam and Muslim militancy across the world has attracted a great deal of attention among scholars and has impacted upon the configuration of geopolitics. It has been a trend for scholars and others to talk of “political Islam,” “Muslim fundamentalists,” “extremists” and “radicals.” And of late, especially following the September 11 incident in 2001, stronger terms like “militants,” “jihadists,” and “terrorists” have gained greater currency when referring to certain Muslim groups as though these terms are objective heuristic devices that can be taken as given without the need for problematising, interrogation and conceptual fine-tuning.

This paper argues that a new “Cold War” is emerging, resulting in the rise of Islamophobia. Such developments have put scholars in a moral and intellectual dilemma, and we need to exercise extra care so as not to be caught in the ideological battle between the divide and the political agenda underpinning these terms. Using Malaysia as a case study, this paper seeks to explain such questions as: Who are the “militants” and “terrorists”? What is “political Islam” and what differentiates it from “militant Islam”? What criteria can be used in defining the problem? This is followed by an analysis of the rise of political Islam in Malaysia and incidents of Muslim militancy. The paper ends by looking at some possible approaches in engaging militant Islam and its contested visions of justice and community.

Introduction

Islam is a religion that emerged in the seventh century AD in the Arabian Peninsula [Engineer 1990], and spread to become a global faith today with about 1.3 billion followers, or 22% of the world’s population. They are distributed in many countries throughout the world, mostly in the 57 member-states of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). Southeast Asia—a region of more than 500 million inhabitants of diverse ethnic groups, religions and cultures—received Islam from about the thirteenth century, and it became the most important religion of this region ever since [al-Attas 1972]. Malaysia—considered “the most industrially advanced Islamic nation in the world” [Ohmae 1995: 136–49]—has a majority Muslim population, with Islam being accorded the constitutional status as the official religion of the Federation but other religions are allowed to flourish.

Muslims everywhere have nostalgic memories of Islam’s golden past, and lament at the present malaise the Muslim ummah and Muslim countries have been trapped in. They

seem to have been caught in a vicious circle with no apparent avenue for exit. As expounded by the immediate past Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, one of the most persuasive articulators of modernist Islam:

The last time the world ushered in a new millennium, the Islamic civilisation was at its zenith. Today in the third millennium of the Christian era, sadly, Islamic civilisation is at its lowest ebb (with) Muslim countries ... caught in their own quagmires of abject poverty and internal violence [Mahathir 2001: 11].

Islam has erroneously been seen or interpreted mainly as a religion for the other world or the hereafter, rather than as a religion of progress for the here-and-now.

It is against such a backdrop that some Muslim countries—Malaysia being one of the examples—have attempted to chart a new course towards progress to partially redeem the image of Islam and Muslims, and to negotiate with—or even appropriate—certain trappings of Western modernity. At the same time, and more importantly for the present discussion, Islamist movements have emerged denouncing the existing social order, putting the blame for the backwardness of Muslims on capitalism and the West as well as on those Muslim leaders who are in power, but not practising what they consider as “true Islam.” Calling for “a return to pristine Islam as *addin* or the complete way of life,” these movements or groups espouse a new social order based on their own vision of Islam, “a vision not so much of the [glorified] past itself but of the future as a restoration of the past” [Norani 1994: 126].

This Islamist “resurgence” or re-politicisation of Islam, which has been put in motion more than three decades ago, has attracted a great deal of attention everywhere and become a new preoccupation especially following the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Capturing the spirit of the age, a Muslim scholar—Ziauddin Sardar [1988: 43]—writing at the close of the 1980s, puts it thus: “Nothing has generated more passion and heated debate, both in the West and the Muslim world, than the alleged ‘resurgence’ and ‘revival’ of Islam.” But a dangerous twist to such a preoccupation has developed especially in the West because the latter’s response to Islamic revival has partly been “mediaeval.” As evidence, the scholar cited the reference to Islam as “militant Islam” in some articles or book titles, an act which conjures negative imageries and connotations such as, “The hordes [referring to Muslims] are again at the gates of Vienna, holding civilization hostage, menacing our energy as they once menaced our faith” [quoted in Sardar 1988: 43].

If that was the situation more than two decades ago, today it has become far worse. Huntington’s “clash of civilisation” thesis in the early 1990s which identified the fault lines as between “Islam and the rest,” has been raised to a higher pitch, that of the “enemy” and “us,” following the September 11, 2001 incident linked to Al-Qaeda. This comes out strongly if we read the various writings of a number of scholars as well as the speeches by certain Western leaders, particularly those by President George W. Bush. Through their words (direct or implicit), as well as their actions, we are given the impression that Islam has indeed emerged as a “threat” to world peace and security of nations, not just to Western civilisation. The spin machine has drummed up the propaganda that instead of the spectre of communism that used to haunt the White House, we now have the spectre

of Islam and Muslims. The rhetoric has become even more strident especially after the US launched the so-called “global war against terror,” labeling Islamist movements not in the mainstream as “Muslim terrorists,” with some Muslim states being identified as “rogue states,” constituting the so-called “axis of evil,” and a sharp line has been drawn of “either you are with us or against us.”

From the deluge of rhetoric and hawkish stance of the Western, namely the US neo-conservatives and some of the world media, one can really get lost and confused between fact and fiction, between reality and propaganda. Hardened perceptions have been formed, even assuming the status of “reality.” Reality is now what is “perceived to be real,” or defined to be real by those with such powers to define.

This complicated and bewildering fusion of myths and fiction with facts and reality, as well as an admixture of emotions and prejudices, propaganda and half-truths, that really constrain any comprehensive, well-informed and objective analysis of the question at hand, the issue of Muslim militancy in Southeast Asia. Over and above that, there is the paucity of data, and, worse still, the secrecy and lack of openness—for various reasons—on the part of the powers-that-be as well as the movements involved. As such, reliable data, particularly first hand data, is very difficult to obtain.

Given these constraints, this paper can only offer a “scratch on the surface” of the issue in question. It will first address the emergence of what I consider as a new “Cold War” and Islamophobia, and its attendant consequence on social science, namely with respect to the problem of definition. This is a necessary ground-clearing exercise not only to give the ideological and geopolitical perspective to the debate before other issues can be discussed, but also to underline the need for academic rigour and objectivity. This will be followed by a brief discussion on Islam and Muslims in Malaysia and the emergence of “political Islam” (in the wake of the perennial battle between the two important Muslim-based parties in the country, namely the ruling UMNO, and the opposition Islamist party, PAS). Then the paper will deal with, perhaps, the most difficult part of the subject, i.e., the issue of who are the “militants,” and the implications of their presence and activities for political stability, security and social harmony. And finally, the paper will offer some reflections on the important question of how to engage with Muslim militancy.

The New “Cold War” and Islamophobia

Let me begin by providing a perspective to the problem under review. I am arguing that the early twenty first century has heralded a new era—one in which some kind of a new “Cold War” is emerging to deal with what is termed as “terrorism.” The full contours of this new “Cold War” have yet to be shaped. But in many ways, it has come to replace the old or conventional Cold War, that is, the ideological conflict that lasted for more than four decades since the late 1940s between the US-led Western bloc and the former Soviet bloc, which ended with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

What are some of the salient features of this new “Cold War”? Here, I will highlight three such features that have a bearing on the subject under discussion. First, just as the old Cold War initiated by the Truman Doctrine in 1947 had “freedom” inscribed on its banner, so also is the new “Cold War.” Such posturing comes out very sharply in the Bush’s inauguration address as a second term President delivered on January 20, 2005 with his declaration that America has “a calling from beyond the stars,” and that the

survival of American liberty depends on the spread of freedom and liberty to the rest of the world. This is clearly an extension of the formulation of the Bush Doctrine enunciated in 2002 [Akmal Hussein 2004]. However, this new “Cold War” defines the battle no longer as between the “Free World” against international communism, but between the “Free World” against a “new” enemy—“militant Islam” and the “global reach of terrorism.”

To whip up support against the enemy, the new “Cold War” ideologues have launched a concerted campaign of demonisation of the other, through a highly sophisticated spin machine linked to the military-industrial complex, or sometimes referred to as the military-industrial-communication complex. Though they try to distinguish between “moderate Islam” and “militant Islam,” the net result of their over-politicisation of Islam is the revival of old prejudices, suspicions, hatreds and animosities against the religion and its adherents, linking the latter with things mediaeval and with terrorism.

One of the consequences of the resurrection of such a spectre of Islam and “Muslim hordes”—coupled with the militant actions taken by some Muslim groups in the name of Islam—is the emergence of Islamophobia or general paranoia of Muslims in the United States and in some European countries. Indeed, this phobia seems to have gripped the minds of Western policymakers and sections of their ordinary citizens. As a study by Cornell University conducted in 2004 shows, the impact on ordinary citizens is alarming, with many ordinary Americans even agreeing to curb the civil liberties of their fellow US citizens of Islamic faith. The gravity of the situation has led the United Nations to organise a seminar on Islamophobia in December 2004, the first meeting of its kind ever to be held by the world body. In the words of the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan when addressing the seminar, “(W)hen the world is compelled to coin a new term to take account of increasingly widespread bigotry, that is a sad and troubling development. Such is the case with Islamophobia.”

Second, the military and strategic dimensions in the new “Cold War” are extremely one-sided and asymmetrical. The war is not between two major power blocs or super-powers as was the case with the old Cold War. Rather it is between the US and its allies who possess nuclear weapons and the most powerful armed forces, versus a nebulous enemy, consisting of non-state actors, backed perhaps by some states, alleged to have “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD). But, the US has taken advantage of its sole super-power position by redefining the concept of “homeland security.” While during the old Cold War, “homeland security” was confined to the American homeland (though foreign bases were stationed in the territories of its allies), the new “Cold War” has extended American “homeland security” as encompassing the whole planet. With such reconfiguration, attacks on American interests anywhere in the world are regarded as attacks on the American soil itself, thus justifying preemptive strikes on foreign soil. In this way, the new “Cold War” simply seeks to override national sovereignty, especially of countries suspected of aiding or abetting terrorism. This conflation of US security with global security, and the strategy of preemptive strikes is the translation of the agenda of the neo-conservatives, the prime-movers of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) whose members form the inner circle of the Bush Administration.

Third, the geopolitics of the new “Cold War” is different from the old. Today, the first frontline states where the US is bent to fight terror are in the Middle East, as Iraq,

Palestine, Syria and Iran have been perceived to be the hotbed of Muslim terrorism. However, following the incidents in southern Philippines as well as the Bali and Jakarta bombings in 2002 and 2003 respectively by Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a movement believed to be associated with Al-Qaeda, a second frontline has emerged—Southeast Asia. Muslim countries in this region—Indonesia and Malaysia—and other Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore in which there are sizeable Muslim minorities have now come under the close scrutiny of the US. The latter has sent troops to the Philippines to assist the Filipino authorities in their fight against the Abu Sayyaf guerillas in the southern island of Mindanao, and has been demanding the right to patrol the strategic Straits of Malacca. With the escalating violence in southern Thailand for which the Thai authorities have blamed the “Muslim separatists,” the US is all the more drawn to the region. This has become very evident especially after the release of the authorized edition of the *9/11 Commission Report*, which identifies in detail the new theatres of possible conflict and the likely hotbeds of terrorism [National Commission 2004].¹⁾ The June 4, 2004 speech by Ronald Rumsfeld, the US Secretary of Defence on board the US carrier *USS Essex* in Singapore, in which he declared that “the war against terrorism” would soon be launched in Southeast Asia vindicates this thesis further [Abdul Rahman 2004].²⁾ The current interest in “militant Islam” in Southeast Asia thus has to take this background into account.

The Problem of Definition

The important thing to stress here is: This new “Cold War” and Islamophobia has made significant inroads into social science today, especially Western social science, although not to the same degree as the old Cold War did. It has been a trend for quite a while for scholars and others to talk of “political Islam,” “Muslim fundamentalists,” “extremists” and “radicals.” And of late, especially following the September 11 incident in 2001, stronger terms like “militants,” “jihadists,” and “terrorists” have gained greater currency when referring to certain Muslim groups as though these terms are objective heuristic devices that can be taken as given without the need for problematising, interrogation and conceptual fine-tuning.

Such developments have put us in a moral and intellectual dilemma, and we need to exercise extra care so as not to be caught in the ideological battle between the divide and the political agenda underpinning these terms. The arbitrary usage of such terms as “militants” and “terrorists” has put those who are genuinely fighting for the freedom of their people and their land (like those in Palestine) in a bad light, and confuses them with real terrorists, i.e., those groups who indiscriminately inflict violence on ordinary citizens using means of terror. Such usage also privileges powerful states, as it camouflages state terrorism (i.e., violence inflicted by the state), giving them a free hand in suppressing the people who are fighting for their rights. Thus, we cannot take these terminologies as given, or for granted.

This brings us to the questions: Who are the “militants” and “terrorists”? What is “political Islam” and what differentiates it from “militant Islam”? What criteria can be used in defining the problem?

The term “political Islam” is perhaps easier to deal with, as it can be taken to mean Islamic movements or groups that have a political agenda, rather than merely the spread

of Islamic theology. Its agenda is Islamisation of the state and society—either gradual or radical—to build a society based on the tenets of Islamic morality and law in the image they define it. To realise such a goal involves ideological propagation and mass mobilisation, as well as personal sacrifice. Hence, the call for *jihad*. However, a gray area exists as to when “political Islam” metamorphoses into “militant Islam.” In my view, “political Islam” remains “*political* Islam” when the organisation or movement operates within the rules or space allowed by the political system. It may subsequently become “militant” but it does not mean it is *inherently* “militant” by the mere fact of being *political*.

The rise of militancy is rather complex. Just as much as it may be inherent in the movement’s or group’s ideology, it can also be triggered by external factors or environment in which it operates. Such conditions as neglect, brutal repression, lack of engagement, marginalisation, prejudices, and so on serve to make the ground fertile for militancy. Thus, both the movement’s ideology and the internal dynamics arising from it as well as the external conditionalities—contemporary and historical—must be taken into account.

Militant Islam is more than just championing its cause politically and asserting Islamic supremacy in shaping people’s political and social lives. One has to examine a plurality of factors, such as whether it has a messianic character and appeal, whether it cultivates the personality cult of the leader and blind faith in the latter, the attitude it adopts towards people of its own and other faiths, its methods of struggle, and so on. Tougher assertion of Islamic primacy in shaping a country’s political and social life and its various institutions is one of its manifestations. Espousing a certain cause in an aggressive way, forcing upon others their point of view, condemning others for not being like them or following their way, and resorting to violent means to achieve their goal—that is not only intolerant but also militant. Add to that the tendency to arrogate to oneself the right to define “truth” and “falsehood,” being exceedingly judgmental, by passing judgments on others. The cult of the leader is strong and there is almost blind faith in the leader, giving rise to a mind set that what the leader says is correct and sacred, and therefore must be obeyed. Sometimes, there is a messianic element in the whole enterprise, with the claim that the leader and the movement is set to be the saviour of humanity to bring them to the promised land at a not too distant future. There is always a constant call to sacrifice and martyrdom in the interest of one’s cause. And when all this is done in the name of one’s religion—be it Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or Hinduism—then it becomes militant Christianity, militant Judaism, militant Islam and militant Hinduism.

“Militancy” and “terrorism” are inter-related, but they are two different things. Militants need not necessarily become terrorists, and terrorists need not necessarily originate from militant movements. Also combatants on both sides of the divide in a war are not terrorists, though their fighting is violent and results in bloodshed and deaths. They commit war crimes if they violate “the rules of the game” in a war or when holding war captives. The term “terrorists” should be strictly used to refer to those who attack indiscriminately, such as targeting even civilians who are not part of the enemy they are fighting against. Terrorists should be differentiated from those fighting for a just cause in defence of their homeland and their national rights against aggression. The latter are not, and should not, be treated as terrorists.

Political Islam in Malaysia: Who Are the “Militants”?

The discussion of militant Islam and Muslim militancy in Malaysia in this paper will be very much guided by the parameters explained above. While there are Islamist political parties and movements in Malaysian history and today, one has to be cautious when talking about militant Islam in this country. A number of Muslim groups, such as those that have resorted to some form of militant means of struggle including violence, undoubtedly can be considered militant, but other Islamist movements or parties that champion Islam as their cause in reforming or changing society and who condemn violence and terrorism cannot be considered such.

Let us look at Malaysia’s demography and the position of Islam in the country. Muslims make up about 60% of Malaysia’s 25 million population, with the rest being Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and others. Muslims in Malaysia are generally Sunnis, who tend to be more conservative as compared to Shiites. The overwhelming majority of the Muslims are Malays—the country’s largest ethnic group—who embraced Islam more than seven centuries ago, replacing their earlier religious beliefs, namely Hinduism, Buddhism and animism. Islam has been part of the Malay identity ever since, shaping Malay psyche, outlook, culture, and institutions.

Malaysia is a federation consisting of 14 member states, with nine of them having traditional rulers or sultans, whilst the Paramount King or Yang di-Pertuan Agong who serves as the head of state, is elected among brother-rulers through the Council of Rulers once every five years. Although Islam is the official religion of the country, as a federation, the power over the religion is vested in the nine respective Malay rulers with the Yang di-Pertuan Agong serving as head of the religion in the five states that have no traditional rulers. A bureaucracy to manage Islamic affairs has been set up in each state whose task, among others, is to ensure that Muslims practice the official doctrine of Islam, and not indulge in what is officially termed as “deviationist” activities.

At the central level, the Federal Government has placed Islamic affairs directly under the Prime Minister’s Department with a minister in charge, and a federal religious bureaucracy is also in existence. The Prime Minister appoints several advisors, including a Religious Advisor (with ministerial rank) to assist him on Islamic issues.

Islam has historically been an important political force in Malay politics till today. Developments in the Muslim world have directly or indirectly impacted upon the Malays leading to calls for social and religious reforms and so on. Since the first half of the twentieth century, too, Islam had served to rally Malays in the fight against British colonialism for independence. In post-independence years, Islam came to be more pertinent in politics, especially from the 1970s onwards as a consequence of Islamic resurgence. Whilst political Islam had entered the political scene in Malaysia since the 1940s (with the setting up of Hizbul Muslimin, and later PAS), the contemporary resurgence or revival has transformed Islam into a greater and more potent force in shaping Malay, and by extension, Malaysian politics. Today, the two major political parties—the ruling UMNO and the opposition PAS (both formed before independence in 1946 and 1951 respectively)—compete for Malay support, using their version of Islam as the banner of struggle. The change in the PAS leadership since the 1980s with the Islamic clerics or the *ulama* being placed at the helm, coupled with their call for the setting up of an Islamic state and the implementation of the *hudud*, as well as their attack

on the UMNO-led government as “secular,” has pushed Malaysian politics in a direction not witnessed previously and creating tension in Malay politics [Hussin Mutalib 1990]. PAS’s rise as a political force attracting not only its traditional political base, viz. rural Malays, but also urban professionals, has challenged UMNO’s dominance. The most critical challenge came in the second half of the 1990s that culminated in the 1999 elections in which PAS succeeded in eroding substantial support for UMNO, wresting control of two state governments (Kelantan and Terengganu), and made inroads into several other Malay-dominated areas. Uniting with other opposition parties, and taking advantage of the Anwar Ibrahim incident and the *reformasi* movement, PAS became the Opposition leader in Parliament, a post traditionally held by the Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP) [Abdul Rahman 2002: chapter 10].

But, PAS’s fortune did not last for long. In the March 2004 general election, the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional under the new leadership of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, took back Terengganu from PAS, and almost knocked PAS out of the State government of Kelantan. The number of seats won by PAS in the Federal Parliament was reduced substantially from 29 to seven, and DAP again became the leader of the Opposition, replacing the Islamist party.

One of the contentious issues between UMNO and PAS today is the question of the religious schools. Before the introduction of modern education, *pondok* or religious schools—set up in almost every state—were the only educational institution for the Malays. This institution survives till today despite the spread of modern schools, but its management is now more in the hands of the respective state authorities. Some still operate independently, but more often than not, they are linked with the Islamist political party, PAS. From before Malaysia’s independence in 1957 till today, students from the *pondok* would usually be sent to the Middle East, or to Pakistan, India and Indonesia to further their studies. Students who studied Islam through the formal education system, however, would generally go to the local university which has the faculty of Islamic studies though a few might be sent overseas. PAS has made important inroads into the *pondok* to recruit members and supporters, as well as among those who went through Islamic studies.

Looking at the political scenario as a whole, one is tempted to categorise PAS and its followers as “traditionalist” and part of “militant Islam.” But is this an accurate description of the party?

In my view, PAS is neither traditionalist, nor militant. PAS is committed to the modern parliamentary democracy and participates in the general elections [Malhi 2003].³⁾ Its discourses are modern, engaging the state not only on Islam and the Islamic state in the modern world, but also on such issues as human rights, justice, equity in development, democracy, accountability, transparency, good governance, people’s participation, and so on. Although consisting of mostly Malay membership, it tries to be non-ethnic, as it does not appeal to narrow nationalism or communalism, but rather to the *Muslim ummah* as a binding universal community. As a party, it does not advocate the use of force or violence to achieve its goals in Malaysia.

But, there is the prevailing perception that the party is “militant” and “fundamentalist.” This is not only due to UMNO’s demonisation of PAS, but also to PAS’s own posturings. In the 1980s, soon after the change of leadership in the party, one of its young and

rising firebrand leaders, Abdul Hadi Awang (currently the President of the party), issued an edict, labeling UMNO members as “infidels.” In November 1985, Ibrahim Libya, who was closely associated with PAS, together with his followers, violently clashed with the authorities in what is known as the Memali incident at a village near Baling, in Kedah. In that incident, Ibrahim Libya and 13 other militants were killed, while 29 other villagers were wounded. A total of 567 members of the security forces (soldiers and police) were involved, along with armoured vehicles. PAS has also openly supported militant Muslim struggles elsewhere such in Kashmir, Mindanao and southern Thailand. Then following the September 11 incident, PAS expressed open support for Osama ben Laden, Mullah Omar, and the Taliban, and called for *jihād* against the United States for invading Afghanistan. At the same time, some mavericks and militants do exist in the party, and have been linked to groups like *Al-Maunah*, *Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia* and *Jema'ah Islamiyah* [Farish Noor 2004: 723].

But will all these make PAS militant? Farish Noor in his two-volume study of PAS maintains that “the overwhelming majority of PAS members are ordinary Malay-Muslims with ordinary wants and aspirations,” and that “PAS kept within the law and the constitution (sic) safeguard of Malaysia [2004: 722]. I agree with his conclusion that, “To demonise PAS as some sort of “fundamentalist menace,” or worse still, to link it to international terror networks and militant movements would be factually incorrect as well as politically counter-productive” [2004: 722–23].

Who then represent militant Islam? In the last 25 years since 1980, a number of groups have emerged and several incidents have taken place in Malaysia that have been a cause of concern. Although the militants have not made much political impact, their teachings and activities could disrupt the political stability and undermine the security of the country, and may invite unnecessary foreign attention and even intervention.

In this section, I shall briefly discuss several groups that may fit into the category of militant Islam. These include the *Al-Maunah*, and those associated with *Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia (KMM)*, and *Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)*. As the data is difficult to obtain, this paper can only offer some glimpses about their struggle and activities. The criteria of “militancy” used here is that they are prepared to use force to achieve their aims of setting up *daulah Islamiyah* or the Islamic state.

Al-Maunah: Al-Ma'unah which means the Brotherhood of Inner Power, grabbed the headlines when on 2 July 2000, their leader and members donning army fatigues and masquerading themselves as army officers (with the leader wearing the rank of a Lt-Colonel) and soldiers, raided two army posts (Post 2 Kuala Rui and Battalion 304 Grik), in Perak and took away 100 rifles and ammunition. The raid took place prior to dawn at these two army posts which were not far from each other. The members then regrouped at Bukit Jenalik in Perak, their usual training camp, together with the weapons they seized.

After the security forces—initially stunned by the daring arms heist—managed to track down the group, the whole area was cordoned off and a tense standoff took place. During the siege, two hostages—a policeman and a soldier, and a villager—were killed by the group. However, after much persuasion and psy-war, the group surrendered on 6

July 2000.

Not much was known about *Al-Maunah* before the arms heist. The group claimed itself to be an NGO, and was officially registered as a society in September 1998, the month the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was sacked and arrested. *Al-Maunah* claimed to seek spiritual enlightenment through martial arts. It claimed to have a membership of 1,000 people, mostly in Malaysia, with a few in Brunei, Singapore, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The group operated openly, and even ran their own website (*al_maunah.tripod.com*). The slogans posted on their website include, "Jihad is our way! Islam will be victorious!" The group leader claimed that he possessed extraordinary powers, and could defeat the "enemy" by making them move backwards without even touching them. They also claimed they could tie their enemies without using ropes, that they were *kebal tak lut* or "invincible" from bullets, fire or sharp objects. Their members were trained to toughen themselves by putting their hands in a cauldron of boiling oil, tree trunks being hurled over their chests, and their skin burnt with flaming torches. Their website included photos of believers undergoing such a training regime.

The leader of *Al-Maunah* was 29-year old Mohamed Amin Mohamed Razali, a former soldier who was previously court-martialled for serious breach of discipline. He led his group to launch the arms heist. What is important to note is that the cult members who were arrested and tried in court did not consist of only ordinary peasants; among them were educated people and professionals including an analyst, an insurance agent, a lecturer, a Proton (national car maker) executive, a serving army captain, besides mechanics and technicians. They were put on trial which lasted 15 months on the charge of attempting "to overthrow the government by armed force." Among them, 10 pleaded guilty to lesser charges and received 10-year prison term, which was later reduced to seven years on appeal. Sixteen other members were sentenced to life imprisonment, while three, including Mohamed Amin, who was singled out as the mastermind, were given the death sentence.

There was widespread controversy in the media and among the public about the authenticity of the arms raid, with PAS alleging that the incident was a *sandiwara* or staged by the government. They argued that it would not be possible for a group to simply walk into the two army camps, dupe the sentry on duty that they came to inspect the armoury, and then to make their get-away so easily. The controversy only died down later, though not fully, when the case was brought to the open court, the facts of the case were revealed, and the perpetrators given their respective sentences. According to one of the lawyers who defended some members of the group, he was convinced that the raid was not staged. After intensive discussion and heart-to-heart talk with some of the group members, the lawyer came to the conclusion that members of *Al-Maunah* followed Mohamed Amin's orders because they were already fanatical and believed that he was a *wali* (saint) whose instructions must be obeyed [Zabidi 2003].

Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia, and Jemaah Islamiah: These two groups became known since the late 1990s and the beginning of this decade. The security forces had been vigilant about their activities, and had taken several measures before their militant activities could spread. Having dealt with earlier incidents and groups, such as the Batu

Pahat incident in 1980,⁴ the Memali incident in 1985, *Al Arqam*⁵ which was banned in August 1994, and *Al Maunah* in July 2000, the authorities are more prepared this time around. The Malaysian public too has been concerned especially following the *Al Maunah* arms raid, as well as a number of bank robberies and kidnappings rumoured to be linked with Muslim militants. In fact, a month before the September 11 attack in New York, the Malaysian authorities already detained 10 Muslim activists, mostly PAS members, on charges that they belonged to the clandestine *Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia*. In 2002, more than 50 suspected militants believed to be connected to JI and KMM were arrested bringing the total to 72 since 2001. Thus, when the US President, George Bush, launched his so-called “global war against terror,” the Malaysian government responded by saying that the Malaysian authorities had always been vigilant about such groups and nipped them in the bud. The authorities also collaborate closely with their counterparts abroad in intelligence gathering and exchange as well as in monitoring the militants’ activities.

Who are the *Kumpulan Mujahideen Malaysia (KMM)*? The KMM was inspired by their namesake, the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan which became well-known in the 1980s following their struggle against Soviet occupation. Some of the Muslim youth in Malaysia answered the call for *jihād* by going to the Afghan battlefield. Although PAS as a party was not involved in militant activities, a number of its members participated in militant activities abroad. They went for military training in Pakistan, and subsequently became involved in fighting against the Soviet forces in neighbouring Afghanistan in the late 1980s. For example, some data revealed in Farish Noor’s book [2004: 440–441], indicate that one of them, Abdul Aziz Samad went to Afghanistan in 1988, to fight alongside the *mujahideen* forces. Another Malaysian, Fauzi Ismail, an ordinary PAS member, also went to Afghanistan in 1988. They took part in battles for Khost and Jalalabad against the Soviet troops and both were killed in action.

The KMM was formed in Malaysia by former *mujahideen* veteran and PAS activist, Zainon Ismail in October 1995 [Farish Noor 2004: 663]. In 1999, its leadership was taken over by Nik Adli (the son of Nik Aziz Nik Mat, PAS’s spiritual leader), who studied in Pakistan and met some *mujahideen* fighters whilst there. Nik Adli was detained under the Internal Security Act in September 2001 together with those detained in August. In October that year, another six suspected members of the KMM were also detained under the ISA. To date, some of those detained are still behind bars.

As for the membership and activities of the *Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)* in Malaysia, not much is readily known. However, they are believed to be closely linked with other JI chapters in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, as well as with *Al Qaeda* and *Jemaat Islami* in Pakistan. Because of these networks, they have been able to slip across borders quite easily to make contacts with the cells abroad to continue with their activities. This is in keeping with their vision that their Islamist struggle does not recognise state borders.

The Malaysian JI members have close links with their Indonesian counterparts as well as those in Pakistan. In order to recruit their members, their modus operandi includes the setting up of religious schools. This is not something difficult to do given the increased religiosity among Malay-Muslims and their support for religious activities. One example is a private religious school, the Madrasah Luqmanul Hakiem, in Ulu

Tiram, Johor, which was set up by the Indonesian JI leader, Abubakar Bashir. In fact, Abubakar had a permanent resident status in Malaysia before he returned to Indonesia. This school was later closed down by the Johor government.

Another leading member and former chief of operations of JI, is Hambali (his real name is Riduan Isamuddin). Also an Indonesian, he has been in US custody since August 2003. Like Abubakar Bashir, he also ran an Islamic school in Malaysia for many years before disappearing shortly before the September 11 attacks in the US. The authorities believe that his plan was to train future leaders of JI, with the students returning home by 2006, to take up *jihād*, or holy war.

Police reports indicate that in 1999 and 2000, Hambali arranged for a number of Malaysian students to attend the Abu Bakar Islamic University in Karachi, paying for at least two students to get there. In Karachi, the students were taken care of by his brother, Rusman Gunawan, who acted as supervisor of Malaysian students. However, following a crackdown by the Pakistani authorities, thirteen Malaysians, and six Indonesians including Rusman Gunawan, were arrested in Karachi in September 2003. After spending some time in detention there, the Malaysian students were sent back to Malaysia and detained. Police released eight of them after interrogation, but put the other five under detention without trial on suspicion of being JI members [Sullivan & Sing 2003]. However, despite the displeasure of the US authorities, all of them were released in March 2005 by the Malaysian government, an act praised by several commentators [Aman Rais 2005].⁶⁾

Although JI seems to be making headlines in neighbouring Indonesia and Singapore, it does not seem to be able to spread its wings or launch its militant activities in Malaysia. This is partly due to the fact that Malaysia is not a fertile ground for militant activities, whilst at the same time, the Malaysian authorities have been able to track them and taken preemptive action as shown above. Nevertheless, a number of JI members have escaped and have been able to conduct their operations abroad namely in Indonesia. Currently, Indonesia has imprisoned four Malaysians, members of JI, namely, Mohd Nasir Abas, Jaafar Anwarul, Shamsul Bahri Hussein, and Amran Mansor. These four have gone on state television to confess their involvement in a series of bombings in that country. They claimed that they had been misled by the teachings of *Al-Qaeda* leader, Osama ben Laden, and the two Indonesian JI leaders, Abu Bakar Bashir and Hambali. According to them, the teachings of the *Al-Qaeda* and JI leaders stated that they could kill Americans, whether civilian or military, anywhere in the world as they are “enemies of Islam.”

Besides the four, the Indonesian authorities are (at the time of writing) still in hot pursuit for another two Malaysians, now “the two top terror suspects” in the country alleged to be linked to a series of deadly bombings there. As their movements have been elusive, the Indonesian police has asked the cooperation of the public and announced a reward of RM 406,000 (US \$1 = RM 3.80) for information that could lead to their capture. The duo—Dr Azahari Husin and Noordin Mohd Top—are believed to be still operating in Indonesia, namely in East Java. From whatever information we can glean, it shows that the more senior of the two, Azahari Husin, is a 46-year old Malaysian, who is a member of *Jemaah Islamiyah*. An engineer by training with a PhD from Reading University, UK, he previously worked as a lecturer in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, in the southern state of Johor, before going underground. He is believed to have undergone

extensive military and bomb training in Afghanistan, and played the role of the top bomb expert of *Jemaah Islamiyah*. He is alleged to have been involved in the Bali bombing in October 2002; the JI bomb manual, which was used in the Bali bombing, was believed to have been authored by him. He is also believed to be present at the February 2002 JI meeting in Bangkok where he was assigned to execute the Bali attack. His close collaborator, Noordin Mohd Top, is a graduate of the same university where Azahari used to work. He was also involved in teaching at a private religious school, the Madrasah Luqmanul Hakiem, in Ulu Tiram, Johor, set up by the Indonesian JI leader, Abubakar Bashir.

Dealing with Political Islam and Militancy: Several Approaches

It is clear from the above that political Islam including militant Islam postulates contested visions of justice, peace and community. How then should we deal with political Islam and militancy? As argued above, while Malaysia is not a fertile ground for militant Islam, political Islam is perusasive enough to attract quite a large following for its promise of a better social order. There seems to be several levels of engagement proposed by a number of influential Muslim leaders. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, but for analytical purposes, we categorise them into three broad categories.

First, the “root cause” approach. This view, propounded mainly by leaders like Dr. Mahathir immediately following the September 11 attacks, maintains that militancy and terrorism has its root causes in poverty and injustices suffered by Muslims everywhere, particularly in Palestine. It maintains that a military solution will not resolve the problem, as it will only give rise to more militants since it intensifies the hatred against the US in particular and the West in general.

Second, is the “*Islam Hadhari*” or the “civilisational Islam” approach. This approach emphasises the need for Muslims to enhance understanding, knowledge, democracy, respect for others, and development. This is the approach taken by UMNO and the Malaysian government at present. According to Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, “*Islam Hadhari* is an effort to bring the Ummah back to basics, back to the fundamentals, as prescribed in the Quran and the Hadith that form the foundation of the Islamic civilisation.... (It) is an approach that emphasises development, consistent with the tenets of Islam and focused on enhancing the quality of life. It aims to achieve this via the mastery of knowledge and the development of the individual and the nation; the implementation of a dynamic economic, trading and financial system; an integrated and balanced development that creates a knowledgeable and pious people who hold to noble values and are honest, trustworthy, and prepared to take on global challenges.” Its proponents believe that when Muslims strive for excellence and empower themselves with knowledge, they will become respected and the basis for militancy will no longer exist.

Third, is the “engaging the margin” approach. This view, proposed by Anwar Ibrahim, upon his release from prison in September 2004, stresses that we should not view all Muslim organisations that are not seen in the mainstream of politics as extremists. He stresses the need to engage with them, “except those who promote and preach violence. We have to draw the line there. Even if they promote *sharia* law or an Islamic state, we have to engage them. Otherwise you are ignoring or marginalising a major

segment of the population. And it is this that becomes the breeding ground for more extreme and fanatical cells to develop.” He also criticises the “over-politicisation of the issue of militant Islam and violence” because by doing so, a lot of ordinary Muslims are antagonised. “What we need to do is promote in a positive sense what Islam stands for, and then focus on violence as violence. If it is perpetrated by Muslims, they need to be equally condemned. If they use Islamic arguments then we have to counter with Islamic arguments against their perverse analysis” [Anwar Ibrahim 2004: 14].⁷

In my view, the question at hand is not so much whether people will agree or disagree with any or all of the above approaches, but rather with the question of how they can be translated into practice. The grand vision of *Islam Hadhari* is appealing, but it needs fleshing out and fine-tuning so that it can be understood by the *ummah*. It has to deliver the promise of justice, equality, morality, development, progress and well-being inclusive of all—Muslims and non-Muslims. The “root cause” approach is sound, but getting consensus on what are the root causes may be an uphill task. The “engaging the margin” approach is democratic and consultative, but it requires a great deal of ground-clearing work to establish mutual trust and confidence so that the engagement process can bear results. In the final analysis, we may require all the approaches to be considered and adopted together when engaging with political Islam, and more so with Muslim militancy.

Conclusion

What conclusions can we draw from the preceding discussion? I would like to conclude by highlighting four crucial points. First, as has been shown from the Malaysian experience, we should not be quick to label political Islam as militant Islam. The distinction between the two must clearly be made. We should not create a situation whereby political Islam is pushed to become militant Islam. The contribution of political Islam in interrogating and challenging the injustices suffered by Muslims and others, and in demanding for greater space and opportunities of democratic participation should be recognised.

Second, militancy and terrorism should be separated from Islam as they are not the monopoly of the Muslim *ummah*. Militancy and terrorism should be dealt with as such, and not be linked with any particular religion or faith. Only then it will be seen as fair and just, without bias or prejudice against a particular religious community, unlike what is happening today.

Third, oftentimes the powers-that-be tend to curb democratic space and stifle democracy and human rights in the name of national security. Democracy, freedom and human rights are critical ingredients that should not be sacrificed in the fight against militancy and terrorism. Indeed greater political and social space—thus enlarging civil society—is needed so that militancy and terrorism can equally be engaged by responsible civil society, and not by the state alone.

Fourth, it is necessary to develop a vision of the future which is inclusive, not only of people of different faiths but also of different political persuasions and communities. Contestations of visions especially among peoples of different faiths and communities have to be handled not by force, but by understanding them and constructively engaging with them. What should be done is to seek out and propagandise the universal values that promote peace, cooperation and justice present in all faiths to pave the way for better

inter-faith understanding and dialogue.

It should be the task of the scholarly community to reflect on these issues creatively and critically to better understand the problem and promote greater understanding and cooperation between adherents of different faiths. It is important for scholars not to get caught in the ideological battle of the new “Cold War.” Social science scholars and observers have to be rigorous and objective in interrogating the concepts and terminologies and should not take them for granted. In this way, it may be possible to theorise afresh the issue of political Islam and militancy that has undoubtedly become a burning issue in contemporary geopolitics.

Notes:

- 1) Note the likely “terrorist” hotbeds of the future identified by the *9/11 Commission Report*.
 - (1) Southeast Asia, from Thailand to the southern Philippines to Indonesia
 - (2) Western Pakistan and the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region
 - (3) Southern or western Afghanistan
 - (4) Arabian Peninsula, especially Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and the nearby Horn of Africa, including Somalia and extending southwest into Kenya
 - (5) West Africa, including Nigeria and Mali
 - (6) European cities with expatriate Muslim communities, especially cities in central and eastern Europe where security force and border controls are less effective.

From the perspective of the report, the entire region of ASEAN and beyond, as well as the African and Asian continents, could become the theatre of war and counter-terrorism in the coming decades. Since Kuala Lumpur figures prominently in the report as the meeting and planning point for several hijackers assisted by Indonesian-born Hambali that launched the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Malaysia figures on the radar screen of Washington as a country to watch.

- 2) There is ample evidence to show that the groups labelled as terrorists by the US today were once their allies. This is especially so in the case of the *Mujahideen* groups in Afghanistan which were spawned and supported by the CIA who used them as allies in their proxy war against the Soviet forces in the 1980s. In fact, as admitted by former CIA Director Robert Gates, “the US intelligence began to aid rebels in Afghanistan six months before the Soviet intervention” [Ahmed 2003: 22]. The Taliban, which took over power in Afghanistan in 1995 from the various *mujahideen* groups, and was later overthrown by the US in October and November 2001 as part of its post-September 11 “war against terror” was also supported by the US ally, Pakistan in the 1990s.
- 3) Amrita Malhi offers an interesting analysis on this issue. She maintains that, “There are serious problems with accepting (the) conceptual divide between traditional and modern Muslims, primarily with reference to PAS’s position within this scheme. Analysis which assumes that PAS is backward-looking and obscurantist reflects a defensiveness about Islam in a multicultural society, particularly in the current international relations climate, and misunderstands PAS’s relationship with its supporters” [Malhi 2003: 238]. She goes on to conclude thus: “What PAS offers to Malay Muslims is not only an ‘idealised past,’... but an idealised vision of a just and equitable future, albeit one which PAS may not be able to provide when faced with the exigencies of managing a ‘modernizing’ capitalist economy should the party succeed in coming to power in the future” [2003: 258].
- 4) The Batu Pahat incident involved a group known as *Kumpulan Imam Mahdi*: Not much is known about this group prior to the October 16, 1980. On that day, an armed band of 20 Muslim extremists, later referred as the *Kumpulan Imam Mahdi* (Imam Mahdi Group) led by someone who claimed himself to be Imam Mahdi (the messiah), wearing white robes and wielding long swords attacked the Batu Pahat police station, in southern Johore. In the attack, 14 policemen and nine civilians were injured, while all the eight attackers including the self-styled Mahdi were shot dead by the police. The police station was made the target because it was perceived as representing the powers of a secular state.

- 5) *Al-Arqam* was set up in the early 1960s by Ustaz Ashaari Muhamad, a former member of the Islamist party, PAS. The movement developed rapidly, and became a formidable force by the 1990s. Though its focus was Malaysia, Al-Arqam was a transnational movement, with its *dakwah* networks in Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, and even in Uzbekistan and the Central Asian states. Al-Arqam at its height had members spread in 16 countries. According to Farish Noor [2004: 514], Al-Arqam became one of the richest and best organised Islamist organisations in Malaysia, boasting a membership of 10,000 and more than 100,000 supporters throughout the country. Its assets were estimated at US \$116 million, with 417 companies and businesses, 257 schools in Malaysia and its own college in Indonesia. In its political programme, Al-Arqam did not stake any claim to militancy. However, its messianic claim was considered by the Islamic bureaucracy as blasphemous and a “threat” to the true teaching of Islam. The leader of Al-Arqam, Ustaz Ashaari Muhammad, claimed to have direct personal contact with God and with Prophet Muhammad in his dreams. In such “encounter,” Ashaari claimed that the Prophet poured scorn on UMNO and its leaders, and told him that a new Messiah would emerge in Mecca, while Ashaari would emerge to become the new Caliph of the East, based in Malaysia. On 5 August 1994, the Malaysian government banned Al-Arqam on charges of deviationist teachings. His attacks on UMNO and his messianic claims became the trigger point that led to the banning of the movement and the arrest of its leaders. Following the ban, Ashaari and many of his followers were detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for several years, and they subsequently admitted their error, and were “rehabilitated.” Ashaari himself was placed under “restricted residence” for ten 10 years, and only recently (late 2004) the order was lifted.
- 6) The Malaysian public has been very impressed by the fact that the five students had used their time productively while in detention to study and sit for their public examinations. Despite their deprived conditions, four secured 6As to 8As for *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (Malaysian Certificate of Education which is taken at the end of Secondary 5) while one obtained equally excellent results for his *Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia* (Malaysian Higher School Certificate).
- 7) Anwar stresses further that “you need to listen and engage them [radical Islamic movements]. I’ve always disagreed with the idea of demonising the *ulama* [religious scholars] and branding them all as extremists. We should engage and choose to disagree. This is the flaw of American foreign policy.... You engage with the so-called moderate leaders who are dictators, or have authoritarian policies, and you expect Muslims to support and recognise that?” [Anwar 2004: 14]

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