

The Arab Spring and Islamist activism in Southeast Asia: Much ado about nothing?

WORKING PAPER

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SUMMARY: Although the Arab Spring prompted greater discussion of Islamism in Southeast Asia, links between Southeast Asian Islamists and their counterparts in the Middle East have remained nebulous. While Southeast Asian Islamists have largely eschewed revolutionary approaches to political change, some parties have remained explicit about their desire to not only Islamize society but to establish an “Islamic state.”

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Much has been made of the transformative effect of the Arab Spring for Islamist movements worldwide. Southeast Asia has not been insulated from these discussions. Indeed since 2011, there has been growing interest in how developments in Egypt and Tunisia in particular have impacted on their Islamist counterparts in Southeast Asia. This interest is certainly understandable and warranted from both academic and policy perspectives given the upsurge in Islamist political activism in Indonesia and Malaysia in recent years. Nevertheless, the question of the effect that the Arab Spring has had on Islamism and Islamists in Southeast Asia needs to be contextualized. Two immediate points need to be registered to that effect. First, although the events between 2010 and 2012 doubtless gave greater impetus to discussions on Islamism, political participation, and democracy across the Muslim world, we should bear in mind that for Islamists in Southeast Asia, the democratic window of opportunity for political mobilization opened much earlier – in the late 1990s during the Asian Financial Crisis – and has remained open much longer, certainly compared to the Middle East and North Africa. Second, links between Southeast Asian Islamists and their counterparts from the Middle East and North Africa have remained nebulous despite potential for deeper linkages to be forged.

Bearing these observations in mind, this paper will primarily use the cases of Indonesia and Malaysia to put forward four arguments that will hopefully advance our understanding of political Islam in Southeast Asia in the context of the Arab Spring. First, while Islamist parties in Indonesia and Malaysia appear, *prima facie*, to be gaining popularity in terms of electoral support, on closer inspection the correlation between support for Islamists and Islamism among the Muslim (and in some cases, non-Muslim) electorate is not necessarily self-evident. Second, Islamists in Southeast Asia have by and large eschewed revolutionary approaches to political transformation. With the minor exception of militant groups who have sought to create Islamic states in Indonesia and Malaysia, those who have articulated an explicit Islamic agenda involving the implementation of *sharia* have remained committed to the political process. Third, Southeast Asian Islamists have not been dogmatic about their ideology. Instead, they have been prepared to modify (ideological convictions to fit local contexts and circumstances. This has been done as much for reasons of expediency and opportunism as it has to do with Islamic traditions in Southeast Asia, which have been rightly assessed as historically more accommodating of pluralism. Fourth, transnational links are stronger between civil society organizations that exist outside the realm of mainstream politics – albeit having access to it through links with political parties – than they are between Islamist political parties themselves.

The Roots of Political Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia

Since independence in 1945 Islam has enjoyed an important, if often ambiguous, place in Indonesian politics. This became immediately evident after independence, when a vociferous debate surfaced among claimants to the fledgling colonial state over the place of *sharia* in the new constitution. The most polarizing element of this debate was deliberations as to whether a seven-word clause “with the obligation for adherents of Islam to practice Islamic law” should be included in the constitution. Commonly known as the Jakarta Charter, this issue was resolved in favor of secular nationalists who feared that the embryonic post-colonial state would unravel if Islam were given too prominent a place in the constitution given the concerns of Eastern Indonesian territories which were populated by large non-Muslim communities.

Through most of their time in office, presidents Sukarno (1959-1965) and Suharto (1966-1998) essentially marginalized political Islam – represented during the early years of independence by the Masyumi party, although the expression of religious piety in the civil sphere was permitted by the state in order to bolster state legitimacy in the eyes of more pious Indonesian Muslims. Paradoxically, it was during this period in the political “wilderness” that seeds for new patterns of Islamic thinking and activism were sown, and which eventually bore fruit. Primarily rooted in student movements through the 1970s and 1980s, “civil” Islam would emerge to play a crucial role facilitating Islamist forces in the post-Suharto era, when opportunities for political participation availed themselves with the advent of Indonesian democracy. Towards the end of Suharto’s New Order era however, greater space was created for Islamic activism as Muslim leaders, hitherto marginalized from positions of power, were brought into government. Suharto also formed *Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia* (ICMI or the All-Indonesian Association of Muslim Professionals), which would serve as the primary vehicle for the New Order’s re-engagement with Islamic social and political activism.¹ During this time, Islamist influence was also gradually emerging within Golkar, the primary organizational vehicle of the New Order.

The watershed for Islamism in Indonesia came about in 1997 when a financial crisis catalyzed a widespread reform movement which eventually led to the overthrow of Suharto’s New Order regime. This reform movement, known in popular local parlance as “*Reformasi*”, saw the emergence of hitherto low-key into the public arena to agitate for Suharto’s resignation. Among these were a host Islamist forces, including those of Masyumi lineage. With the introduction of free elections in 1999, Islamist parties such as *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* (PKS or Justice and Prosperity Party), *Partai Bulan Bintang* (Crescent and Star Party), and *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* (United Development Party) competed at the polls in 1999, 2004, 2009, and 2014 on an Islamist platform which included introduction of *sharia* law and a greater role for Islam in society and state affairs.² Nevertheless, these parties experienced mixed fortunes. Except for the notable performance of the PKS, the newest among the Islamist parties, in 2004 and 2009 when it managed to score in the region of seven percent of popular votes, overall the Islamists failed to make any significant headway at the national level.³ Unlike Ehnada in Tunisia or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Indonesian Islamists never came to power on their own; at best, they were minority members of ruling coalitions. A major factor that explained the failure of Islamist parties to capture power was the fact that in post-Suharto Indonesia, the Islamist agenda, rather than become concentrated in one or two parties, became dispersed across a spectrum of Islamic and Islamist parties because of the fragmented nature of Islamic authority and institutional weaknesses of the parties themselves, leading to a dilution of the Islamist (indeed, the Islamic) vote as well as the broadening of the Islamist agenda.⁴

¹ Douglas Ramage, *Politics in Indonesia: Democracy, Islam, and the Ideology of Tolerance* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.75-121.

² In addition, there were a number of Islamic (as opposed to “Islamist”) parties aligned with Indonesia’s two main Muslim organisations Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama. These were *Partai Amanat Nasional* (Pan or National Mandate Party) and *Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa* (PKB or National Awakening Party).

³ The possible exception in this discussion would be the case of Aceh, where the Acehnese provincial government was permitted to introduce various aspects of Islamic law as part of the resolution of the longstanding separatist struggle between the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM or Free Aceh Movement) and the Indonesian state.

⁴ Sunny Tanuwidjaja, “Political Islam and Islamic Parties in Indonesia: Critically assessing the evidence of Islam’s political decline,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 32, No.1 (2010).

This broad canvas of Islamist parties is absent in Malaysia. In Malaysia, the standard bearers of Islamism have primarily been the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PAS), although in recent times the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO) have pursued policies that are easily construed as “Islamist” as well (e.g. policing and regulation of non-Muslim activity in defense of Islam, supporting PAS initiatives to implement Islamic law, etc.). As a political party, PAS was ironically born within UMNO itself, when members of the Religious Bureau of UMNO called into question the commitment of the party’s leadership to Islam and Muslim interest, and broke away in 1951. Regardless of the party’s overtly religious character and motivation however, its track record in Malaysian politics is certainly more chequered. Through the 1950s and 1960s and inspired by Sukarno, the party in fact pursued a religio-socialist agenda. After the May 1969 race riots, PAS, moved further right of the ideological spectrum and transformed into a Malay nationalist party that contested UMNO’s claim to leadership of the Malay community against the backdrop of heightened communitarian consciousness. By 1982, PAS moved to implement ulama rule in the party leadership through the formation of a Consultative Council (Majlis Shura) comprising clerics who oversee all party policies and the introduction of the Musyidul Am, and set it on course for a stronger Islamist agenda. The early 1980s witnessed key global events in the Muslim world that not only informed this re-orientation in PAS, but as it turns out, in UMNO as well. This included the Afghan Mujahidin struggle, the Iranian revolution, the introduction of Islamic government in Pakistan, intensification of Islamism in the political realm in Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey, and the general heightened Islamic consciousness of the Malay-Muslim population as calls toward Islam as “the solution” gained greater currency across the country. In response to the shifting mood of the Muslim ground in Malaysia, the UMNO-led government of Mahathir Mohamad sought to seize the initiative by harnessing and mobilising Islam to justify its developmental policies. It did so by orchestrating an Islamisation process that found expression in the host of Islamic-oriented institutions that flowed from this policy such as the expansion of the size and scope of the religious bureaucracy at the state and federal level, creation of Islamic banking institutions, and the creation of an Islamic university. This stood in marked contrast at the time to developments elsewhere in the Muslim world where regimes experiencing similar pressures from Islamist opposition forces, such as Egypt and Turkey, chose to discredit, rather than leverage on, the Islamist agenda.

Are People Who Vote Islamist Parties Islamists?

Hitherto described as a moderate, Sufistic and apolitical Muslim society, the Bali bombing of October 2002, barely a year after the September 11 attacks in the US, saw the world bestow upon Southeast Asia the devastating epithet of the “Second Front” in the “global war on terror.”⁵ While most analysts recognise that terrorist and militant groups are not widely representative of the Muslim population of Southeast Asia, there is consternation in some circles over the “conservative Islamic high tide”⁶ which seems to be sweeping the region. The flowering of

⁵ Greg Fealy, “Islam in Southeast Asia: Domestic Pietism, Diplomacy and Security” in *Contemporary Southeast Asia: regional dynamics, national differences*, ed. Mark Beeson, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) p.137. He highlighted the international media’s inclination to refer to Southeast Asia as a ‘second front’ in the war on terror, as exemplified in Anthony Spaeth, “Rumbles in the Jungle,” *Time*, February 25, 2002, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,212723,00.html>.

⁶ Dean Yates, “Indonesia’s moderate Islamic image under threat,” *Reuters News*, September 16, 2005, http://www.redorbit.com/news/health/245577/indonesias_moderate_islamic_image_under_threat/index.html.

Islamic organisations and the growing influence of Islamist movements and parties, particularly in Malaysia and Indonesia, are often pointed to as clear signs of this. In the recent elections in Malaysia PAS has slowly increased its popularity and number of seats in parliament, albeit as part of an opposition alliance which includes a major non-Muslim partner. The 2004 Indonesian elections saw the PKS winning 7.3% of the total votes and 45 seats in parliament, a number significant enough to make it a junior partner in President Bambang Yudhoyono's first coalition government. This was the first instance of Islamists being in the ruling government since Masyumi's experiment in the mid-1950s. Beyond tangible indicators such as electoral results, commentators also detect a general "Islamic resurgence" from the increased Islamic "consciousness" in the daily life of Muslims of the region, manifested primarily in the adoption of Muslim dress, mosque attendance and the general proliferation of Islamic symbols.⁷

It would however be myopic to assume that an increase in Islamic consciousness will necessarily lead to the politicization of Islam or rise of the Islamism. There are a number of factors which have given rise to this greater Islamic consciousness, not least the fact that people are increasingly gaining their religious education from state religious schools which provide a curriculum endorsed by Islamic scholars rather than from local preachers who may follow a more syncretic or idiosyncratic and "localized" variant of the faith.⁸ Furthermore, the gains made by some Islamic political parties in Malaysia and Indonesia, especially PAS and PKS, do not necessarily signal a wider Islamization of the political arena nor do they necessarily indicate a future threat to the political stability of Southeast Asia. There are a number of socio-political and economic reasons apart from simply religious motivations which have led people in Southeast Asia to vote for Islamic parties. For instance, PAS has managed to secure support from non-Muslims, while both PAS and PKS have opened membership to non-Muslims.⁹ Indeed, the point can be made that participation in the political process has encouraged a number of Islamic parties to shape a broader and more inclusive political agenda, one that moves away from demands for the strict implementation of Islamic codes. In fact, Islamic parties and movements have in many cases contributed to the development of the democratic ethos by welcoming political liberalization and participating in the political process.¹⁰

It would be instructive here especially for policy makers to note the difference between spirituality or pietism as a personal conviction and religiosity as a public expression of a religious conviction. While the former is largely related to the realm of personal convictions and the fulfilment of individual religious duties, the latter can have important social and political implications. In the social realm, it can manifest itself in the call for greater adherence to Islamic

⁷ Vincent J.H. Houben, "Southeast Asia and Islam," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588 (2003): p.163.

⁸ See for instance, Greg Fealy, "Understanding Political Islam in Southeast Asia," *Asia Society: A Summary*, May 21, 2003.

⁹ The PAS Supporter's Club was created in 2010 in response to perceived growing interest and appeal of PAS to non-Muslims. However, although the club has since been "upgraded" into a wing, its members are still not allowed to vote in party elections or have representation in the party's central working committee. The PAS Supporters' Wing claims a membership of 40,000. See Shazwan Mustafa Kamal, "Branded toothless, PAS non-Muslim wing wants votes, posts in party polls," *Malay Mail*, 18 May 2015. In the case of PKS, the number of non-Muslims who are associated with the party is negligible given that the Indonesian population as a whole is up to 87 percent Muslim.

¹⁰ Muhammad Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World*, (Ann Arbor, M.I.: University of Michigan Press, 2008), p.94.

norms and codes. While we should be mindful of not drawing a clear dichotomy between the social and political realms, the call for greater adherence to Islamic norms in the social sphere does not necessarily transcend into demands for enforcement of Islamic codes. In Indonesia for instance, scholars have found that there is in fact an inverse correlation between religious piety and support for Islamism in the form of either Islamist parties or stricter Islamic legislation.¹¹ Several reasons account for this. First, some of the parties at the forefront of the drive to implement sharia law are not Islamist parties, but secular parties such as Golkar, the largest political party in Indonesia. Second, Islamist parties were assessed not just based on their Islamic credentials alone, but on how they were able to “deliver the goods” in terms of sound policy platforms and the personal appeal of their candidates. Given the proliferation of political parties in the post-Suharto era – including Islamist parties – the electorate sought other ways to differentiate between parties, beyond abstract ideological platforms. Third, Islamist parties themselves avoided focusing excessively on Islam in their campaigns. As Greg Fealy rightly noted of the 2014 elections, “none of the four Islamic parties that passed the 3.5 percent parliamentary threshold campaigned using Islamic concepts or doctrines. Rather, their appeals to their core constituencies emphasized the practical benefits that they had or would deliver to their supporters.”¹² All this points to the dilution of the Muslim vote and broadening of the Islamic agenda in Indonesian politics and society since the fall of Suharto’s New Order and the introduction of democracy.

Having said that, we should also recognise that there are voices within Southeast Asia which explicitly articulate a demand for a greater role for Islam in the political realm. It is imperative to note that these voices themselves are not monolithic and range from calls for the implementation of sharia for Muslims to the elevation of Islam as the official ideology of the state. Such groups and individuals also advocate the use of a myriad of methods to achieve their aims, ranging from participation in the political process to the waging of an armed struggle in the case of terrorist and insurgent groups such as those active in the Muslim majority provinces in the southern border areas of Thailand and in the case of the Philippines, the islands of Sulu and Basilan, and parts of Mindanao.

Ideological Malleability: Islamic Legislation and the Islamic State

A key characteristic of the standard bearers of political Islam in Southeast Asia such as PKS in Indonesia and PAS in Malaysia has been their apparent readiness to compromise aspects of their ideology in order to enhance their appeal. A close look at their positions to Islamic legislation, one of the keystone issues on any Islamist agenda, illustrates this point.

Post-mortems of PKS’s performance in Indonesia’s 2004 general elections mostly attributed the party’s surge in popularity to its campaign platform of “clean and caring government.” By casting its language in reformist and egalitarian rather than creedal terms, the PKS managed to distinguish itself from a slate of parties widely perceived to be elitist and tainted by corruption. Notable during the elections was its restraint over the issue of *sharia* implementation and

¹¹ Michae Buehler, “The Rise of Shari’a By-Laws in Indonesian Districts,” *South East Asia Research* 16, No.2, (2008).

¹² Greg Fealy, “Resurgent Political Islam or astute Islamic parties?” *New Mandala*, April 14, 2014
<http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2014/04/14/resurgent-political-islam-or-astute-islamic-parties/>.

formation of the Islamic state, which served to broaden its appeal among a religious but largely moderate Muslim majority. Cognizant of the political costs associated with a deliberate Islamist political strategy following its experience in 1999, PKS leaders have sought to contextualize, if not outright skirt, questions regarding the place of *sharia* on their agenda without necessarily disavowing it. True to form as an ideological offspring of the Brotherhood, PKS leaders have consistently maintained that their political agenda was anchored on issues of social welfare, anti-corruption, and good governance, and insofar as *sharia* is concerned it informs the pursuance of these objectives.¹³ As PKS leader Tiffatul Sembiring maintained, “people often simplify *sharia* as cutting off hands and stoning. *Sharia* is very broad, covering all aspects of life and having a universal nature. In our understanding, a government creating public welfare performs *amar ma'ruf* (doing what is correct) in the sense of *sharia*, and one eradicating corruption carries out *nahi mungkar* (rejecting what is wrong) as obliged by *sharia*.”¹⁴ In order to allay fears, the party leadership declared that they would not press the implementation of *sharia* before educating the population about its merits.¹⁵ Rather, its implementation would be a natural outcome of the gradual, bottom-up Islamization of society through education and good governance. It is in this manner that PKS’s pursuit of *sharia* is conceptualized.

At first glance, this calibrated perspective on the role of *sharia* marked a shift from PKS’s disposition during its earlier forays into mainstream politics. When its predecessors first participated in electoral politics in the late 1990s, they were involved in heated debates over the issue of whether to revive and implement the Jakarta Charter in the national legislature, which would have obliged the Indonesian government to endorse the introduction of *sharia* laws to govern the life of Indonesian Muslims.¹⁶ Though PKS eventually distanced itself from other Islamic parties that championed the Jakarta Charter resolution, it continued to advocate the need for society to be more explicitly organized along Islamic principles. It sought to realize this through its campaign for the introduction of a Madinah Charter, which referenced the practice of the Prophet Muhammad during the early Medinan period of Islamic history when Muslims lived in harmony with tribes that were permitted to retain their own customs and religion.¹⁷ When both motions were subsequently defeated, the Islamists recalibrated their strategy, pressing for the introduction of as many elements of Islamic legislation as possible at the regional level short of calling for the full implementation of *sharia* and the Islamic state. At the same time, the frontline battle for enactment of Islamic law was moved out of the political centre to the provincial and district legislatures. In so doing, supporters of greater Islamic legislation – including those in PKS – effectively leveraged decentralization processes set in place in the post-Suharto era, where local legislative bodies were granted expanded powers and influence, including the right to formulate laws and regulate local affairs.¹⁸ Since 2004, Islamic by-laws

¹³ Zulkifliemansyah, personal interview.

¹⁴ Tiffatul Sembiring, “Shari’a a reality and asset of national law,” *Jakarta Post*, March 27, 2006.

¹⁵ “PKS tidak akan paksakan syariat Islam,” 19 April 2006. <http://zulkifliemansyah.com/in/pks-tidak-akan-paksakan-syariat-islam.html>.

¹⁶ “Creeping Sharia,” *Van Zorge Report on Indonesia* 8, No.8, May 9 2006.

¹⁷ adirsyah Hosen, “Religion and the Indonesian Constitution: A Recent Debate,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, No.3, (2006).

¹⁸ Consider, for instance, the following anecdote from PKS Member of Parliament Zulkieflimansyah: “For us (PKS), the issue of *shari’a* puts us between a rock and a hard place. For example, when I ran as a gubernatorial candidate in Banten last year, if you went to a traditional community and didn’t support *shari’a* then you were in trouble. They

have been implemented in a number of provinces, including West Java, West Sumatra, South Kalimantan, South Sulawesi, and Aceh.¹⁹ Significantly, mirroring to some extent what happened in Malaysia, these by-laws were initiated not by Islamist parties but by Golkar, the secularist party which previously had been Suharto's vehicle to power. While some had predicted that the appeal of *sharia* would eventually wane in Indonesia, evidence appears to point to the contrary. In Aceh, Islamic law implemented since 2001 has resulted in several public canings, including an episode when a widow was caned after she was accused of adultery by a group of men who broke into a house and found her with a married man, but not before the men had gang-raped her and beaten up her companion.²⁰ Significantly, the piecemeal implementation of *sharia* by-laws across Indonesia has not elicited widespread opposition from local populations. In point of fact, according to recent surveys there are indications that Indonesians have generally supported the introduction of more, not less, *sharia* type legislation. One example is the 2013 Pew Survey of Muslim attitudes, which claims that up to 70 percent of Indonesians interviewed desire *sharia* to be the legal code of the country.²¹

The elusive responses of PKS to queries about its position on *sharia*, which have been tactically predicated on ambiguity and non-commitment, cannot however be read as a discernible ideological shift in the party. This has been stressed clearly by scholars who observed that: "Formally, PKS declares its support for the current format of the Indonesian state: that is, a unitary republic based on the religiously neutral ideology of *Pancasila*."²² But the party's doctrinal documents make clear that it regards comprehensive Islamization of the state and implementation of *sharia* law as a longer term goal."²³ Moreover, amidst the cut and thrust of local election campaigning PKS leaders have been known to support *sharia* implementation, or at least make statements to that effect.²⁴ Similarly, party leaders had spoken out strongly in support of the enactment of an Anti-Pornography Bill devised not only to regulate the circulation of overtly pornographic material, but also to police social activities deemed by conservative Muslims to be offensive. Underlying this is PKS's belief – drilled into its cadre through its *Tarbiyah* (educational) programs – that the implementation of *sharia*, while a necessary expression of personal and communal piety, must nevertheless be a gradual process flowing

don't really care what *shari'a* means, because for them *shari'a* is an obligation because they are Muslim. But the problem now is how do we define *shari'a*; that is the challenge,"

<http://zulkieflimansyah.com/en/special-interview-with-van-zorge-report.html>.

¹⁹ See Michael Buehler, "The rise of shari'a by-laws in Indonesian districts: An indication for changing patterns of power accumulation and political corruption," *South East Asia Research* 16, No.2, (2008); Robin Bush, "Regional Syari'ah Regulations: Anomaly or Symptom?" in *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, eds. Greg Fealy and Sally White (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).

²⁰ "Gang rape then caning: Welcome to Aceh's bizarre moral crusade," *TIME*, May 8, 2014.

²¹ The survey is available at <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview/>.

²² On 1 June 1945, President Sukarno enumerated five principles of the post-independence state in a speech to the preparatory committee for Indonesian independence. Collectively known as *Pancasila*, the five principles referred to (1) belief in a supreme God, (2) humanitarianism, (3) the unity of Indonesia, (4) consultative democracy, and (5) social justice.²² Significantly, the principles of *Pancasila*, and in particular the first principle, was an attempt to accommodate the aspirations of activist Muslim and Islamist nationalist counterparts who sought to articulate the post-independence Indonesian nation with specific reference to *shari'a*, yet without compromising the imperative of national unity. This principles continue to govern Indonesian society today.

²³ Anthony Bubalo, Greg Fealy, and Whit Mason, *Zealous Democrats: Islamism in Egypt, Indonesia, and Turkey*. (Sydney: Lowy Institute Papers, 2008): p.68.

²⁴ auzan Zidni, "Shariah Law in Indonesia," February 2, 2008, <http://bukittimahschool.blogspot.com/2008/02/sharia-law-in-indonesia.html>.

from a religiously conscious society, and not something that can be implemented by edict or executive decree.

In Malaysia, Islamist movements such as PAS, ABIM and newer movements like Hizbut Tahrir Malaysia and Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (Malaysian Muslim Network, ISMA) have all pushed for the implementation of *sharia* laws, in particular the highly controversial Islamic criminal laws. It is important to note that a large segment of the incumbent UMNO party have also been either sympathetic to this push, or in some cases actively involved in agitating for implementation of *sharia*.

Since 1994, most Malaysian states have adopted the *Sharia* Criminal Offences enactment. These enactments were designed to regulate the private life of Muslims such that they “measure up” to the exacting moral demands of *sharia* as interpreted by the growing and increasingly proactive state Islamic bureaucracies.²⁵ Moral police set up by these state religious bureaucracies routinely raid night clubs, parks and hotels in an effort to curb un-Islamic practices such as alcohol consumption and *khalwat*. Until the mid-2000s, the hallmark of PAS’ struggle has been the quest for the implementation of *sharia*, with particular emphasis on the enforcement of *Hudud*, *Qisas* and *Ta’zir*.²⁶ As early as 1993, PAS had already tabled a *Hudud* Bill in the Kelantan state assembly which it controlled shortly winning the 1990 state election. The Bill included a section legislating against *hudud* offences such as wine drinking, apostasy, unlawful sexual intercourse (*zina*), robbery, and accusing someone of *zina*.²⁷ Prepared by a committee comprising PAS ulama, the state Mufti and other ulama in the Kelantan State Islamic Religion and Malay Council (MAIK), the Bill proved highly controversial. Among the criticisms were how the Bill prejudiced against women and introduced draconian and inhumane punishments.²⁸ In light of the blowback, PAS ulama made several changes and began to campaign fervently for the implementation of the laws by issuing various publications and organizing public forums and seminars to discuss the issue.²⁹ Although the Bill was eventually passed in the Kelantan Parliament, it was not ratified by the Malaysian government and thus could not be implemented. In Terengganu, a similar bill was enacted in 2002 during the short period when PAS controlled the state assembly. Once again, the laws were not gazetted due to opposition from the central government. Ironically, despite rejecting the *hudud* bills of PAS, the Malaysian government found itself harried to move closer to the agenda of PAS when officials within the state religious bureaucracy, many of whom were either members of the UMNO party or supporters of it, started pressurizing the government to introduce such laws.

Many government officials and UMNO leaders argue that it was the responsibility of the government in an Islamic state to strive towards the implementation of *sharia* laws.³⁰ Indeed,

²⁵ Joseph Liow, *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): p. 129.

²⁶ Dewan Ulama PAS, “Negara Islam: Antara Realiti Dan Cabaran,” *Mimbar Ulama* 7, (2004): pp. 25-27.

²⁷ Hashim Kamali, *Punishment In Islamic Law: An Enquiry Into The Hudud Bill of Kelantan*, (Kuala Lumpur: Ilmiah Publishers, 1995), Appendix for the full text of bill.

²⁸ Ahmad Ibrahim, “Implementation of *Hudud* Laws in Malaysia”, in *Hudud In Malaysia: The Issues At Stake*, ed. Rose Ismail (Kuala Lumpur: SIS Forum Berhad, 1995).

²⁹ Nik Aziz, Hadi Awang and Harun Taib, personal interview, July 2004.

³⁰ Wan Zahidi Wan Teh, “Ciri-Ciri Sebuah Negara Islam,” *Seminar Perlaksanaan Hukun Syarak Di Malaysia*, February 9-10, (2001): p. 2.

the quid pro quo that led Malaysian ulama to support Mahathir Mohamad's Islamic State declaration and Abdullah Badawi's Islam Hadhari pronouncement was that the government would eventually institutionalize sharia legislation, including *hudud*.³¹ Nakhaie Ahmad, the then chief of YADIM and a former PAS leader postulated that *hudud* must be implemented and mentioned that various provisions needed to be prepared before *hudud* can be implemented. For instance, the legal system, *sharia* courts, supporting enactments and the detailed study of the *hudud* needs to be undertaken before *hudud* can be implemented. He also criticized UMNO leaders for condemning the *hudud* laws as obsolete and not suited to contemporary society.³² It is thus clear that the demand for the implementation of Islamic law is winning support from a wide spectrum of Malaysian Muslim society (including elements within or linked to the ruling party) and is not merely an agenda confined to the opposition Islamists, as may be the case in some other Middle Eastern contexts.

In a sign that both the Malaysian government and Islamist opposition are beginning to converge on the *hudud* issue, Annuar Musa, chief of UMNO Kelantan and chief justice of the Kelantan's *sharia* court, declared in January 2014 that the state was prepared to consider implementing *hudud* laws. In response, the PAS leadership in Kelantan formed a technical committee to study the implementation of *sharia* laws.³³ Kelantan UMNO's gambit paid off on two counts: it shored up the party's religious credentials and appeal as an Islamic party, while at the same time heaping immense pressure on the opposition PR alliance, whose component parties have harbored residual suspicion of PAS's Islamist agenda despite entering into a coalition with them. Indeed, while some of PAS's allies have taken the position that the implementation of *hudud* may be tolerable in Muslim-majority states so long that it is made clear that non-Muslims stand outside its jurisdiction, others have been less forthcoming. In point of fact, even if such a delineation is done in theory, in practice it would be difficult to implement especially when a crime, for example, *zina*, involves Muslims and non-Muslims.³⁴ On March 19, 2015, the Kelantan state assembly passed the Sharia Criminal Code II Bill 1993 (amended 2015) with the support of 12 UMNO assemblymen, and PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang has tabled a private member's bill in parliament to discuss amendments to the Sharia Court (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act of 1965 which would pave the way for the implementation of *hudud* in Kelantan.

Unlike the PKS in Indonesia, For PAS there have been significant differences of opinion within the party over the matter of the urgency of the Islamic state agenda as well as the manner in which this objective is to be attained. One can observe the contours of two broad camps that differ over the issue. The Ulama, who have led the party since 1982, have generally

³¹ Nakhaie Ahmad, "Hudud Dalam Konteks Pelaksanaan Syariat Islam Yang Menyeluruh" in *Seminar Kebangsaan Cabaran Pelaksanaan Islam Dalam Konteks Masyarakat Malaysia*, June 28 (1992): p. 10. Those who oppose the bill had argued that the bill is not comprehensive enough must cover more aspects of the *hudud*. See Abdul Halim Muhammady, "Undang-Undang Jenayah Syariah Dan Perlaksanaannya Di Malaysia", *Seminar Pelaksanaan Hukun Syarak Di Malaysia*, February 9-10, (2001). There are however many government ulama who support the bill such as the Mufti of Perak and Selangor; Sayuti Omar, *Talqin Untuk Mahathir*, (Kuala Lumpur: Tinta merah, 1994).

³² Ibid, pp. 13-19. See speeches of UMNO leaders, which criticize the *hudud* in Institut Polisi Studi dan Lajnah Penerangan Dewan Pemuda PAS Pusat, *Mahathir Serta Beberapa Pemimpin UMNO dan Penyokongnya Anti-Islam*, (Gombak: Dewan Pemuda PAS Pusat, 2002), pp. 17-24.

³³ Md Izwan, "Umno sokong PAS laksana *Hudud* di Kelantan," *Malaysian Insider*, November 16, 2013, accessed on 28 March 2014, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/bahasa/article/umno-sokong-pas-laksana-hudud-di-kelantan>.

³⁴ Dr Ong Kian Ming (DAP strategist and Member of Parliament for Serdang), personal interview, February 24, 2014.

championed the top-down formation of an Islamic state in Malaysia. This is evident in the party's attempt to implement Islamic law when they are in power, such as in the states of Kelantan (since 1990) and Terengganu (1998-2004) as alluded to above. While these attempts were met with legal and structural impediments inherent in the Malaysian federal constitution, the fact is that Islamic laws have been drawn up for these states with a view to eventual implementation.³⁵ Moreover, the ulama leadership has taken the position that the electoral swing to the opposition was indicative of greater sympathy for Islamic governance. The Ulama Council declared to that effect: "the Malaysian people today have high hopes for PAS towards the advancement of the country. Moreover, many among them hope to see an Islamic state and welfare state come into being that would guarantee peace and prosperity to all Malaysians."³⁶ Reformist technocrats and activists who mostly flocked to the party during the height of the Malaysian reform movement in the late 1990s however, have taken the position that, rather than forcing the implementation of an Islamic state by way of political pronouncements and executive decree, the formation of an Islamic state and introduction of *sharia* should be the "natural outcome" of a gradual, bottom-up Islamization of Muslim society in Malaysia.³⁷ These reformists stood at the forefront of PAS's entry into an opposition alliance known as the Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance), and rationalized this move as an outcome of *ijtihad* (intellectual renewal) and *tajdid* (revivalism) towards Qur'anic imperative of *al Wasatiyah* (the middle path).³⁸ However, while reformists saw this as part of wider post-Islamist trends that also encapsulated developments in the Middle East in 2011, conservatives were less sanguine. Relations between the two factions of the party came to a head at the party elections of June 2015, when conservatives swept into all major leadership positions in the main party as well as its youth wings. This has prompted intense discussions within the reformist faction as to whether to split from PAS and create a new Islamist party to continue the struggle as part of the opposition coalition, or to remain within the party but under conservative leadership. As for the conservative leadership, their victory in party elections was quickly followed by the severing of ties with the secular opposition allies in the Democratic Action Party on grounds that the latter's criticism of its *sharia* law agenda was tantamount to interference in internal party matters and a contravention of the opposition alliance agreement.

Differences in perception between conservatives and reformists over the means however, have had little impact on the ends. Indeed, even reformist technocrats have been compelled under the weight of public scrutiny and political pressure to concede that the creation of an Islamic state and implementation of Islamic legislation remains the party's ultimate goal, albeit a long-term one. Rather, it is over the question of the prioritization of the Islamic state goal vis-à-vis other more immediate political objectives that one finds a greater degree of ambiguity. This is evident from PAS's track record in national elections, where a pattern has emerged that has

³⁵ For a detailed discussion about these impediments, see Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): pp.58-72.

³⁶ "Dewan Ulama Sokong Penuh Kenyataan Presiden PAS," *Harakah*, December 29, 2009.

³⁷ Party reformists have also maintained that Islamic law is not on the agenda of the opposition coalition of which PAS is a part. See "Negara Islam bukan agenda Pakatan – Husam Musa," April 9, 2008, <http://ganulening.wordpress.com/2008/04/09/negara-islam-bukan-agenda-pakatan-husam-musa/>.

³⁸ Dzulkefly Ahmad, personal interview.

seen the party's popularity dwindle whenever it pushes an overt Islamic agenda.³⁹ Nevertheless, this does not imply that the electorate is any less keen on Islamic strictures. After all, there is, as this paper has argued, little that differentiates between PAS and UMNO today insofar as an Islamic agenda is concerned. What can be hypothesized is that, as with the case of Indonesia, in cases where there are more than one Islamist party or agenda to choose from, Muslim electorates in both countries tend to look at other aspects of political platforms as well. In Malaysia, this includes issues of local and national governance and economic policy that are pursued *alongside* the implementation of *sharia*. For PAS, there is the further dimension of non-Muslim support, which it covets. Unlike Indonesia, the demographics in Malaysia are such that any Islamist party with pretensions of coming to power must secure a measure of non-Muslim support. UMNO has done so via its non-Muslim partners in the National Front coalition. PAS's challenge at any given time then, is to fine-tune the tactical utility of the Islamic state - which endears the party to the conservative Malay-Muslim heartland - without compromising its embryonic popularity among non-Muslims, who while openly opposed to discriminatory policies of the incumbent are nevertheless exceedingly perturbed at the prospect of the implementation of Islamic legislation, in particular the Islamic penal code.

Southeast Asia and Transnational Islamism

Muslim activists and Islamists in Southeast Asia have always been cognizant that they are part of a wider universal network of believers, and have sought with varying amounts of success to build on these linkages in order to strengthen their own mobilization at home. Much of this has involved attempts on the part of Islamic organisations and parties to coordinate efforts with co-religionists from afar to advocate for Muslim causes. Within the region, student groups such as *Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam* (Indonesia), *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (Malaysia), and the *National University of Singapore's Muslim Society of Singapore* often come together to facilitate the formation of informal networks of Islamic groups. An annual meeting of the three groups is held on a rotational basis. These meetings are meant to strengthen the ties between the three groups and enhance their efforts at strengthening proselytizing amongst Muslims in the region. Some earlier leaders of this network, such as Anwar Ibrahim, Ghani Shamsuddin and Nurcholish Majid would go on to play major roles within their respective societies. Members of PAS Youth and ABIM were also known to have visited Indonesian Islamist leaders such as Mohamed Natsir, the former Indonesian prime minister who led the Islamist Masyumi party in the early to mid-1950s.⁴⁰ It was during one of these meetings that Natsir advised Anwar Ibrahim to join PAS.⁴¹

At the international level, Islamist parties and groups from Southeast Asia frequently attempt to coordinate their efforts to address issues affecting the Muslim world.⁴² In Southeast Asia, more specifically, PAS became more active in co-ordinating its activities with other Islamic

³⁹ Briefly, PAS has performed better in national elections when it has downplayed the Islamic state and focused on the pressing issues of the day. For more on this, see Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Exigency or Expediency? Contextualising Political Islam and the PAS Challenge in Malaysian Politics," *Third World Quarterly* 25, No.2, (2004).

⁴⁰ PAS Youth Annual Report (1976-1977), 36.

⁴¹ Hassan Shukri, personal interview

⁴² Dr Azzam Tamimi, (Director of the Institute of Islamic Political Thought and a Member of the Muslim Brotherhood), personal interview.

organisations both within and outside of Malaysia. In 1988, PAS organized the first international gathering of Islamist parties and groups entitled “The International Gathering for the Solidarity of Muslims.” This gathering and was attended by representatives of Islamic parties from Pakistan, Egypt, Indonesia, Philippines, Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan.⁴³ With the outbreak of the 1990 Gulf War, a group of Islamist parties including the *Jamaat-i-Islami*, the Muslim Brotherhood and PAS (represented by its current President, Hadi Awang) led by the former Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan travelled to Europe and the United States to lobby for a resolution to the conflict. Of note was what came out of these efforts – the creation of the International Gathering of Islamic Groups with a secretariat in Istanbul.⁴⁴ PAS and PKS have been important members of this grouping. Throughout the 1990s, this Islamist grouping tackled issues affecting Muslims such as the conflict in Bosnia, Kashmir and Chechnya, and have generally articulated a position that is anti-Western and anti-American. Apart from facilitating the flow of ideas, such formal linkages have also allowed for global Islamist organisations to draw from each other’s methods.

Since the fall of the Suharto regime in Indonesia and after the September 11 attacks and the ensuing “war on terror”, a second phase of Islamic resurgence took shape in Southeast Asia. Unlike the first wave of resurgence where the Muslim masses became more religiously attentive and elite groups of Islamists emerged, the second wave of resurgence is to an extent politicizing the Muslim masses and bringing debates over the imposition of stricter Islamic laws and the need for an Islamic State to the fore. At a global level, Muslims of the region are forging a greater sense of solidarity and identification with their religious counterparts in other parts of the world, and becoming more attentive and responsive to Islamic conflicts worldwide.

The attacks of September 11 and the ensuing war on terror presented a difficult dilemma for Islamist parties in Southeast Asia. At an official level, both PAS and PKS gave measured condemnation of the terrorist acts.⁴⁵ Subsequent American actions in Afghanistan and Iraq were however met with vocal condemnation. For PAS and PKS, the situation was further complicated by the discovery that the Jemaah Islamiyah comprised of individuals who were sympathizers of these parties. While PAS leaders urged its members to fight alongside the Taliban,⁴⁶ the former leader of the PKS, Hidayat Nur Wahid, was more cautious and refrained from openly advocating support. On their part, Southeast Asian governments capitalized on the global fear of Islamists to demonize these parties.⁴⁷ In the case of PAS, the immediate effect was its poor electoral performance in the 2004 Malaysian elections where it lost the support of non-Muslim Malaysians. In time, however, Muslims of the region came to be disturbed by what they perceived to be a disproportionate retaliation of the Americans against the Muslim world. A significant number of Muslims came to view the war against terror as a war against Islam.⁴⁸ This anti-Americanism continues to linger, spurred by the perceived double standards towards

⁴³ See program booklet of the International Gathering for the Solidarity of Muslims, 9-10 Sept 1998, Masjid Rusila, Terengganu.

⁴⁴ Nasharuddin Mat Isa (Deputy President of PAS), personal interview..

⁴⁵ “Justice Party Chairman Condemns Attacks on America,” *Antara*, September 14, 2001; “PAS Describes Attacks as ‘Heinous Crime’”, *New Straits Times*, September 13, 2001.

⁴⁶ Nik Aziz, “US Threat to Attack America Unreasonable,” *Bernama*, September 23, 2001.

⁴⁷ Patvinder Singh and Zubaidah Abu Bakar “PM Exposes Militant Links,” *New Straits Times*, August 5, 2001.

⁴⁸ These views were expressed in the PEW Global Attitudes Survey, *What the World Thinks in 2002*, 5-10.

the Muslim world as exemplified in global reactions to the Charlie Hebdo affair. Southeast Asian Muslims increasingly came to see themselves as being members of an international community of grievance. The Islamists channelled this sense of frustration and alienation towards galvanizing support for Muslim causes and against western hegemony. Needless to say, this has been a significant factor in sustaining a steady stream of support for Islamist parties and civil society groups.

The influence of Islamist movements in Southeast Asia and the level of cooperation and coordination between Islamist groups within the region and beyond in “defence of Islam and Muslims” further evident in two instances. In the wake of the American attack on Iraq, a number of Islamist parties convened in London to discuss their response. This meeting included the *Ikhwan* (chapters from Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Palestine), *Jamaat-e-Islami* (chapters from Pakistan and Bangladesh), the Refah party (Turkey), as well as PAS and PKS.⁴⁹ It was agreed at the meeting that a coordinated worldwide peaceful protest was to be organised in March 2003. Each of the parties further agreed to pressure their respective governments to boycott American and British products, and to organize humanitarian aid for the people of Iraq. Both PAS and PKS organised demonstrations in Malaysia and Indonesia respectively to win support for these causes. The second case in point is the Islamist reaction to the Israeli war against Hizbollah in 2006. Islamist parties and groups in Southeast Asia quickly moved to coordinate their efforts to provide assistance to Hizbollah. On August 12, 2006, PAS organized the Southeast Asian Islamic Organizations Roundtable Conference of Palestine and Lebanon in facing the Zionist and Anglo-American Imperialism. Representatives of Islamist parties the world over, including the *Jamaat-e-Islami* Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and Islamist parties and groups from Cambodia, Brunei, India, Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar and Malaysia were in attendance.⁵⁰ Even the Iranian government sent a senior cleric, Ayatollah Ali Tashkiri. Hamas sent its leaders Khaled Meshal and Dr Khaleel Al Hayea as their representatives.

In his opening speech, the moderator of the event, Dato’ Yeop Adlan Rose, former Malaysian Deputy High Commissioner to Singapore and a member of PAS, condemned the atrocities committed by the Israelis. He went on to blame the United States, United Kingdom and other western powers for their support for the Israeli state.⁵¹ He then went on to criticize the Organization of Islamic Conference describing it as impotent and called for the mobilization of the Muslim *ummah* through a different platform. All the subsequent speakers reiterated this call for a new platform for Muslims.⁵² In doing so, the Islamist parties and groups were essentially presenting themselves, through their newly established body, as an alternative platform to the OIC.

The second wave of Islamic resurgence also saw the emergence of new Islamist players on the political Islam stage. One such group is the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (HT) which defines itself as an international political party seeking to implement Islamic laws in the world and revive the Islamic

⁴⁹ Nasharuddin Mat Isa (Deputy President of PAS) personal interview.

⁵⁰ Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, “Israel, Lebanon and the Rise of the Islamists,” *IDSS Commentaries*, no 88, August 24, 2006.

⁵¹ Ambassador Yeop Adlan Rose, (speech, Conference of ASEAN and Asian Islamic NGOs Speech Century Paradise Club, Kuala Lumpur, August 12, 2006).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3.

Caliphate. The HT has chapters in over forty countries including Malaysia and Indonesia. The movement first found a foothold in Southeast Asia in the late 1980s but it was not until early 2000 that the Southeast Asian chapters emerged openly in Indonesia and Malaysia. HT's attraction for many Southeast Asian Muslims lies in its overtly anti-Western ideology. Unlike many of the Islamist parties that accept elements of Western society such as democracy and capitalism, HT rejects these ideas as un-Islamic. Its globalist strategy of pitting the Muslim world against the West also seems to enhance its standing amongst certain quarters within the Muslim communities in the region.

ISIS

Authorities in Indonesia have confirmed more than 150 Indonesians are in Syria and Iraq, while their Malaysian counterparts have likewise suggested that up to 70 Malaysians are present in those conflict zones. It is likely that in both cases, the actual numbers are much higher. The Singapore government has also revealed that several of its nationals have made their way there, while Manila has expressed concern that ISIS would also recruit from among the Bangsamoro populations in their southern islands, although there is currently no evidence of Filipino or Thai Muslims being involved. Indonesians and Malaysians have already been involved in martyrdom operations in Syria. When ISIS declared the formation of the caliphate on the first day of Ramadhan, it was widely reported (and in some segments of the Muslim population, celebrated through pledges of allegiance) in Indonesia.⁵³ In Malaysia, Muslim political parties and civil society groups have celebrated the martyrdom of a Malaysian who died in Syria fighting alongside ISIS.⁵⁴

Noticeably, ISIS appears to have gained some currency in certain quarters of Southeast Asia's large Muslim demographic. Its popularity derives from several factors. At an abstract theological level, ISIS's Southeast Asian sympathizers are cognizant of the fact that its struggle resonates with several hadith concerning Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria) that prophesied the creation of a Khilafah Minhajul Nebuwah (end of the world caliphate) following the fall of dictators in the Arabian Peninsula, as well as the eschatological struggle between the Imam Mahdi (Islamic Messiah), who would be supported by forces raising black banners (ISIS's colors), and the Dajjal (antichrist). This millenarian perspective has been making its rounds in discussions and local publications on the Syrian conflict in both Indonesia and Malaysia.⁵⁵ A second channel of appeal is the sectarian element to the struggle. The ISIS challenge is seen in some quarters as an extension of the Sunni-Shiite schism, to wit, the struggle against Bashar-al Assad's Allawite regime is considered legitimate in fundamentalist Sunni-Salafi circles. Much in the same way, ISIS militancy in Iraq is seen as a consequence of Sunni grievance against the Shiite-led government of Nouri al-Maliki. These narratives have to be understood in the context of tense Shiite-Sunni relations in Southeast Asia: Shiite Islam is banned in Malaysia and not

⁵³ Sidney Jones, "The Evolution of ISIS in Indonesia," *IPAC Report No.13*, September 24, 2014, <http://www.understandingconflict.org/conflict/read/30/The-Evolution-of-ISIS-in-Indonesia>.

⁵⁴ "Lotfi a 'martyr' for sacrificing his life for ISIS, says Nik Abduh," *The Malaysian Insider*, September 15, 2014, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/lotfi-a-matyr-for-sacrificing-his-life-for-isis-says-nik-abduh>.

⁵⁵ A comprehensive discussion of the eschatological dimensions of ISIS's popularity in Indonesia can be found in Sidney Jones, "The Evolution of ISIS in Indonesia," *IPAC Report No.13*, September 24, 2014, <http://www.understandingconflict.org/conflict/read/30/The-Evolution-of-ISIS-in-Indonesia>.

widely accepted in Indonesia.⁵⁶ Finally, many Southeast Asian Muslims have been motivated by the sheer magnitude of the humanitarian crisis in Syria to lend support, principally in terms of financial contributions, although a small number have also joined medical missions.

While ISIS has been embraced by several radical groups, it has been rejected and virulently condemned by others. Jemaah Islamiyah, the notorious terrorist organization responsible for several suicide bombings in Indonesia over the last decade and a half, has accused ISIS of takfir (Muslims accusing co-religionists of being non-Muslim) and dismissed them as kharawij (extremists). Others, such as the conservative Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (Indonesian Mujahidin Council) have cast doubt over the credibility of ISIS, proclaiming that it is an organization and not a caliphate, and hence had no legitimate claim to the loyalty of Muslims. Furthermore, they point out that the process of appointing Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi caliph was in violation of Islamic law as it did not take place before a religious shura council that represents the entire Islamic community.

The Arab Spring

The upheavals that took place in the Middle East that began in December 2010 was closely followed by Islamist parties in Southeast Asia. Not without reason, it was with Indonesia that the events surrounding the Arab Spring, especially in Egypt (including the subsequent coup) was predicted to resonate. Both Egypt and Indonesia have significant Muslim majorities and share the same strategic position in their respective regions (as major regional powers), both had historically been ruled by populists in the form of Nasser and Sukarno, and subsequently, authoritarian military regimes when Suharto took over in Indonesia, and first Sadat then Mubarak ruled in Egypt. Both had a growing Muslim middle class, although it is debatable if in the Egyptian case the size of depth of this middle class was anywhere near what was created by the economic growth in Indonesia under Suharto's New Order regime, corruption and nepotism notwithstanding. Both were also home to significant Islamist undercurrents (or, underground). In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood managed a successful penetration of Egyptian society on a scale that would eventually see it emerge as the most viable candidate to form a government after the collapse of the Mubarak regime. In Indonesia, Muslim activism was circumscribed during the Suharto rule, but never eliminated. Indeed, it was the *Tarbiyah* (Islamic education) networks that sustained an Islamist discourse which in turn would generate the cadreization of PKS that was required to catapult it into national prominence.

Given the democratization of Indonesia following the collapse of Suharto's New Order regime in

⁵⁶ In Shiite Islam has been banned as a consequence of two factors. First, since the mid-1980s the Malaysian state has taken the initiative to define "correct" Islam and to dictate the manner in which it can be practiced. What this meant was that any deviation from Sunni orthodoxy was deemed a threat to "mainstream" Malaysian Islam and hence subject to circumscription. By this logic, not only have Shiite Muslims been targeted but other fringe Muslim sects like the Ahmadiyah and the Al-Arqam as well. Second, the ban on Shiite Islam has been the Malaysian state's interpretation of the centuries-old Sunni-Shiite doctrinal divide. Not only is Shiite Islam banned, the Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia (otherwise known as JAKIM) which provides Friday sermons for all mosques in the country have frequently launched through these sermons vitriolic attacks against Shiite Islam. See "Shia are not Muslims, claims JAKIM," *The Malaysian Insider*, December 13, 2013. <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/all-branches-of-syiah-teachings-in-malaysia-are-un-islamic-claim-jakim-bern>. A similar dynamic is evident in Indonesia. See Azis Anwar Fachrudin, "Endless Sunni-Shia sectarianism in Indonesia," *The Jakarta Post*, March 11, 2015.

1997 (which ushered in a tempestuous few years of social upheaval and turbulence), it should be no surprise that the ouster of the Mubarak regime and the onset of the “Arab Spring” period of democratization in the Middle East was widely embraced by Indonesia. More to the point, it was also during this period that much talk circulated about the possibility that Indonesia’s own democratization experience could serve as a “model” for the reform processes underway in the Middle East although in hindsight, it is evident that few Arab democrats actually took these discussions seriously.⁵⁷ Platitudes notwithstanding, and leaving aside the obvious contextual and cultural differences, there are at least two main reasons why the tendency to presuppose congruence between the Indonesian and Middle Eastern experiences were misplaced. First, as far as the Egyptian model was concerned, it was Egyptian Islamists, not Indonesian Islamists, who captured power. Indeed, such was the discrepancy that, Indonesian Islamists themselves such as PKS, rather than purport to export their experience, looked to the success of the Arab Spring as a source of inspiration to energize their own struggle.⁵⁸ Second, there remains a tendency among Muslims to view the Middle East as the heartland and source of all things “authentic” in Islam. By extension, political models have tended to derive from there, and this is evident again in the fact that both PAS and the PKS have traditionally modelled their struggle along the lines of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In Malaysia, the Arab Spring quickly played into the hands of a political opposition itself engaged in major political competition with the UMNO-led incumbent. Under the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim, who had since his student activism days in the 1970s cultivated close personal relations with members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Malaysian opposition coalition that included PAS quickly latched on to the popular epithet and called for a “Malaysian Spring,” drawing swift comparisons of the ruling government in Malaysia with the overthrown regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. Demonstrations were staged to express fraternity and support with the social movements and opposition parties in these Arab societies, but they quickly shifted gear to become platforms for attacks on the Malaysian regime. Opportunism aside, there was also an element of co-religious affinity and religio-intellectual cross-fertilization, particularly among PAS members as well as members of the UMNO-affiliated ulama, who had always held the likes of Rashid Gannoushi (co-founder of the Ennahda movement in Tunisia) and Yusuf Qaradawi in high regard.⁵⁹

If the Arab Spring failed to trigger a deepening of relations between Islamist parties in the Middle East and Indonesia (and Malaysia), the coup in Egypt did prompt widespread condemnation in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, PAS has been strongly opposed to the anti-Morsi coup, and has used its publication vehicle, *Harakah*, to condemn the coup in Egypt. Further to

⁵⁷ Yang Razali Kassim, “Post-Mubarak Egypt: Is Indonesia the Right Model?” *East Asia Forum*, March 3, 2011, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/03/03/post-mubarak-egypt-is-indonesia-the-right-model/>. See also Tom Pepinsky, “There is no Indonesian model for the Arab Spring,” *Foreign Policy*, February 27, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/02/27/there-is-no-indonesia-model-for-the-arab-spring/>; “What Indonesia can teach Thailand and Egypt about democracy,” *Time*, May 29, 2014.

⁵⁸ “Arab Spring bakar semangat PKS,” *Dakwatuna*, September 23, 2012.

<http://www.dakwatuna.com/2012/09/23/23078/arab-spring-bakar-semangat-pks/#axzz3acdmXXpU>.

⁵⁹ In fact, several Malaysian politicians I spoke with regarding this pointed out that Qaradawi’s leading of Friday prayers on Tahrir Square on 18 February 2011 rallied bipartisan Malaysian support for the Arab Spring in Egypt.

that, huge demonstrations were organized in response to the coup.⁶⁰ Specifically, the coup has been portrayed by conservatives in the party as a conspiracy between the US and Israel to remove the democratically elected Islamist leadership. The late Mursyidul 'Am of PAS, Nik Aziz Nik Mat, even lashed out at the Saudi regime for endorsing the Egyptian military's killing of civilians after the coup, opining that "the truth belongs to God alone, not to the East and not to the West. Although the custodian of the two holy places has been honored with this duty (to rule over Makkah and Medinah), it does not necessarily mean they hold the key to the truth."⁶¹ Party progressives on the other hand, have criticized the coup as a blatant contravention of democratic principles and the will of the Egyptian people, the majority whom voted in Morsi and the Egyptian Brotherhood. Noticeably, this view has been shared by the Malaysian leadership, with Prime Minister Najib openly criticizing the coup. In Indonesia, the Egyptian military was widely disparaged for waging the coup. Given Indonesia's own historical experience with military regimes and social-political upheavals, it was no surprise that criticism came not just from the Islamists, but from across the political spectrum.⁶² As with the case in Malaysia, several street protests and demonstrations organized by Indonesian civil society groups against the coup in Egypt took place, though nothing substantive materialized from these actions.⁶³

Conclusion

This paper has provided a snapshot of the character and content of political Islam in Southeast Asia as it has evolved in recent years. Several points bear repeating in that regard.

Despite PAS' relatively strong showing in the recent Malaysian elections and the general expectation that PKS will increase on its electoral standing in the impending Indonesian elections, the likelihood of any Islamic or Islamist party coming to power in the region remains small. As the paper stressed at the outset, an increase in Islamic consciousness amongst the Muslim population in Southeast Asia does not necessarily translate into political gains for Islamic or Islamist parties. A good case in point here is the Tablighi Jamaat. The Tablighi Jamaat, which is the largest Islamic movement in the world, has played an important role in influencing a revival of personal piety and adherence to individual Islamic religious obligations in Southeast Asia. It has, however, remained strictly apolitical, asserting the need to concentrate on personal and individual reform. Adherence to the Tablighi Jamaat's conservative beliefs in the religious and social sphere is thus not necessarily indicative of any political position or voting pattern

The activities of Islamic organizations internationally has further demonstrated this de-linking of pietism and Islamism. An interesting case of point within Southeast Asia would be that of the Jakarta Charter. From the 1940s to the 1960s, every Islamic party in Indonesia had supported the Jakarta Charter, a constitutional amendment which would have obliged Muslims to uphold

⁶⁰ Omar Aldeeb, "Huge protest in Malaysia against the coup in Egypt - friday 28/3/2014," *YouTube* video, 1:39, March 28 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=je0gRrKyjml>.

⁶¹ "Top PAS leader lashes out at Saudi Regime," *Harakah*, August 21, 2013.

⁶² "MPs: Egyptian coup is bad example for democracy," *Republika Online*, July 21, 2013, <http://www.republika.co.id/berita/en/national-politics/13/07/20/mq8qyt-mps-egyptian-coup-is-bad-example-for-democracy>.

⁶³ Several videos of these protests have been uploaded on www.youtube.com.

the sharia. In the 1999 elections, the first free elections in Indonesia in 44 years, parties championing the Charter won a mere four percent of the vote. More importantly, in 2002, the two largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, the NU and the Muhammadiyah vocally rejected the Charter, leaving little prospect for the Charter's success in the foreseeable future.

There are however, as demonstrated in the discussion above, parties and movements within Southeast Asia which remain strongly committed to developing an Islamic state. When analyzing the potential impact of these parties and movements on the political future of Southeast Asia, it is imperative to note that despite similarities in rhetoric and objectives, no two Islamisms are alike. Islamic and Islamist parties and movements have employed a myriad of methods ranging from democratic participation to militancy. Islamic political parties and the methods they employ are shaped by and operate within the socio-political contexts within which they operate. For now though, it does seem that Southeast Asian Islamists are for the most part in favor of gradual and incremental advancement of their goals through active participation in political processes and the continued building of networks across the ummah.