

Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia

Joseph Chinyong Liow

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For much of the twentieth century, race and ethnicity formed the basis of Malaysian politics and, therefore, dominated its discourse. This book explores how over the past thirty years the politics of Malaysia, which was only approximately 60 percent Muslim, moved strongly in an Islamist direction, indeed, “how Islam—in particular its ideological and institutional expressions—informs the configuration of power, the nature of legitimacy, and the sources of authority in Malaysian politics and society today” (xii). To do so, Liow first examines the genesis of the Islamist agenda from the perspective of the two major political parties—the Islamist opposition *Parti Islam se-Malaysia* (PAS) and the dominant United Malay National Organisation (UMNO)—showing how the latter went through several changes as it evolved to place Islamism at the center of its sociopolitical agenda. He then proceeds to show how the UMNO-led government of

Malaysia began to create institutions of Islamic governance, a process he terms the “bureaucratization” of Islam, which formed the basis for Prime Minister Mahathir’s claim in the 1990s that Malaysia, constitutionally a secular state, was an Islamic state. As he does so, he notes the tensions that these developments caused between the federal and state administration on the one hand and civil and religious law on the other. Liow moves on to explore the debate from the 1990s between PAS and UMNO, and within PAS itself, on how Islam might be expressed as the organizing principle for society and politics in a religiously plural Malaysia and how the non-Muslim communities responded to the parties’ endeavors.

After this, Liow considers civil society organizations and how they engaged with and countered the discourse of Islamism. He covers a wide range of organizations, from conservative to liberal, and traces their responses to issues such as Islamic family law, apostasy, and *hudud* (punishments). Moreover, he enterprisingly explores popular representations of Islamism as they are expressed in English-, Malay-, and Mandarin-language blogs, alternative media, and Internet chatrooms. Finally, Liow addresses Muslim militancy and extremism as it has emerged in Malaysia. He notes that while this is an important expression of Islamism, militancy and extremism do not have substantial support among Malaysians. He examines the measures undertaken by the government to deal with these issues, while reminding us that the future of Islamist politics lies not with the militants but with the vast majority of moderate Islamist groups. Liow draws his discussion to a close by noting that any idea of a secular state in Malaysia is dead, that the rivalry between PAS and UMNO (each’s piety competing with the other) has been an important factor in driving the process of Islamisation forward, but that so deeply has Islamism now penetrated Malaysia’s society that its views and concerns have become as important a driver of the Islamising process as any competition between the mainstream political parties. In an epilogue, considering the March 2008 elections, Liow tells us that they “reinforced many of the contentions made in the preceding chapters about the nature, state, contours, and impact of Islamism in Malaysia” (203).

This is an important book, one in which the author explores in considerable detail how over the past thirty years Islamism has accomplished its strengthening hold over Malaysian politics and society. In addition to pointing to this achievement, Liow highlights three additional points of note. First, the paradoxes and contradictions of Islamist politics are well exposed—one example is how in the 1990s the PAS reintroduced in Terengganu the right for the Chinese community to raise pigs, while ten

years later the more moderate UMNO was perceived at the federal level to be engaged in cleansing the country of non-Muslim places of worship (however, this is, a simplistic example of the nuances and complexities the text reveals).

Second, although the author is not concerned with investigating the driving forces behind the growth of Islamism, he makes clear the role of external factors in helping to drive the Islamisation process. Malaysians are much affected by the Islamic revival; students returning from Muslim countries play an especial role in raising awareness. Moreover, Liow is quite specific in stating that “the intensification of conservative Islamist discourse . . . and the concurrent constriction of discursive political space” (149) was the outcome of a global rise in Islamic consciousness driven by the United States’ War on Terror. Indeed—while Prime Minister Mahathir himself was engaged in his own campaign against local Islamic militants—in all probability, this Islamic consciousness lay behind his strident condemnation of the US’s extension of the War on Terror to Iraq.

Third, the author reveals how over the past decade the Malaysian government’s own battle against radical Islam has led the regime in an increasingly illiberal direction: the government increasingly only sanctions “authentic Islam”; for example, the prime minister’s office identified twenty-four deviant strands of Islam. Shias, were apprehended as deviants and forced to take rehabilitation courses, and the Malaysian state began to monitor closely the activities of its students overseas. Aspects of free speech increasingly became matters of security, and the space in which this key democratic freedom might be exercised was confined.

This is an essential book for all those interested in recent political development in Malaysia and an important one for those who want to understand the progress of Islamism in the modern world. It is a pity that Oxford University Press permitted the solecism “an ulama” in the text (88), which is confirmed as policy in the glossary (246). Also, Joseph Chinyong Liow’s presentation would have benefited from greater clarity; it would have helped if the central arguments could had been more in control of the excellent research deployed in their support.

Francis Robinson
Professor of the History of South Asia, Department of History,
Royal Holloway, University of London
Sultan of Oman Fellow, Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies
F.Robinson@rhul.ac.uk