

CONTEMPORARY MATTERS AFFECTING MUSLIMS TODAY

BARAZA!

A Sisters in Islam Bulletin



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Navigating Islamisation: Political Islam's Influence in Malaysia

Sisters in Islam

Empowering Voices For Change

SIS FORUM (MALAYSIA) (266561)

MUSLIM WOMEN SPEAK

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BARAZA! is a resource primarily for activists; policy makers; academics and students of law, Islamic and gender studies; and SIS funders and supporters.

It provides:

- a focus on contemporary matters affecting Muslims today, especially women's rights in Islam
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Editor's Introduction

Preserving Malaysia's Cultural Harmony Amidst Distorted Ideologies

In the heart of Malaysia beats a vibrant tapestry of cultures and races, a testament to its rich diversity. Yet, lurking in the shadows are forces intent on unravelling this intricate fabric, imposing their distorted vision of an Islamic State. This version of Islam, purported by certain factions, stands in stark contrast to the religion's true essence of inclusivity, peace, and justice.



Professor Khurshid Ahmed

At its core, Islam champions the equality of all humanity, rejecting discrimination based on colour, class, or race.

وَأَعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا وَاذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ كُنْتُمْ أَعْدَاءً فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ بِنِعْمَتِهِ إِخْوَانًا

Ayat al-Imran 3:103.

Khurshid Ahmad, in his book *Islam: Basic Principles and Characteristics* (World Assembly of Muslim Youth, 1990), echoes the sentiments of many, certainly, defines Islam as the “embodiment of the code of life,” a divine guide bestowed upon humanity by Allah. This divine mandate, rooted in metaphysical truths, unravels the mysteries of the cosmos, emphasizing the unity that underlies the apparent diversity. It presents a holistic worldview, challenging the fragmented perspectives of scientists and philosopher alike.

This calls for unity, reminding believers of Allah's favour that transformed former enemies into brothers. This universal brotherhood extends beyond earthly realms, defining humanity's noble purpose as vicegerents of Allah on earth, tasked with establishing justice and harmony.

Zainah Anwar's (Co-founder Sisters in Islam and Musawah) impassioned speech at a forum 2023, reverberates with truth, capturing the essence of Malaysia's predicament. Her Words, “Malaysia is LOST,” echo a sombre reality—a nation adrift from its foundational narrative. The dominant national ethos, once rooted in a shared identity and belief system, now lies shattered by the relentless pursuit of power.

“And hold family to the rope of Allah and do not be divided. Remember Allah's favour upon you when you were enemies, then He united your hearts, so you-by His grace-became brothers. And you were at the brink of a fiery pit and He saved you from it.”

However, the Islam propagated by certain quarters in Malaysia deviates from this universal message, morphing into a divisive and race-based ideology. They've hijacked Islam, turning it into a tool for racism, a betrayal of its foundational principles. Islam does not belong exclusively to Muslims; it encompasses all of Allah's creations. The distinction lies not in professing Islam but in embodying its values of compassion, justice, and humility.

In her address at the Forum titled “After Decades of Islamisation: Where are You Malaysia?”, she lays bare the erosion of Malaysia’s social fabric. Politicians, driven solely by ambition, have hijacked the narrative, competing to outdo each other in showcasing Islamic credentials. In this race for religious legitimacy, they have strayed far from the path of true Islam, abandoning the principles of multiculturalism, diversity, and discourse.

The two majors political parties, vying for dominance, have sacrifice the nation’s soul at the altar of their ambitions. The myopic focus on Islamic symbolism has obscured the broader vision of a harmonious and inclusive society, aligned with the teachings of the Prophet and the wisdom of the Quran.



Zainah Anwar’s poignant words serve as a clarion call urging Malaysia to reclaim its lost identity and rediscover its guiding principles. It is a plea for a return to authenticity, where the essence of Islam permeates every aspect of society, fostering unity, compassion, and justice. Only then can Malaysia rise from the ashes of division and reclaim its rightful place as a beacon of tolerance and harmony.

Instead of nurturing a culture of discourse and understanding, Malaysia grapples with a narrow version of Islam that stifles alternative narratives and imposes rigid orthodoxy. Fatwas are wielded like weapons, religious departments flex their muscles, yet the spirit of justice enshrined in the Federal Constitution is trampled upon. The very essence of Malaysia, a multicultural and democratic nation, is undermined by those who seek to impose their narrow worldview.

Islam’s simplicity, rationality, and practicality offer a beacon of hope amidst the chaos. Its teachings, rooted in reason and logic, empower believers to seek knowledge and enlightenment. Yet, Malaysia struggles to embrace this enlightened Islam, mired in rote rituals and punitive measures devoid of compassion and understanding.



Source: <https://www.bodavonline.com/world/circumstances-faceted-the-acceptance-candidacy-says-dr-m>

Mustafa Akyol

The ‘sock’ controversy epitomizes this misguided approach, where racial tensions are stoked under the guise of religious righteousness. Vigilantes roam free, emboldened by misplaced zeal, while justice becomes a casualty of political expediency. Malaysia’s narrative is tarnished, its allure diminished in the eyes of the world, including fellow Muslims.

Mustafa Akyol’s admonition rings true, warning against the perils of politicizing Islam and fueling Islamophobia. Extremist actions tarnish Islam’s image, alienating those who would otherwise embrace its message of peace and tolerance. Muslims must reclaim the narrative, dispelling misconceptions and fostering mutual understanding.

Yet, amidst the gloom, hope flickers like a distant flame. Malaysia’s redemption lies in embracing the true principles of Islam - justice, fairness, and compassion. Its leaders must heed the call to embody these timeless values, steering the nation towards a brighter future where diversity is celebrated, and harmony reigns supreme. Only then can Malaysia reclaim its identity and fulfil its destiny as a beacon of multiculturalism and tolerance.

Ameena Siddiqi
Communications Manager
Sisters in Islam

Note: Zainah Anwar’s speech is accessible here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBJ--COJvWQ>

Islamisation in the New Malaysia: Knowns and Unknowns

Shanon Shah

A white, Western artiste runs afoul of Malaysia's stringent live performance guidelines. Worse, he raises the LGBTQ spectre through 'very disrespectful...behaviour', in the words of a minister (Clinton and Thomas 2023). This 'overt defiance' makes the government ban not just the group from performing in Malaysia - the entire three-day music festival that played host also gets shut down. According to the minister, his ministry 'will never compromise with anyone who provokes and indulges in indecent acts during their performance in Malaysia'.

His is not the authoritarian, corrupt Old Malaysia, suffocated by the chauvinist United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and its docile coalition partners. It is not even a Malaysia governed by the increasingly hardline Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). This is the New Malaysia (Volume Two, the Remix) governed by a coalition of coalitions, led by a self-described reformist prime minister whose rise to power involved being repeatedly and infamously jailed for sodomy. The incident I am referring to is the controversial anti-LGBTQ rant by British singer Matt Healy of the year 1975 - including kissing his male bass player Ross MacDonald onstage - at the Good Vibes Festival in July 2023.

Not so New Malaysia

It is, nevertheless, difficult to dismiss this episode as simply being a case of 'new government, old politics' - especially after yet another tense election in November 2022. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the déjà vu-ness of it all. An LGBTQ panic was also whipped up almost immediately after the UMNO-led regime was finally unseated after the historic 2018 general election. Remember the first iteration of the New Malaysia, led by ex-dictator Mahathir Mohamad and his coterie of former political foes including current premier Anwar Ibrahim? In the euphoric aftermath of the elections, the openly gay Numan Afifi was hired to be part of Minister of Youth and Sports Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman's team. The vitriolic backlash prompted Numan to resign, but what really angered many Malaysian liberals was Syed Saddiq's Twitter response, which critics saw as oozing heteronormative hypocrisy and betrayal: 'Your service has been invaluable bro since our campaigning days. Stay strong and I'll always respect your decision. You'll always be a bro.' This time around, communications minister Fahmi Fadzil seems to have escaped relatively unscathed, given Healy's blatantly Orientalist, white-saviour tactlessness.



Source: <https://www.todayonline.com/world/circumstances-forced-me-accept-pm-candidacy-says-dt-m>

Mahathir Mohamad

Back in 2018, Mahathir's faux rapprochement with his frenemies was forced and brief. But it seems like anti-LGBTQ polemics are here to stay, no matter which political coalition gets to lead the nation. So, idiotic white privilege notwithstanding, is the Healy Incident an example of worsening trends in religious conservatism in Malaysia? Or is it merely a glitch within an overall trajectory of reform? This essay explores these bigger themes by looking more closely at the evolving political dynamics of moral panics in Malaysia and suggests some ways forward for social justice advocates.

This analytical approach clarifies how some things are indeed getting worse whilst others are getting better. It also introduces useful ways of negotiating some of the unknowns when moving forward, especially regarding what some scholars refer to as the 'ungovernable' internet and its potential real-life impacts.

Worsening Trends in Religious Conservatism in Malaysia

First, some background from three different perspectives. These are neither exhaustive nor representative of the depth and breadth of experiences and expressions of Islam in Malaysia, but they illustrate some key concerns and ways of approaching them.

The first perspective can be discerned from an in-depth opinion piece, published by Malaysiakini on 28 July 2023, by Zainah Anwar (2023), co-founder and former executive director of Sisters in Islam (SIS). We can refer to this as the 'it's getting worse' thesis.

Zainah opens with a plaintive question: 'After decades of Islamisation, where are you Malaysia?' To which she succinctly replies, 'lost'. Zainah grounds her insights in her decades-long observations of the 'rise of political Islam globally', first as a journalist from 1978 to 1984, then as an activist until today. From her viewpoint, the forces of Islamisation in Malaysia were let loose when PAS was radicalised by its 'Young Turks' in 1982, led by its current president Abdul Hadi Awang. Hadi's excoriation of the Malaysian Constitution and UMNO as kafir (infidel) triggered a 'holier-than-thou battle' in which, for decades, PAS and UMNO tried to out-Islamise each other. This ideological arms race, according to Zainah, was devoid of true Islamic substance and has held the nation hostage ever since.



Source: <https://www.sistersinislam.com/qa/qa/2023/07/28/zainah-anwar>

Zainah Anwar

As the recession-riddled 1980s transformed into the prosperous 1990s, then- premier Mahathir Mohamad and his heir apparent, Anwar Ibrahim, 'lost control of their Islamic agenda to the Islamists within their own-bureaucracy, in the opposition, and society'. During the same era Indonesia, by contrast, had no shortage of trained and thoughtful intellectuals, such as Gus Dur, Harun Nasution, and Nurcholish Majid, who articulated a 'compassionate, inclusive, democratic, and just' vision of Islam.

By the time Abdullah Badawi succeeded Mahathir and introduced his own-brand of 'civilisational Islam', Islam Hadhari, it was too late. Abdullah had no takers within the Islamic bureaucracy. Instead, he struggled to contain the Syariah lobbyists and nationalists within and outside UMNO, which contributed significantly to his downfall. During Najib Razak's time in government, the less said the better.

The task of the current Pakatan Harapan-led coalition government is therefore Herculean. Zainah writes: The man who led and initiated the Islamist movement in this country is now the prime minister. He owes this country a debt to redress the damage done.

It's Getting Better

The second perspective, by the anthropologist Michael Peletz, offers an intriguing contrast and can be referred to as the 'it's getting better' thesis. Like Zainah, Peletz anchors his insights within a long career involving deeply immersive fieldwork in Malaysia since the 1970s (including in rural Malay villages), interviews with Islamic bureaucrats, and comparisons with developments in Indonesia. According to Peletz, we get an unexpected picture when we shift our attention from the producers of Islamist polemics to the people who implement Islamic laws in the real world. Within the Syariah courts, 'the vast majority of plaintiffs...are (heteronormative) women of modest or meagre means, just as most defendants are (heteronormative) men, from generally comparable socioeconomic backgrounds, typically plaintiffs' current or former husbands' (Peletz 2022a, 308). And, by and large, the courts usually find in favour of the women.

Peletz (2022a, 311) stresses that SIS 'deserves the lion's share of the credit' to shift public consciousness and government attitudes towards the rights of Muslim women. The arguments that SIS has championed since its inception - on Muslim women's rights in marriage, divorce, and child custody - have been accepted and internalised by the Syariah courts to a very significant extent. Concrete examples include the courts' expanded grounds for Fasakh divorce, initiated by the wife, to include emotional or psychological distress as legitimate grounds for ending the marriage (Peletz 2022a, 312). According to Peletz (2022a, 311), the 'cultural elaboration and "thick" institutional backing of the idea that women are rights-bearing, entitled citizens, not simply jural minors yoked to men through ties of marriage and co-parenthood, is a huge step forward for Malay and other Muslim women'.



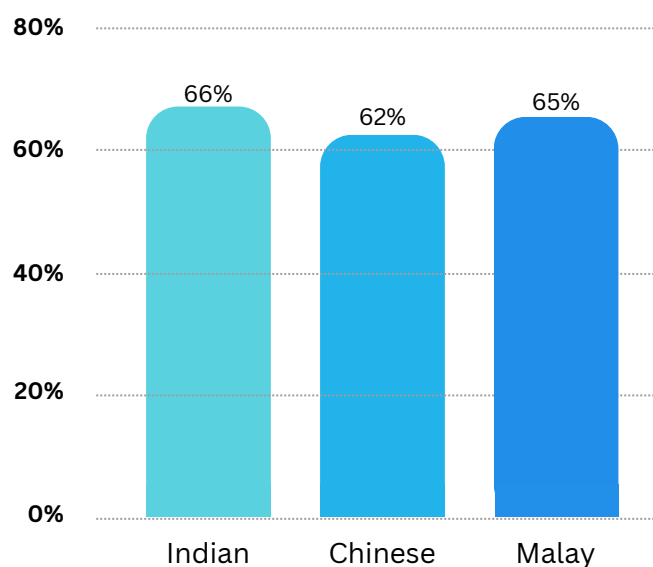
Source: <https://www.bharian.com.my/edukasi/2018/08/459708/bangkit-menperkasai-mahkamah-syariah>
Syariah Courts Wilayah Persekutuan

Peletz acknowledges that this picture of progress has its limitations and contradictions. The government's embrace of neoliberal economic policies from the time of Mahathir's administration onwards has unleashed other paradoxes. On one hand, the authorities' willingness to expand Muslim women's rights in marriage and divorce makes complete sense in light of raised educational levels and women's documented economic contributions through increased participation in the paid labour force (Peletz 2023, 11). On the other hand, we are still a long way to full equality, even as Malaysian women now live very different lives from their mothers and grandmothers. Better educational levels and work opportunities are accompanied by changing values attached to marriage in that romantic and emotional compatibility, rather than child-bearing and economic security, have become prime reasons to get and stay married. Yet this idea of 'companionate marriage' continues to entail a strong 'patriarchal bargain'. More women are seeking 'meaningful adulthood outside of marital unions, either by refusing to remarry after a divorce or a husband's death or by postponing marriage in the first place or avoiding it altogether' (Peletz 2023, 13).

Peletz's work exposes the hidden element in all discussions of so-called Islamisation neoliberal capitalism. Successive Malaysian administrations have used euphemisms such as development (pembangunan), modernisation (modenisasi) and globalisation (globalisasi) to mobilise the citizenry's support for nation-building policies (Peletz 2022b, 9). But these terms basically describe a governance philosophy modelled after the Western templates of Thatcherism and Reaganism. At the same time, this aggressive embrace of neoliberal governance and globalisation has been mirrored by the regime's ambivalence and growing hostility toward liberal social values. This double standard explains why, even in their most vitriolic attacks, critics usually leave the term 'liberal Islam' undefined or only partially defined (Peletz 2022b, 12).

This has knock-on effects on social attitudes towards 'liberalism' as an umbrella term. A 2020 survey by the Merdeka Centre of 1,200 respondents above 18 years of age found that attitudes towards liberalism were divided along ethno- religious lines. Among the Malay respondents, 65% thought it was a 'bad concept', while 62% of Chinese and 66% of Indian respondents considered it a 'good concept' (Peletz 2022b, 11).

2020 survey by the Merdeka Centre of 1,200 respondents above 18 years



But then 76% of all respondents did not even understand the meaning of 'liberalism' in the first place.

Whether in Malaysia or other contexts, it is neoliberal governance that enables and produces 'lifestyle'-focused social trends. In Malaysia, these include, on one hand, increasing secular and Syariah-compliant varieties of consumerism and, on the other hand, LGBTQ subcultures, demands for-recognition of ethnic and religious pluralism, and various expressions of feminism. In other words, like many other neoliberal postcolonial regimes, the Malaysian government created many of the social phenomena that it demonises. The big question is how and to what extent these social trends will develop in changing circumstances, including the 'largely ungovernable Internet' (Peletz 2022b, 16).

Pandora's Box

This brings us to our third perspective, exemplified by the work of the security researcher and practitioner Munira Mustafa. We can call this the 'WTF is in Pandora's Box and who opened it?' warning, or 'Pandora's Box?' for brevity. This view starts from something everyone can agree on - hate speech exists online and offline, but digital advancements have produced new permutations, creators, and audiences. The problem in authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia is that much hate speech is aligned with pro-government views or even manufactured by governments. Munira (2022, 12) argues that within this context, social media and tech companies have 'sacrificed their social responsibilities to appease their Southeast Asian government clients, ultimately silencing voices of criticisms against the status quo'.

Several aspects of these online polemics are not new either - antisemitism, anti-feminism, and anti-LGBTQ sentiment remain ideological staples. Predictably strong pro-policing and pro-military positions and aesthetics also shape many of these discussions (Munira 2022, 24). But fresh developments and discourses from other contexts are getting internalised and hybridised in new ways within the 'Malay far-right' sphere. Malay nationalist ideologues are, for example, scathing of Black Lives Matter and denouncing 'budaya BLM' (Munira 2022, 25). Yet not too long ago the Malay pop music scene was significantly defined by African American influences, especially hip hop, and rap - just think of KRU and 4U2C.

These three perspectives - 'it's getting worse', 'it's getting better', and 'Pandora's Box?' - provide essential context to understand the trajectory of Islamisation in Malaysia and its tangible impacts. I would argue that, despite their apparent differences, these perspectives are reconcilable especially when seen through another analytical lens, which examines the politics of moral enterprise and moral panics.

This is not news to Malaysians. Even during the Reformasi era of the late 1990s and the tumultuous Abdullah administration, online 'culture wars' often involved 'the deployment of cyber troopers (cytros) and trollbot armies to control and manage the online discourse to enforce certain narratives and distort public perception' (Munira 2022, 18).

Strong historical revisionism is another characteristic of online Malay far-right rhetoric. One variant of pan-Asian nationalism blatantly glorifies Japanese imperialist discourses from the Second World War (Munira 2022, 20). Another example is an online campaign 'to whitewash and erase indigenous Malay people's Hindu antecedents, which these ethnonationalist activists have pejoratively dubbed as "Chola Ideology" (Munira 2022, 24).

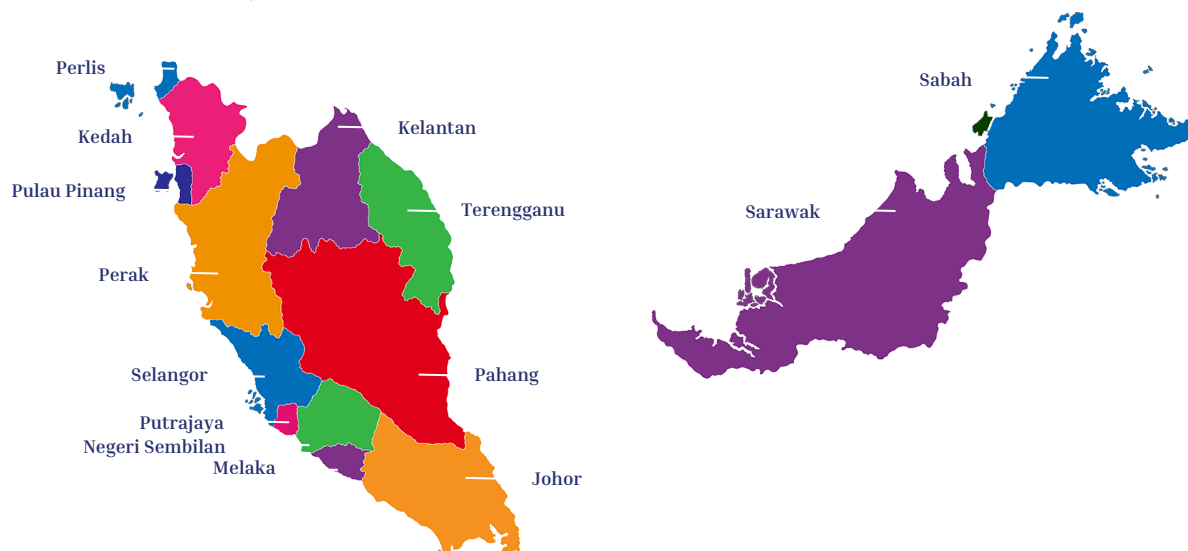
Munira argues that the Internet needs governance. But are the neoliberal authoritarian regimes that have enabled and continue to enable the hate speech that proliferates online to be entrusted with this task?

Politics of Moral Enterprise and Moral Panics

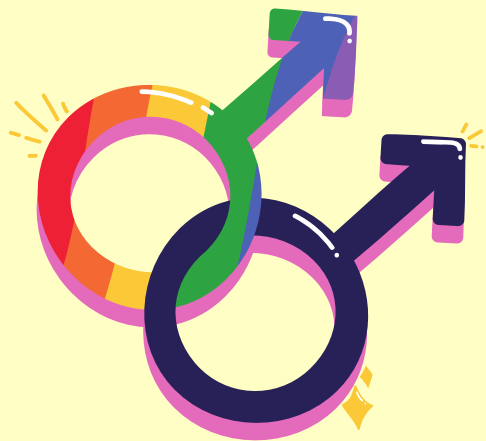
Malaysians are by now familiar with a wide range of moral panics, with some recurring more regularly than others, including supposed threats posed by Christianisation, Shi'ism, other so-called cults and deviationist teachings, feminism, Black Metal music and, of course, the LGBTQ 'agenda'. This list is by no means exhaustive. The Healy-Good Vibes Festival episode is only one of many permutations of LGBTQ-related moral panics in Malaysia. So was the outcry over Numan Afifi in 2018. So were the multiple allegations of sodomy against Anwar over the past few decades.

According to the sociologist Howard Becker (1991, 147), rules are always 'the products of someone's initiative' even when they are claimed to have divine origins. We can think of 'the people who exhibit such enterprise as moral entrepreneurs. At the same time, there are also the people who want society to be structured around the interests of particular ethnic groups, referred to by the sociologist Rogers Brubaker (2006, 10) as 'ethno-political entrepreneurs. The same line of thinking applies to religio-political entrepreneurs who aim to make their interpretations of religion central to the ordering of society. My usage of 'moral entrepreneurs' includes these overlaps between moral and ethno-religious concerns. This larger category of moral entrepreneurs contains 'two related species' which are particularly relevant in an assessment of the state of Islamisation in Malaysia - 'rule creators' and 'rule enforcers' (Becker 1991, 147).

Malaysia is not the only context in which political lobbying groups and state authorities play pivotal roles in producing moral panics. In different places and moments in history, campaigns to protect religion and morality have often targeted gender and sexual expressions that threatened the patriarchal and heteronormative social order. The British introduced anti-sodomy legislation in the 1860 Indian Penal Code, which became the parent law for criminalising homosexuality throughout the Empire, while the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act explicitly aimed to exterminate eunuch societies in India. To cut a long story short, this is how Malaysia inherited colonial era penalties for sodomy and, after independence, expanded its Syariah provisions to criminalise homosexual behaviour and trans identities.



There are many types of rule creators, but what interests us is the type which is most obsessed with the content of rules. They are rarely satisfied with the existing way that society is organised because there is too much evil or immorality for their liking. According to Becker (1991, 148), this variety of rule creators can be described as 'crusading reformers. They are usually quite absolute in how they try to correct society and regard the issues that they oppose as 'truly and totally evil with no qualification'. They also often believe they have God or some sacred power on their side. This makes these rule creators sound like fanatics at worst or meddling busybodies at the very least. But this view is unfair, because many social justice activists and humanitarians are also driven by very similar motivations. If not for moral campaigners, we would not have any movements of anti-racists, feminists, abolitionists, er-human rights activists and humanitarians are also driven by very similar motivations. If not for moral campaigners, we would not have any movements of anti-racists, feminists, abolitionists, er-human rights activists and environmentalists. Furthermore, radically humanitarian moral campaigners will often connect different struggles for liberation and justice, which has basically provided the template for contemporary intersectional and decolonial discourses.



“
It is possible to have pro-feminist and pro-LGTBQ+ moral campaigners as well as anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ crusaders.
 ”

The 'moral crusader' variety of rule creators therefore describes a social- psychological approach to social change rather than a fixed ideological standpoint. It is possible to have pro-feminist and pro-LGTBQ+ moral campaigners as well as anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ crusaders. The bigger question is what happens when rule creators succeed in their goals.

Once rules get formally established and recognised by state authorities, they need enforcement through legitimate, official channels. Compared to the more ideologically driven 'rule creators', the 'rule enforcers' charged with this task are usually employees within state bureaucracies and are often more pragmatic. This is not predominantly due to inherent personality traits but to structural factors. Official rule enforcement is by and large a nine-to-five job. Some rule enforcers have families as well as other responsibilities and worries, meaning that moral enterprise becomes more of a routine task than a sacred mission.

Many enforcers also act as first responders and, depending on the issue, will directly experience the aftermath of violent or abusive encounters. But if the 'villains' turn out to be scapegoats in an unjust system, the enforcers are the ones who must deal with the consequences, too. Some might rationalise their actions. Some might exploit the system, especially if it is corrupt and opaque. Others might get deeply troubled and their discomfort, which is akin to 'moral injury', might provoke them to oppose the system and turn into counter- crusaders. Others might continue working within the system but interpret it in such a way that their targets are treated as fairly and humanely as possible.

This multi-layered perspective of moral enterprise somewhat reconciles the general arguments from Zainah Anwar and Michael Peletz. According to this framework, crusading reformers who are more absolutists will never be satisfied because there will always be aspects of society that violate their vision of 'true' morality. The 'holier-than-thou' war of Islamisation between UMNO and PAS described by Zainah illustrates what happens when a specific form of racialised, patriarchal, and heteronormative moral crusade becomes part of the nation's political DNA. Yet by looking at how Syariah courts as a sub- category of rule enforcers implement many of these rulings, Peletz captures a different set of trends and patterns. In other words, within the larger context of state-led Islamisation, some things are indeed getting worse while others are getting better.



This framework of moral enterprise partly reconciles these longer-term patterns but what about specific eruptions of moral panics, such as the Healy-Good Vibes Festival debacle? According to the sociologist Stanley Cohen, those who try to control morality often provoke instances of defiance through their policing of 'unacceptable' behaviour. Episodes of moral panic are therefore not merely spontaneous eruptions. They emerge from a combination of 'structural conduciveness' (the social conditions under which particular types of group behaviour become seen as legitimate) and 'structural strain' (for example, economic

crises or political instability that could provide openings for 'race riots, sects, [or] panics') (Cohen 2011, 14). Cohen (2011, 219) further argued that a prolonged strain can result in a 'boundary crisis' - 'a period in which a group's uncertainty about itself is resolved in ritualistic confrontations between the deviant and the community's official agents. During such boundary crises, over-policing and heightened demonisation by the authorities - including politicians and the mass media can trigger further cycles of control and defiance, or 'deviance amplification' (Cohen 2011, 226).

The Healy-Good Vibes fiasco illustrates what happens when these different types of moral enterprise and moral panics clash. The glorification of performative sexual protest and casual Islamophobia in the West, on one hand, and the heightened polemics on moral policing in Malaysia, on the other hand, provided the 'structural conduciveness' for Healy's confrontation with the concert organisers and Malaysian authorities.

PAS's inroads in the elections in six states - Selangor, Kelantan, Terengganu, Negeri Sembilan, Kedah, and Penang - put a 'structural strain' on the Malaysian government which made it virtually impossible to ignore Healy's antics. The political transitions after the tensely fought elections of 2018 and 2022 have also resulted in an unresolved 'boundary crisis' in which LGBTQ issues are mobilised by Malay nationalists and Islamists to defend their interests. Yet, arguably, there was an absence of deviance amplification after the Healy-Good Vibes saga since even local LGBTQ activists were scathing about Healy's shenanigans. They expressed indignation about Healy's lack of real solidarity and their anxiety that they would be the ones bearing the consequences while The 1975 simply sashayed to their next gig unharmed.

This framework can help to clarify how LGBTQ issues get weaponised in different ways in different political contexts, where different sorts of 'moral panics' are generated under neoliberal conditions. In Malaysia, Anwar's sacking in 1998 catalysed the opposition to LGBTQ inclusion as an component in the defence of Malay political dominance, politicised interpretations of Islam, and national sovereignty. In contexts such as the UK home of Matt Healy political transformations in the past few decades have resulted in quite different attitudes towards gender and sexuality. Amid increasing social tolerance of sexual freedoms and the decreasing significance of religion in Britain, it is groups perceived to be misogynistic or homophobic that provoke moral panics, especially Muslims.



a period in which a group's uncertainty about itself is resolved in ritualistic confrontations between the deviant and the community's official agents. During such boundary crises, over-policing and heightened demonisation by the authorities - including politicians and the mass media can trigger further cycles of control and defiance, or 'deviance amplification'



Even more worrying is what happens when moral enterprise meets the ungovernable internet. The explanations by Becker and Cohen I have referred to assume that there is an interaction between recognisable state and non-state actors in the production and resolution of moral panics. To put it differently, no matter how controversial some rules may be, they are at least formulated and implemented by a recognised governing authority. They can be challenged or constrained by recourse to other rules within the same governing system, which is often how activists strategize their protest campaigns and tactics within democratic or semi-democratic contexts. But in an online public sphere that lacks these governance structures, is there a systematic way to identify rule creators and rule enforcers? Moreover, as shown by Munira Mustafa, we are seeing moral panics being manufactured and promoted online with increasing speed, variety, and reach. What surprises are we yet to see from the Pandora's Box of online, far-right, and Islamist networks?

Reclaiming the Narrative



More relevantly for this essay, how can Sisters in Islam and other justice-seeking groups in Malaysia respond? Perhaps a useful way forward would be to consider two important dimensions that characterise neoliberal governance in semi-democratic regimes such as Malaysia - the cultural and the structural.

The cultural dimension requires work to reclaim the narrative that intertwines religion, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in the way we imagine Malaysia. This is basically the crux of Zainah's disillusionment with the Malaysian political establishment over the past five decades - its loss of control of this narrative to nationalist and Islamist moral crusaders. But we need not be daunted, especially since there are so many homegrown resources we can tap into. For example, the Malaysian sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas (1928-2007) published the monthly English-language journal *Progressive Islam* between 1954 and 1955. While it is unlikely that this publication addressed sexual diversity in its short life, this shows that there is a decades-long legacy of progressive Islamic thought with Malaysian roots. The term 'progressive' can also challenge the stigma associated with its cognate term, 'liberal'. It is beyond the scope of this essay to spell out their crucial differences, but they both describe a political trend that increasingly embraces LGBTQ inclusion, including within Islam. A good example is the 2003 volume *Progressive Muslims: On Gender, Justice, and Pluralism*, edited by Omid Safi, which contains groundbreaking essays on feminism, sexual diversity, and religious pluralism from Muslim scholars who have continued to contribute valuably toward progressive understandings of Islam.

Concerning sexual diversity, the growth of LGBTQ Muslim networks has also come of age. In fact, the global debate on LGBTQI inclusion within Islam is at least two decades old. The early days of the internet saw the birth of *The Inner Circle* (South Africa, established 1996), *Queer Jihad* (US, 1997), *Al-Fatiha* (US, 1997), the *Yoesuf Foundation* (the Netherlands, 1998), *Imaan* (UK, 1999), and *Salaam* (Canada, 2000). While some of these networks have become defunct, others continue to thrive and they are now joined by the *Muslim Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity (MASGD)* in the US, *Hidayah LGBT+* in the UK, *Maruf* in the Netherlands, *Sydney Queer Muslims* in Australia, and *JEJAKA* in Malaysia. There are even hidden transformations within some Islamist networks which are viciously repressed by many Muslim-led regimes. For example, in 2016, the reformist Saudi Arabian scholar *Salman Al-Awdah* said that homosexuality might be a sin, but it should not be punished. Al-Awdah was arrested the next year alongside several other Islamic dissidents and Saudi human rights activists on charges of 'terrorism and plotting against the state' and remains imprisoned.

Besides these more overt forms of activism, we are also seeing the blossoming of creative works by LGBTQ Muslims and their Muslim allies spanning different genres and platforms. Some examples include my own play, *Air Con*, the works of *Faisal Tehrani*, including his novel *The Professor*, and the prolific fiction by *mak nyah* author *Regina Ibrahim*. The UK has seen award-winning and thoughtful plays such as *The P Word* by *Waleed Akhtar*, *The Funeral Director* by *Iman Qureshi*, and *Shades* by *Alia Bano*. The Channel 4 television series *We Are Lady Parts* (created, written, and directed by *Nida Manzoor*) also contains a sensitive queer and feminist Muslim subplot. There are autobiographical works, such as *Life of a Unicorn: Memoirs of a Muslim Drag Queen* by *Amrou Al-Kadhi*. Recent LGBTQ-sensitive films from Muslim countries include Pakistan's *Joyland* (directed by *Saim Sadiq*) and Morocco's *The Blue Caftan* (directed by *Maryam Touzani*), both released in 2022 to critical acclaim.

Effective Outreach

The challenge in this cultural dimension will be how to achieve effective outreach. The risks involved in promoting these works offline and online and using them as a springboard to generate further discussion are also very real. Another risk is that many of these outputs, even by LGBTQ Muslim cultural producers, have generally emerged in the West. They are therefore likely to be dismissed as examples of so-called foreign corruption by local moral guardians. But, again, there is no shortage of gender pluralism in the Malay world that we can draw upon for inspiration. In PAS-controlled Kelantan, for example, there were special mak yong villages for male couples which survived into the 1960s. Many of these men were in openly romantic or erotic relationships - basically de facto same-sex partnerships - and their patron was none other than the Sultan of Kelantan (Peletz 2011, 671, 673). In the 1980s, there was even a mak nyah society in Kuala Lumpur that was set up with the blessing of then Federal Territories Minister Shahrir Samad (Shah 2009).

These examples illustrate an insight that is well summarised by the Egyptian scholar of gender in Islam, Leila Ahmed. She argues that there is and always has been an 'ethical voice' in the Islamic tradition that upholds egalitarianism and inclusivity. It has always movements struggling against patriarchal, heteronormative, and elitist varieties of 'establishment Islam', within and outside Muslim contexts (Ahmed 1992, 238). Perhaps the Syariah courts' sensitivity towards Muslim women's rights can also be seen as an example of Islam's 'ethical voice' subtly cutting through the more strident and absolutist demands of 'establishment Islam' in Malaysia. We are now also seeing these ethical Islamic struggles being directed at the legacies of Western colonialism, including the weaponization of gender and sexuality in Islamophobic rhetoric. The challenge will be how to mobilise this ethical Islamic voice as authentically Malay and Malaysian, whilst incorporating and celebrating the narratives of people of other backgrounds who call Malaysia home.



Source: <https://muslimqil.com/book-review-border-passage-leila-ahmed/>
Leila Ahmed

This cultural or narrative work must therefore be accompanied by efforts to tackle the structural factors that produce and sustain inequality. I have already referred to the 'patriarchal bargain' that still plays a role in constraining women's lives, even as Muslim women have improved access to justice through the Syariah courts. This patriarchal bargain also persists in the West, where feminist advances have simultaneously entailed more consumerism, workplace competition, rising divorce rates, newer varieties of violence against women, and many other changes that now form a matrix of isolation and anxiety for many women within a context of neoliberal capitalist governance. This is not to dismiss the important advances in women's rights that came out of the sexual revolution. But it does mean that focusing only on narrative or cultural work without addressing structural factors will potentially result in feminism and LGBTQ activism performing the dirty work of neoliberal capitalism. The struggle therefore must involve recognising that the root causes of moral panics including anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ varieties - lie in strategies by political regimes to deflect their failures of governance.

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..the Syariah courts' sensitivity towards Muslim women's rights can also be seen as an example of Islam's 'ethical voice' subtly cutting..

For Sisters in Islam, this means holding on to the ethos that defined the organisation from its inception - privileging women's lived experiences of injustice and seeking to address these through the 'ethical voice' of Islam. As the world continues grappling with multiple crises - including climate change, cost of living, and global pandemics - it will become even more important to understand how these structural issues can and will produce more moral panics. This is especially the case considering the Pandora's Box of online far-right, nationalist, and Islamist networks.

At the same time, it is crucial to acknowledge that, despite the Malaysian state often acting as an agent of moral enterprise, some things have improved even while others have deteriorated. Advances in social justice and human rights are never simply gifted by governments. They are the result of collective, thoughtful struggles by people who prioritise humane and holistic concerns rather than colonial, racist, patriarchal, or heteronormative agendas. And a reformist government is only as reformist as the citizens who hold it to account, especially when it capitalises on moral panics to rationalise its shortcomings. The most effective inspiration for seekers of justice is best summarised by bell hooks (Horton 2021): 'The moment we choose to love we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others.'

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Lost Narratives: Malaysia at Crossroads Navigating the Aftermath of a Wake Islamisation

Aleeza Othman & Ameena Siddiqi

"Malaysia is LOST. We have lost the dominant national narrative of who we were, who we are, who we want to be and what we believe in. What we are seeing today is the willful and destructive tearing apart of Malaysia's social fabric by politicians who only care about remaining in power or getting into power." - Zainah Anwar (Sisters in Islam Cofounder).

In the corridors of Malaysia's history, there lies a tale of lost narratives, where the threads of identity, belief, and progress have unravelled over decades of political manoeuvring. Zainah Anwar's poignant observation at the in a thought-provoking forum titled "After Decades of Islamisation: Where are You Malaysia?" held in July 2023 captures the essence of Malaysia's predicament: a nation adrift, torn between competing visions of itself, manipulated by those hungry for power.

The Rise of Political Islam: Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Malays

The rise of political Islam globally has left an indelible mark on Malaysia, with United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) and Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia - PAS) engaging in a battle for the hearts and minds of the Malay community. The seeds of Malaysia's transformation were sown in the fervour of political Islam, as evidenced by the rivalry between UMNO and PAS for the allegiance of the Malay community. This competition, rooted in the conservative heartlands of Kelantan, Terengganu, and Kedah, marked the beginning of a seismic shift in the nation's ethos.



This rivalry, deeply entrenched in conservative strongholds, has catalysed the radicalization of PAS since 1982 when the Young Turks overthrew the more nationalist leadership of Asri Muda, and ideologically was led by Ustaz Hadi Awang, who pronounced the Malaysian Constitution as an infidel constitution, UMNO an infidel party, and began demanding for an Islamic state with the Qur'an and Sunnah as the constitution of the country, and Hudud laws as the criminal law for Muslims.

Sunnah as the constitution of the country, and Hudud laws as the criminal law for Muslims. Under the influence of ideologues such as him, PAS veered towards an uncompromising vision of an Islamic state, forsaking Malaysia's pluralistic heritage.

In response, UMNO embraced Islamization as a means to bolster its political legitimacy, setting the stage for a perilous contest of religious piety. The subsequent erosion of control over the Islamic agenda by leaders like Mahathir Mohamed and his protégé Anwar Ibrahim found themselves outmanoeuvred by the tide of Islamism within their ranks. The Islamization project they initiated was co-opted by conservative forces, leading to a resurgence of conservatism, intolerance, and bigotry within Malaysian society and paved the way for the ascendancy of conservative forces within Malaysian society.

Transformation of Malaysian Way of Life

This transformation was not confined to the political arena but permeated every facet of Malaysian life, from legal frameworks to societal norms. The government's attempts at Islamization inadvertently empowered the very forces they sought to challenge, resulting in a stifling orthodoxy that stifled dissent and diversity.

The ensuing crackdown on dissent, epitomized by the demonization of NGOs advocating for women's rights and religious freedom, laid bare the insidious nexus between political power and religious conservatism. The complicity of government institutions in stifling dissent further exacerbated tensions within Malaysian society, pushing it towards the brink of intolerance.



Abdullah Badawi's brief interlude with Islam Hadhari promised a civilizational Islam, advocating for compassion and inclusivity. However, this vision was eclipsed by the strident voices of Islamist ideologues, who viewed any deviation from their rigid orthodoxy as a threat to their hegemony.

Crackdown on Dissent

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The watershed moment arrived in 2018, as decades of disillusionment culminated in a seismic shift in Malaysia's political landscape. Yet, the spectre of intolerance continues to haunt the nation, with Bersatu and PAS exploiting fears of the 'Other' to consolidate their power.

In the wake of this upheaval, the onus lies on Malaysia's leadership to chart a new course, one grounded in justice, progress, and inclusivity. The Prime Minister, once an architect of Malaysia's Islamization, must now confront the legacy of division and reclaim the nation's pluralistic heritage.

Malaysia at Crossroads

As Malaysia stands at crossroads the path forward demands a rejection of the zero-sum politics that has plagued Malaysia, in favour of a more inclusive and equitable vision. Will the current leadership summon the courage to challenge the status quo and embrace a more inclusive vision of Islam? Can Malaysia transcend the politics of fear and division and forge a path towards unity and progress?

This necessitates not only political will but also a concerted effort to bridge the divides that have fractured Malaysian society.



source: <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/08/28/why-malaysian-voters-and-civil-society-are-turning-to-anwar-ibrahim/>
Anwar Ibrahim

The task ahead is daunting, but the stakes could not be higher. Malaysia's future hinges on its ability to navigate the aftermath of Islamization and chart a course towards a more just, compassionate, and inclusive society. Ultimately, the measure of Malaysia's success lies not in the triumph of any single ideology but in its ability to forge a shared destiny, where diversity is celebrated, and justice reigns supreme. It is a vision worth striving for, in a nation that once stood as a beacon of hope in the world. Only then can the nation reclaim its rightful place as a beacon of democracy and pluralism in the Muslim world.

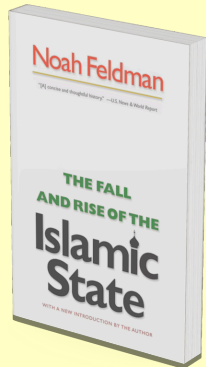
**This article is based on a speech given by Zainah Anwar at the Forum After Decades of Islamisation: Where are You Malaysia?*



Zainah Anwar

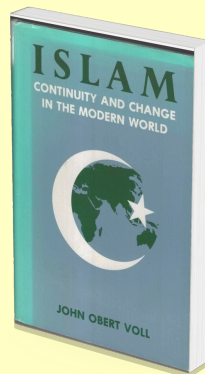
Zainah Anwar is a founding member and former executive director of Sisters in Islam (SIS) and Musawah, the global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family. The pioneering work of SIS in understanding Islam from a rights perspective and creating an alternative public voice of Muslim women demanding equality and justice led it to initiate Musawah in 2009. This knowledge-building movement brings together activists and scholars to create new feminist knowledge in Islam to break the binary between Islam and human rights and the disconnect between law and reality. She wrote a monthly column on politics, religion, and women's rights, called Sharing the Nation, in the Sunday Star, Malaysia. She is a former member of the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia. Her book, Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia: Dakwah Among the Students, has become a standard reference in the study of Islam in Malaysia.

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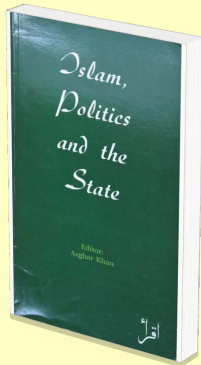
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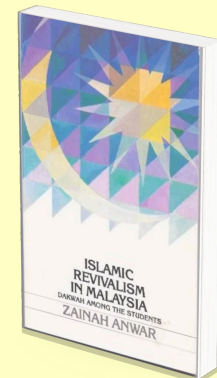
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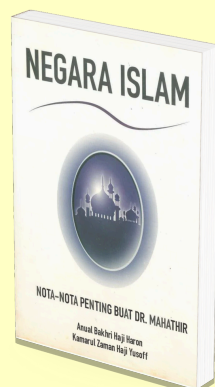
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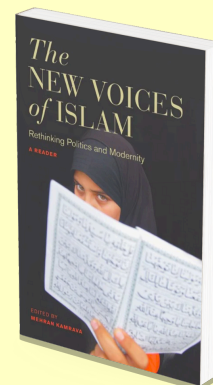
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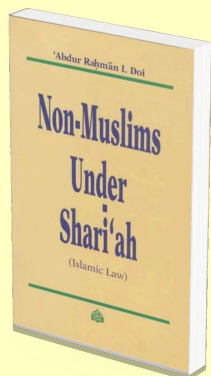
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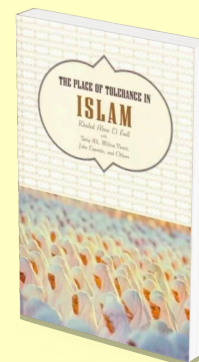
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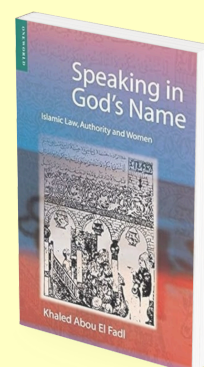
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