

# Patterns of State Interaction with Islamic Movements in Malaysia during the Formative Years of Islamic Resurgence

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## Abstract

Unlike many Middle Eastern states which have unequivocally resorted to repression to outflank Islamist opposition, Malaysia's response to Islamic resurgence since the formative decade of 1980s has typically combined cautious encouragement of official *dakwah* (missionary effort) and checks on activities of independent Islamist groups so as to minimise possibilities of violence. Coercion was employed only as a temporary measure. Enjoying a relatively buoyant economy, problems such as mass demonstrations, riots, "terror" campaigns and assassination attempts, have largely eluded Malaysia. The state's strategy of coopting major Islamists and committing itself to an Islamisation programme has added to the regime's legitimacy. Previously strident Islamists have decided to discard their anti-establishment image and pursue their Islamic state ambitions through channels acceptable to the dominant political elite. Islamists' verbal and tacit espousal of Islamisation signal the fruition of the state's accommodationist strategy which, in turn, has obviated the need for Islamists to indulge in fifth-column activities. In turn, the mellowing of mainstream Islamist trends have convinced the state that the continuance of piecemeal Islamisation features, coupled with ambiguous assurances as to its long-term intentions of guiding the nation towards a modern Islamic polity, are sufficient to contain the socio-political influence of Islamic movements.

**Keywords:** Islam, Malaysia, resurgence, state, cooptation, coercion, accommodation, movement

## I Introduction

Among Muslim nation-states affected by Islamic resurgence, Malaysian Islamic movements have tended to be equated with moderation and tolerance, which in turn have invited an accommodative response from the state. The relatively amiable interaction between the state and resurgent Muslims in Malaysia has been in stark contrast to the tumult and violence that have often characterised similar relationships in the Middle East and South Asia. This is not to deny that intermittent outbursts of violent agitation have occurred or threatened to occur, but they have been dealt with rather efficiently by the state, whether by pre-emptive or reflexive strikes. Recent examples are the Darul Arqam scare in 1994–96, the Reformasi protests—relatively impetuous by Malaysian

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standards and involving motley Islamic-cum-secular elements in 1998–99, the Al-Ma'unah arms heist-cum-rebellion in Grik, Perak, in July 2000; and the discovery in 2001 of revolutionary cells run by the Mujahidin Group of Malaysia (KMM)—or otherwise dubbed malapropos by the state as the Militant Group of Malaysia, followed by a crackdown on Malaysian cells of the Jamaah Islamiah (JI).<sup>1</sup> Evidence linking the KMM and JI suspects to treacherous plots and invocation of violence have not gone beyond a biased reading of their ideological interpretations of militant *jihad* and forcible confessions, and never been verified in a court of law. The state's management of such scares, although harsh in certain respects, is mellow in comparison with the typical response in other parts of the Muslim world. Emphasising its anti-violent image, the Malaysian state has been a stern advocate of anti-terrorist initiatives in Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup>

While Muslim governments in the Middle East have unequivocally resorted to

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- 1) The major mechanism used by the state in quelling the four aforesaid challenges is the Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows for detention without trial (see section II below). The state strenuously maintains that the ISA served to protect national security, but critics have constantly accused the state of abusing the ISA, with its accompanying use of physical and mental torture, in order to cow political opponents; see ALIRAN [1988]. Of the four challengers, Anwar Ibrahim, the *de facto* leader of Reformasi protests around Kuala Lumpur since his sacking as Deputy Prime Minister on 2 September 1998, and Al-Ma'unah leaders, have been tried in court. Having been found guilty of corruption and sexual misconduct, Anwar served almost 6 years of his 15-year jail sentence in Sungai Buloh prison. However, Anwar was freed on 2 September 2004 after having his conviction quashed by a stunning Federal Court ruling which, ironically, attributed its decision to lack of evidence rather than being an unequivocal exculpation of Anwar. Al-Ma'unah's prime leader, Mohd. Amin Razali, was sentenced to death along with two fellow rebels, guilty of waging war against the Yang diPertuan Agong (king). Darul Arqam's leader, Ustaz Ashaari Muhammad, following his arrest under the ISA on 2 September 1994, was held virtually incommunicado under the Restricted Residence Act from end of October 1994 until end of October 2004. During his release, he had been residing in the federal territory of Labuan, an island off the Bornean coast of the state of Sabah, since February 2002, upon forcible transportation by the authorities. Until now, 17 alleged KMM leaders, including the supposed ring-leader Nik Adli Nik Aziz, son of Kelantan's Chief Minister from the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS), and 75 alleged *Jamaah Islamiah* members, have been held in the Kamunting detention centre in Perak. See "ISA terhadap pelampau agama ancam keselamatan," *Utusan Malaysia*, 10 June 2004.
  - 2) Malaysia's anti-terrorist measures have focused on identifying and addressing the deep-seated causes of terrorism, rather than relying on military strikes against suspected terrorists and countries accused of harbouring terrorism. Strongly believing in multilateral cooperation among Southeast Asian countries, since late 2003, Malaysia has hosted the Southeast Asian Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT), which has been credited with success in actively organising seminars and workshops on combating terrorism. See the reports, "Britain hormati pendekatan Malaysia perang keganasan," *Utusan Malaysia*, 11 January 2003; "Cara Malaysia perang keganasan disokong," *Utusan Malaysia*, 14 January 2003; "AS puji Malaysia perang keganasan," *Utusan Malaysia*, 6 February 2004; "SEARCCT berjaya tangani keganasan," *Utusan Malaysia*, 2 June 2004; "Amerika yakin keupayaan Malaysia tangani keganasan," *Berita Harian*, 22 June 2004.

overtly repressive policies to outflank religious opposition, for instance by banning Islamic parties and launching “police and security” measures with complicated surveillance techniques,<sup>3)</sup> the Malaysian government’s response to Islamic resurgence has ambivalently been a mixture of cautious encouragement of *dakwah* (missionary effort),<sup>4)</sup> albeit in an officially recognised and regulated version, and of checking activities of independent *dakwah* groups such that vaguely-defined “extremism” is minimised. Coercion has been employed sparingly, and often as a temporary measure until such a time when the Islamists relent in their approach and seek accommodation with the government. Such pragmatism is itself in response to the largely adopted peaceful *modus operandi* of Malaysian *dakwah* movements. Profiting from a buoyant economy, the government has not had to grapple with problems of mass demonstrations, riots, “terror” campaigns and assassination attempts which have engulfed Middle Eastern governments for decades. Such accommodative response has, in turn, obviated the need for Islamic movements to change tactics and go “underground,” hence bolstering further the non-violent character of Malaysian-style Islamic resurgence.

Malaysia’s success in maintaining peace and stability amidst Islamic resurgence was the result of well-designed manoeuvres intended to neutralise, not defeat and punish, resurgent Muslims. The government has, to its credit, responded heedfully and leniently, though not always cooperatively, to Islamists’ pressures. The resurgent Muslims were accommodated, not rejected. They were given the limited opportunity to air their demands and grievances. Short of playing into their hands, the state cooperated with them where possible, but maintained control of the overall situation. The present author suggests that the world, and the Muslim *ummah* in particular, have a lot to learn from the Malaysian way of handling Islamic movements. The emergence of terrorist cells in the Muslim world could in part be attributed to the state’s own stern and overwrought response to resurgent Muslims who merely wanted to have a say in the running of society. Intolerance breeds violence, which invites even harsher repercussions from the authorities. Society and politics are then stuck in a culture of fear and constant threats of reprisal by both the state and Muslim insurgents. This article argues that Malaysia

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3) On Middle Eastern Islamic movements and the harsh governmental response to them, see Munson [1988: 41–94], Ayubi [1991: chapters 4–5] and Owen [1992: 178–188]. The only parallel case to Malaysia in the Middle East is probably Jordan, where the “controlled incorporation of some Islamic elements within the Hashemite Establishment” and “relative prosperity and dynamism of the Jordanian economy” have been responsible for the Islamic movement’s “restrained militancy against the State” [Ayubi 1991: 98]. For a comparative study of Islamic movements in Malaysia and Jordan, see Roald [1994].

4) Literally meaning “propagation,” as derived from the Arabic term *da’wah*, *dakwah* originally referred to the proselytising activities of Muslims on non-Muslims, but in the lexicon of contemporary Islamic resurgence, *dakwah* entails disseminating the message of Islam as *din al-hayah* (The Way of Life) to born Muslims. In other words, *dakwah* encourages Muslims to become better Muslims by preaching the universality of the Islamic faith.

has successfully avoided such a grave situation due to accommodative policies adopted early in the state's handling of resurgent Muslims, and seeks evidence from the 1980s—the formative decade of Islamic resurgence.<sup>5)</sup>

## II Coercion

Coercion has been used against groups which have dared to mount an overt political challenge, either as parties competing in the electoral arena or as pressure groups issuing politically sensitive statements, and against fringe groups which have shown readiness to adopt violence to achieve extremist ends. Originally a hangover from the pre-Independence fight against communist insurgency, the Malaysian state has a variety of internal coercive instruments at its disposal, making it a popular target of criticisms from international human rights organisations. The Internal Security Act (ISA 1960) authorises the Home Minister to detain anybody who “has acted or is about to act or is likely to act in any manner prejudicial to the security of Malaysia” [ALIRAN 1988: 24; Gayathry 2003: 20–29]. For purposes of investigation, the detainee is held for a preliminary period of 60 days, which may be followed by a two-year confirmed detention, renewable indefinitely on a two-yearly basis, subject to recommendations from the Special Branch and an appointed Advisory Board [Lent 1984: 443–444]. Upon release, detainees may be further imposed with a restriction order, which effectively confines their movements within a designated locality and circumscribes their public role [Barraclough 1985b: 808]. The ISA has been regularly used in conjunction the Essential (Security Cases) Regulations (ESCAR) (1975), which enables the government to circumvent established judicial procedures for cases involving national security, and whose enactment prompted the Malaysian Bar Council to call on lawyers to boycott trials held under “oppressive” regulations which flagrantly flouted the rule of law [Lent 1984: 445; Means 1991: 143].

Among established Islamic movements, the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia [ABIM] and Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) bore the brunt of the government's repressive legislation during the formative phase of Islamic resurgence. ABIM was then arguably the most vocal critic of government policies among NGOs and the epitome of the new socio-political force of *dakwah*, while PAS was an open competitor against the United Malays' National Organisation (UMNO) for Malay-Muslim votes. Since its re-organisation and leadership takeover by Iranian-inspired Young Turks in 1983, PAS had emerged as a formidable political force [Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid 2003: 81–84]. However, the authorities were hardest upon groups allegedly harbouring violent designs to

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5) For background information, see two previous articles dealing with similar themes during the same era [Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid 2002; 2003].

overthrow the established order. In March 1980, the ISA was used to arrest several Kedah PAS leaders accused of mobilising thousands of paddy farmers in mass demonstrations demanding rises in the price of rice and payments of subsidies in cash. Despite the obvious economic overtones of the unrest, the government insisted that it was masterminded by a clandestine organisation, *Pertubuhan Angkatan Sabilullah* (Organisation of the Soldiers of God), intent upon erecting an Islamic government by revolutionary means; an allegation apparently corroborated by the confession of one of the detainees after weeks of interrogation [Barraclough 1983: 962]. The government's concern at the activities of fringe Islamic extremists intensified after bloody incidents in Kerling, Selangor in 1978 and Batu Pahat, Johore in 1980. In the former case, temple vigilantes killed 5 young Malay-Muslims, only one of whom survived, who were on a self-professed mission to desecrate Hindu shrines. In the latter event, a police station was viciously attacked by 20 sword-brandishing religious zealots, 8 of whom were killed in the ensuing confrontation [Ramanathan 1996: 44-45]. Throughout the 1980s, several fringe groups suspected of para-military activities, bearing such names as the Islamic Revolutionary Forces, the Spiritual Group and the Crypto were uncovered and their leaders arrested under the ISA [Barraclough 1983: 962; Syed Ahmad Hussein 1988: 185-188]. Actual outbursts of violence, or evidence of intended attempts, provided justification for the government's tightening of security measures and enabled it to discredit the mainstream *dakwah* movements by lumping Islamists together as "fanatics," "deviant extremists" and proponents of *dakwah songsang*<sup>6)</sup> [Syed Ahmad Hussein 1988: 188-189, 560-564; Mohamad Abu Bakar 1981: 1052].

While the invocation of security powers against fringe groups effectively leads to their demise, similar action against mainstream socio-political movements may have the opposite effect of arousing public sympathy and support. In particular, detentions of their charismatic leaders may create a "martyrdom syndrome," by which the government's high-handedness becomes an instant liability by justifying allegations of government's authoritarianism and injustice. It is an established fact, for instance, that the political stature of Anwar Ibrahim, President of ABIM 1974-82, was considerably enhanced following his two-year ISA detention for his role in orchestrating the 1974 student demonstrations [Funston 1981: 177; Barraclough 1985b: 804-805]. ABIM's anti-establishment views, which included opposition against the New Economic Policy (NEP) for its racial bias, acquired such enormous popularity in student campuses that student activities had to be consequently placed under the direct control of university authorities [Jomo and Ahmed Shabery Cheek 1988: 854]. ABIM-inclined civil servants were inconvenienced by transfers to remote areas without ABIM branches [Syed Ahmad Hussein 1988: 544-545]. The government became increasingly alarmed at the potential threat posed by a PAS-ABIM alliance; informal grassroots links between both groups had been

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6) Literally meaning "upside-down *dakwah*," the term *dakwah songsang* is used by the authorities to refer to false or deviant forms of Islamic activities.

steadily developing since the withdrawal of PAS from the National Front in December 1977. The unwritten pact was mutually beneficial. Taking the advantage of PAS' network, ABIM managed to spread its wing into rural areas, while at the same time supplying PAS with highly-educated recruits who were able to inject new ideas, especially in terms of cadre training, organisational skills and mobilisation capacity [Jomo and Ahmed Shabery Cheek 1988: 850–851]. Tacit cooperation turned into outright support during the 1978 general elections, when not only did ABIM activists campaign fiercely on behalf of PAS, but former ABIM leaders such as Fadhil Nor, Nakhaie Ahmad and Abdul Hadi Awang also decided to become candidates on the PAS ticket [*ibid.*; Funston 1981: 178]. With respect to Kelantan, where snap elections were called to end the state of Emergency and rule by decree triggered by the “Kelantan crisis of 1977,”<sup>7)</sup> political commentator Alias Muhammad has castigated ABIM leaders for pronouncing that “PAS' defeat will usher the start of an era of darkness for Islam,” thus falling into the “religious trap set up by PAS from time to time” [1978: 47]. In July 1978, Prime Minister Hussein Onn, in allusions to ABIM, issued post-election statements accusing *dakwah* groups of manipulating Islam for the political interests of PAS [Barraclough 1983: 964].

Increasingly irritated by ABIM's bold venture into pro-opposition politics, the government pushed the Societies (Amendment) Bill through Parliament in 1981. Although the effect of the Act was to impose stringent regulatory measures on all “friendly societies,” observers have noted that its principal target was ABIM, which was at the pinnacle of success in terms of popular support [*ibid.*: 971; Milne and Mauzy 1983: 623; von der Mehden 1986: 230; Jomo and Ahmed Shabery Cheek 1988: 854]. Appropriately, ABIM was accepted as the coordinator of the protest campaign, which united 115 NGOs, representing a cross-section of the Malaysian population, under the banner of the Societies Act Coordinating Committee (SACC) [Barraclough 1984: 457; Lent 1984: 450]. In essence, the Societies (Amendment) Act (1981) severely curtailed the freedom of voluntary organisations to act as pressure groups by allowing arbitrarily-defined “political societies” the sole right to issue public statements intended to influence government policies and activities [Barraclough 1984: 451–452; Lent 1984: 449–450]. In explaining the rationale for the Act, acting Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir expressed his disapproval of people who used “friendly societies” as a front for political gains, characterising such

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7) The “Kelantan crisis of 1977” refers to the 95 day suspension of democratic procedures following mass demonstrations, later escalating into violent destruction of property, held in support of Mohamad Nasir—Chief Minister recently deposed by PAS despite commanding the confidence of the federal government. PAS was consequently expelled from the National Front coalition for failing to support the Kelantan Emergency Bill in Parliament, while Mohamad Nasir formed a splinter party, Barisan Jamaah Islamiah Malaysia (BERJASA), which cooperated with UMNO in the state elections to end PAS' 18-year rule in Kelantan. Mohamad Nasir was eventually appointed Minister in the Prime Minister's Department responsible for Islamic affairs. For details, see Alias Muhammad [1978], Alias Mohamed [1978: 170ff], Kamarudin Jaffar [1979] and Farish A. Noor [2004a: 274–281].

suspicious behaviour as that befitting of communists [Barraclough 1984: 453].

In the mid-1980s, a PAS revival, indicated especially by burgeoning audiences at PAS-organised lectures, prompted the government to step up security measures against the party. Amidst rumours that PAS members were preparing themselves for a military *jihād*, a ban was imposed in August 1984 upon PAS gatherings in its four stronghold states [*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 23 August 1984]. This followed the previous month's ISA detentions of three PAS Youth leaders, viz. Abu Bakar Chik, Bunyamin Yaakob and Muhammad Sabu [*ibid.*]. A live television debate, which would have pitted three UMNO leaders against three PAS stalwarts on the issue of *kafir-mengkafir* i.e. trading of accusations of one another's infidelity, was eventually cancelled by the Yang diPertuan Agong's intervention.<sup>8)</sup> Following this, the government issued a White Paper entitled "The Threat to Muslim Unity and National Security," which implicated PAS members in the subversive activities of extremist Islamic groups, and created the spectre of the communists manipulating PAS-inspired rifts to achieve their anti-democratic aims [*ibid.*; Gunn 1986: 40; Kamarulnizam Abdullah 1999: 268–271].

In 1985, two bloody incidents astonished PAS members into realising how far the government was prepared to resort to blatant physical repression. Firstly, a PAS supporter was killed when UMNO-paid thugs attacked a PAS pre-by-election gathering in Lubok Merbau, Kedah [Farish A. Noor 2004b: 395]. A PAS leader who wrote a pamphlet disclosing the event was consequently held under the ISA and expelled to district confinement [Jomo and Ahmed Shabery Cheek 1988: 862]. In Memali, Kedah later in the year, police stormed upon a community of primitively-armed PAS villagers resisting the arrest of their leader, Ibrahim Libya. In the ensuing showdown, 4 policemen and 14 villagers including Ibrahim lost their lives [*ibid.*: 863; Milner 1986: 48; Kamarulnizam Abdullah 1999: 271–272]. PAS has since commemorated the event by declaring, to the government's disapprobation, the day of the Memali tragedy as "Martyrdom Day." In October 1987, 9 PAS leaders were among the 106 detainees held under the ISA during the so-called Lallang Operation. Other Muslim activists arrested included Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, the well-known academic critic of the government and Indian-Muslim leader of the non-communal social reform organisation, Aliran Kesedaran Negara (ALIRAN),<sup>9)</sup> and

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8) In many of their gatherings and lectures, PAS speakers allegedly grew fond of branding their UMNO opponents as *kafir*. Consequently, PAS members were discouraged to offer prayers behind and solemnise marriages with UMNO *imams*, to attend *kenduris* (religious feasts) organised by UMNO family members and villagers, and to eat meat slaughtered by UMNO people. To answer PAS' charges of UMNO's infidelity, Dr. Mahathir challenged PAS to a public debate scheduled for live television broadcast on 11 November 1984. See "Malaysia: Islam on the screen," *The Economist*, 27 October 1984; "They shall not Pas," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 18 October 1984; "The great non-debate," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 22 November 1984; Keddie [1988: 21] and Chandra Muzaffar [1987: 85–86].

9) In her typology of Malaysian *dakwah* movements, Nagata [1984: 122–125] has included a discussion on Penang-based ALIRAN which promotes a "progressive Islam... uncontaminated by ethnic particularisms and divisions" along the lines of such modernist thinkers as ↗

Ibrahim Ali, an UMNO leader associated with the anti-Mahathir faction and former student leader detained under the ISA in 1974 for mobilising campus demonstrators [Means 1991: 212]. In actual fact, the Lallang Operation was a widespread crackdown on the state's political opponents accused of inflaming racial and religious tension, and among its victims were trade unionists, Chinese educationists and Christian activists as well [Gayathry 2003: 31].

Another legal instrument which has been used to cow Islamists is the Printing Presses and Publications Act (1984), which authorises the censorship and proscription of writings "prejudicial to the national interest" and imposes penalties for operating "publications without government permit" [Means 1991: 139]. Under this Act, ABIM's periodical *Risalah* was refused printing permit for several years [von der Mehden 1986: 229]. Similarly, PAS' official mouthpiece published twice weekly, *Harakah*, has been consistently denied the right to public circulation since beginning publication in 1987 [Case 1993: 202].<sup>10</sup> Not exempt from the government's peering eyes have been newspapers known to have given sympathetic treatment to Islamic movements or the cause of *dakwah* in general. For example, *Mingguan Waktu*, which reserved special pages and columns for articles by Darul Arqam leaders, was banned in 1992 for apparently publishing an article declaring Dr. Mahathir's ten-year tenure as Prime Minister "a failure" [*ibid.*; Alattas 1992: 13–18].<sup>11</sup> Immediately following the Lallang Operation in 1987, the government revoked the publishing licences of the English-language and Chinese-language dailies, *The Star* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, and the Malay tabloid, *Watan*. All were known to have highlighted anti-establishment views of Dr. Mahathir's political adversaries from within and outside UMNO [Means 1991: 213]. Restructuring of the ownership of the mass media in the 1970s and 1980s has ensured that the country's main newspapers and television stations are controlled directly by the government or indirectly via share acquisitions by investment subsidiaries of UMNO and other National Front component parties [*ibid.*: 137; Zaharom Naim 1996; Lent 1984: 452].

Since the 1970s, it has become habitual for the government to charge its opponents with having been influenced by undesirable foreign elements. The communists, allegedly operating through front organisations such as the Persatuan Persaudaraan Islam

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↙ Muhammad Iqbal, Muhammad Abduh and Al-Afghani. The impact of ALIRAN as a source of irritation to the government is mentioned by Milne and Mauzy [1983: 623], Barraclough [1984: 455–456] and Lent [1984: 450] in relation to opposition to the Societies (Amendment) Act (1981). Today, led by P. Ramakrishnan, ALIRAN campaigns actively on behalf of human rights concerns. Its avowedly secular-humanist orientation, however, belies Nagata's earlier portrayal of ALIRAN as part of the *dakwah* movement.

10) Since March 2000, the circulation of *Harakah* has been severely curtailed to twice a month and restricted to PAS members only.

11) Dr. Mahathir denied that the article was the reason for *Mingguan Waktu*'s proscription and referred instead to its reports which were of "no use to the nation." But when asked for examples, he confessed to have never read the newspaper [*The Star*, 30 December 1991].



(PAPERI: Muslim Brotherhood Association) supposedly active in Kelantan, were once singled out as the elusive nemesis constantly prepared to exploit foreign-induced divisions among the Malays [Barraclough 1983: 961].<sup>12)</sup> From 1979 onwards, state rhetoric against alleged foreign involvement in Islamic movements has focused upon Iran's alleged attempt to export its revolution abroad. The manifest excitement surrounding Islamists of all persuasions after the February revolution prompted the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Mohamad Nasir, to declare: "The struggle of the Iranian people has nothing to do with our country" [*Bintang Timur*, 13 August 1979, as quoted in Syed Ahmad Hussein 1988: 585]. ABIM's decision to observe a "Solidarity Day" in conjunction with the liberation of Iran and Anwar Ibrahim's cordial visits to Khomeini's Iran and "fundamentalist" Pakistan under Zia ul-Haq seemed to vindicate accusations of ABIM's predilection for a revolutionary Islamic government [Mohamad Abu Bakar 1981: 1048]. During the 1980 and 1981 UMNO General Assemblies, vociferous attacks against groups "attempting to import the Iranian revolutionary ideology" were followed by specific demands by some delegates to proscribe ABIM altogether [Syed Ahmad Hussein 1988: 585-586]. Also alleged to have links with Gadhaffi's Libya [Nagata 1980: 430; Gunn 1986: 41], ABIM nevertheless denied receiving finance from abroad [Funston 1981: 176]. The question of funding aside, it was ABIM's aggressive commitment to Islamic internationalism, as signified by Anwar Ibrahim's appointment as the Asia-Pacific representative to the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), that made it a cause for legitimate concern [*ibid.*; Mohamad Abu Bakar 1981: 1048].

As for PAS, Iranian influence was discernible in the language of its post-1982 rhetoric, for instance the portrayal of its struggle as representing the *mustazaffin* (oppressed) as against the *mustakbirin* (oppressors) [Chandra Muzaffar 1987: 85-86; Jomo and Ahmed Shabery Cheek 1988: 862; Farish A. Noor 2004b: 329-336, 355]. PAS-sponsored schools were known to send their graduates to Iranian universities for further studies [*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 8 May 1986]. But contrary to government claims, no evidence exists to indicate that PAS-Iran relations ever went beyond ideological and educational aspects. Charges of Iranian interference in Malaysian politics peaked at the height of the government's coercive measures against PAS in the mid-1980s. In his 1984 National Day

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12) According to Musa Ahmad, the former Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) chairman who surrendered to the authorities in 1981, the CPM had resolved since 1961 that religion provided the best avenue of obtaining mass support. As such, the CPM had sought to infiltrate religious organisations through highly-trained cadres who would use leadership positions to spread communism, under the guise of religious extremism, among rank and file members. Musa also disclosed CPM's tactics of playing on religious and nationalistic sentiments to attract Malay intellectuals; see Sebastian [1991: 276, 294: fn. 10]. However, apart from confessions made under duress, the government has presented little, if any, concrete evidence that mainstream Islamic movements had been subject to communist infiltration, as its exaggerated propaganda consistently implied [cf. Barraclough 1985b: 803].

address, Dr. Mahathir harped upon the theme of groups aiming to forcibly establish a “government by mullahs” and on another occasion, claimed to have seen evidence of PAS’ plans of setting up “suicide squads” for whom “the shedding of UMNO blood [wa]s halal” [*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 18 October 1984]. The government attempted to reduce movements’ international links not only through closer supervision, but also by maintaining contacts with countries suspected of assisting them, such that funds to promote the cause of *dakwah* were channelled only through government-approved outlets [cf. Gunn 1986: 39]. Malaysia took definite steps to countervail *dakwah* movements’ international Islamic credentials by improving economic and cultural ties with the Islamic world [*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 31 January 1985]. That Iran appeared to accept the danger that close ties with radical Islamic elements posed to its diplomatic relations with Malaysia, as reported in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* [9 August 1984], was testimony to the success of the state’s strategy of neutralising the international influence of *dakwah* movements.

The state would have been embarking on a dangerous course if it had relied solely on coercion in facing the challenge of Islamic movements. For coercion, and the threat of its use, is a double-edged sword. While it may be successful in intimidating Islamists whose activities may be justifiably portrayed to the public as constituting a security threat, its protracted use against legitimate critics of the government and peaceful expressions of Islamic resurgence presents long-term political costs. For example, by denying legitimate channels of dissent to political adversaries, coercion might radicalise their supporters and drive them into clandestine activities, thus recreating the problem in another form. Coercion, by triggering criticism from the comity of democratic countries and reputable international organizations, may damage a country’s international prestige, diplomatic relations and trade and investment opportunities. Finally, coercion might alienate especially the middle class and educated elements of the population, and invite an electoral backlash in the form of “protest votes” for opposition parties or simply refusal to vote in disillusionment against an increasingly authoritarian political system [Barracough 1985b: 802–806].

Despite the government’s repeated insistence that coercion in the Malaysian context has served only as a “preventive” and “corrective” mechanism, evidence indicates that punitive motives have surfaced no less significantly in determining its actions against legitimate political opponents. In full realisation that the Islamic constituency had greatly expanded with the oncoming Islamic resurgence, the state launched a policy of Islamisation to outwit its Islamic rivals, whether Islamic political parties competing for votes or non-electoral *dakwah* bodies competing for influence. As Nagata asserted, “The antidote to an ‘excess’ of religious zeal then, [wa]s paradoxically more of the same” [1984: 158]. In this endeavour, the government had been surprisingly frank as to its political motives. Since PAS left the ruling coalition in late 1977, the government had constantly feared that PAS would capitalise on the new force of Islamic resurgence by presenting

itself as the sole political alternative to realise the overriding ambitions of independent *dakwah* organisations [Kamarudin Jaffar 1979: 216; Funston 1981: 185]. Such a foreboding was transformed into reality with the formation of the PAS-ABIM alliance during the 1978 elections. Ironically, the PAS-UMNO break-up apparently intensified the government's commitment to Islam. The immediate official response to a possible alignment of political and non-political forms of *dakwah* were major steps to streamline the national Islamic administration so as to be able to monitor nationwide *dakwah* activities, and the launching of a National *Dakwah* Month in December 1978, when state-remunerated *ulama* toured the country to enlighten the youth to the dangers of *dakwah songsang*, drug-addiction and communism, while explaining the correct forms of *dakwah* as propagated by themselves [Mohamad Abu Bakar 1981: 1050; Barraclough 1983: 970]. Prime Minister Hussein Onn explained:

You may wonder why we spend so much money on Islam. You may think it is a waste of money. If we don't, we face two major problems. First, Party Islam will get at us. The party will, and does, claim we are not religious and the people will lose faith. Second we have to strengthen the faith of the people, which is another way to fight communist ideology. [Tasker 1979]

### III Cooptation: Prelude to Islamisation

It was since the ascendancy of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad to the Premiership in July 1981 that the state's turn towards Islam became more resolute. Observers have noted that while his predecessors' Islamic policies represented no more than symbolic and defensive concessions to Islamists, Dr. Mahathir went further by adopting some of the Islamists' more significant demands, thus effectively hijacking the Islamist agenda [Milne and Mauzy 1983: 638; Jomo and Ahmed Shabery Cheek 1988: 855; Hussin Mutalib 1990: 133]. As one Chinese political leader, Dr. Goh Cheng Teik, noted in 1982, what was extremist 10 years before had now become government policy [*New Straits Times*, 4 April 1982]. Looking back on Dr. Mahathir's Islamisation policies until 1992, Hussin Mutalib believes that the Prime Minister had seemingly shown genuine commitment "to practise the universalistic Islamic values and principles in his governance of the country," despite "using Islam as a legitimating instrument" [1994: 160]. He admits, however, that,

... a primary motivating factor for the breadth of Islamic programmes under his [Dr. Mahathir's] administration must be the pressures coming from the collective force of the *dakwah* movements, Islamic intellectuals, and most understandably, the Islamic Party, PAS. [*ibid.*]

A discussion of Dr. Mahathir's Islamisation programme is incomplete without mentioning his cooptation in 1982 of Anwar Ibrahim, until then ABIM President and arguably the most prominent figure among *dakwah* leaders during its formative years in the 1970s. Dr. Mahathir's success in persuading Anwar Ibrahim to join UMNO instead of PAS—the latter's widely rumoured choice, shows Dr. Mahathir at his best as a political strategist. PAS was then experiencing an acute leadership crisis between President Mohamad Asri's "old-guard nationalist" camp and the reformist "Young Turks" led by Anwar Ibrahim's ex-ABIM colleagues. Mohamad Asri had personally initiated a campaign to bring Anwar Ibrahim into PAS, by which it was hoped that the "Young Turks" would be pacified and Mohamad Asri's flagging credibility restored [Syed Ahmad Hussein 1988: 598]. Despite his family's strong UMNO credentials,<sup>13)</sup> Anwar Ibrahim's joining UMNO had seemed to be against all odds. Since his student days, he had consistently rejected opportunities to strive for his Islamic ambitions from within the establishment. Such overtures included Prime Minister Tun Razak's offer of a cabinet post and later as Food and Agricultural Organisation representative to the United Nations [Barraclough 1985a: 315; Mohammad Nor Monutty 1989: 101]. He reiterated his anti-UMNO position during the period of PAS-ABIM cooperation, and once even compared UMNO to a septic tank "that could not be cleaned from the inside" [Jomo and Ahmed Shabery Cheek 1988: 857]. In 1976, he reportedly told a group of students to wait until ABIM registered as a political party before launching political careers [Syed Ahmad Hussein 1988: 597].

Yet, analysts have pointed out that Dr. Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim did enjoy amazingly similar political inclinations, making their eventual rapprochement not altogether surprising. Anwar Ibrahim the "Islamic-Malay nationalist" and Dr. Mahathir the "ultra-Malay nationalist" had maintained close contact with each other since their common opposition to Tunku Abdul Rahman's policies in 1969 [Farish A. Noor 2004a: 306]. Both subscribed to modern interpretations of Islam without renouncing the Malay cause, although presumably Anwar's version was essentially more "Islamist" in important respects [Jomo and Ahmed Shabery Cheek 1988: 858]. On reasons why he eventually chose UMNO as his political platform, Anwar Ibrahim variously stated that besides the special friendship he had cultivated with Dr. Mahathir, he was above all impressed by policy changes brought about by Dr. Mahathir's administration in the defence of Islam and Malay interests, and by Dr. Mahathir's determination to weed out poverty and corruption [Barraclough 1985a: 316; Syed Ahmad Hussein 1988: 597]. In addition, he expressed misgivings about divisions in PAS, reaffirmed his belief in UMNO's commitment to Islam and resolved that he would be more effective in the government party

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13) Anwar Ibrahim's father was former UMNO member of Parliament for Permatang Pauh in Seberang Perai, Penang. Without her son's knowledge, Anwar Ibrahim's mother had been remitting his UMNO membership fees for several years. See Jomo and Ahmed Shabery Cheek [1988: 856].

[Milne and Mauzy 1983: 636, fn. 62; Mohammad Nor Monutty 1989: 104–105].<sup>14)</sup> Under Dr. Mahathir's patronage, Anwar Ibrahim rose swiftly through the ranks of UMNO and the government.<sup>15)</sup> Upon election to Parliament in 1982, Anwar Ibrahim was immediately appointed Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department responsible for Islamic affairs: a post which catapulted him to the forefront of the government's Islamisation policies, which he himself, besides Dr. Mahathir, took privilege to declare. While the extent of Anwar Ibrahim's influence in the actual shaping of policy might have been exaggerated, his presence in the government was recognised as a major catalyst to the new Islamic direction pursued, not least by bolstering its Islamic image [Hussin Mutalib 1990: 139–141].

Politically, the “Anwar factor” broke the unity of Dr. Mahathir's Islamic rivals by ending the tacit alliance between ABIM and PAS. The pro-government press was quick to applaud the cooptation of Anwar Ibrahim as Dr. Mahathir's “biggest political coup” and “a historical victory for UMNO” [Syed Ahmad Hussein 1988: 599]. The Islamic opposition did not hide their disappointment at having being outmanoeuvred in the “battle for Anwar.” PAS attacked Anwar Ibrahim as a renegade who had sold out for opportunistic gains [*ibid.*: 600]. Subky Latiff, a well-known PAS columnist, declared Anwar Ibrahim's decision to join UMNO as spelling the “effective separation of ABIM from PAS” [*Watan*, 27 July 1982]. Anwar Ibrahim's decision to leave ABIM was made without consultation with colleagues among ABIM's leadership. It divided ABIM into a “pro-Anwar” faction, whose spokesmen claimed that Anwar Ibrahim's decision was a calculated long-term strategy to infiltrate UMNO and Islamise the state from within, and an “anti-Anwar” faction, many of whom drifted into PAS and feared that Anwar Ibrahim had fallen into Dr. Mahathir's trap by willingly heading UMNO's subsequent election campaign against PAS [Syed Ahmad Hussein 1988: 646; Jomo and Ahmed Shabery Cheek 1988: 856–857; Farish A. Noor 2004a: 307–308].

The cooptation of Anwar Ibrahim, by removing one of the regime's most ominous critics, was undoubtedly a *tour de force* for Dr. Mahathir and UMNO [Barraclough 1985a:

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14) In a public function, Anwar said that he rejected PAS in 1982 because of the party's impetuous approach, which “evaluates a leader's aptitude on how far he could brand a fellow-Muslim an infidel” [*Utusan Malaysia*, 12 April 1995].

15) He was generally accepted as Dr. Mahathir's heir-apparent before being unceremoniously removed from the Deputy Premiership and Deputy Presidency of UMNO in September 1998. His ouster was followed by a nationwide purging of pro-Anwar elements in the ruling party and state institutions. It is fair to see Anwar's downfall as manifestation of a political clash of ideas and personalities between him and his erstwhile mentor, Dr. Mahathir. Undeniably, Anwar's meteoric rise had made him the object of envy of many UMNO politicians; in 16 years, Anwar was able to reach the “Number Two” position in UMNO and the government after successively holding the posts of UMNO Youth chief, UMNO Vice-President, and Ministers of Culture, Youth and Sports; Agriculture, Education and Finance. See Chandra Muzaffar [1998].

316; Camroux 1996: 859]. But it was neither the first nor the last time that cooptation was successfully used as a political strategy against its Islamic rivals. In 1974, Sanusi Junid, ABIM's first Vice-President, joined UMNO to the loud chorus of disapproval from fellow ABIM leaders including Anwar Ibrahim. Later, as Deputy Home Affairs Minister, Sanusi was directly responsible for the Societies (Amendment) Act (1981) against which Anwar Ibrahim as ABIM President had vehemently campaigned [Jomo and Ahmed Shabery Cheek 1988: 857; cf. Barraclough 1984: 453].<sup>16)</sup> In 1986, a PAS splinter party led by ex-President Mohamad Asri, Hizbul Muslimin (HAMIM), was admitted into the National Front to counterbalance the expected growth in support for PAS in the forthcoming elections [Means 1991: 183]. PAS sources claimed that their ISA detainees have been constantly persuaded by various inducements to defect to UMNO [*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 21 April 1988]. In April 1989, UMNO scored another morale victory over PAS when former PAS Vice-President and ex-ABIM stalwart, Nakhaie Ahmad, joined UMNO, having resigned all posts in PAS seven months earlier [Jomo and Ahmed Shabery Cheek 1992: 102]. Nakhaie has since enjoyed posts in UMNO and the regime's Islamic bureaucracy, while being extremely critical of PAS.<sup>17)</sup>

#### IV Islamisation

The Malaysian state's Islamisation programme can be analysed by means of substantive achievements and policy declarations. Among the government's major accomplishments were the introduction of Islamic banking, insurance and pawnshop systems (1981–83), official sponsorship of an Islamic Medical Centre (1983), the expansion of the Islamic Centre to cover seven principal units including distinctive Dakwah and Quranic Institutes (1984), an official declaration of “instilling Islamic values into the government machinery” based on the slogans *kepimpinan melalui teladan* (leadership by example) and *bersih, cekap dan amanah* (clean, efficient and trustworthy) (1984), the upgrading of the status of *shariah* courts and judges so as to be at par with their civil judiciary

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16) Having enjoyed lengthy stints as UMNO Secretary-General, UMNO Vice-President and Agriculture Minister, Sanusi Junid was appointed Chief Minister of Kedah in June 1996, after about a year in the political wilderness; see reports in Malaysian national newspapers on 11 June 1996.

17) Today, Nakhaie is head of the state-sponsored Islamic Dakwah Foundation of Malaysia (YADIM) and has a regular Friday column in the national newspaper *Berita Harian*. In fact, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's scheme of Islam Hadhari (Civilisational Islam) is credited to have been the brainchild of Nakhaie; see Nakhaie Ahmad, “Dasar Islam Hadhari sebagai landasan pembangunan negara” [*Berita Harian*, 7 May 2004] and Astora Jabat, “Malaysia model Islam Hadhari” [*Mingguan Malaysia*, 25 April 2004]. For Nakhaie's criticisms of PAS, see “Tembelang PAS didedah” [*Utusan Malaysia*, 7 December 1994] and “Perjuangan PAS ikut emosi—Nakhaie” [*Utusan Malaysia*, 15 April 1995].

counterparts (1988) and the establishment of an Islamic think-tank, the Malaysian Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM) (1992) [Milne and Mauzy 1983; Hussin Mutalib 1990: 134–139, 142–144; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 20 May 1993; Norhashimah Mohd. Yasin 1996: 197–220; Camroux 1996: 860–862]. Islamic language was increasingly used to justify government actions such as the assault on the sultans' constitutional powers in 1983 and 1992–93 [Hussin Mutalib 1990: 141–142]. In foreign policy, closer relations were forged with Muslim countries including the PLO, and Malaysia assumed an active role in the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) [*ibid.*: 128–133]. The previous policy of attaching importance to Islamic symbols was intensified. Increased allocation was given to Islamic programmes for airing over radio and television. There were more sections on Islam in the state-controlled press, more money pumped into mosque-building and Islamic infrastructural facilities, and generous publicity given to the hosting of sumptuous Islamic occasions such as the Annual Quranic Recitation Competition, the International Islamic Youth Camp in 1981, the International Seminar on Islamic Thought and the Islamic Civilisation Exhibition, both in 1984 [Hussin Mutalib 1993: 31].

In the sphere of education, arguably the cornerstone of the Islamisation programme, the 1980s witnessed a major revamp of school curricula at all levels to reflect religio-moralistic conceptions of life, the introduction of compulsory Islamic Civilisation courses at tertiary level, the founding of the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) in 1983 and the establishment in 1987 of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC), a major research institute headed by the renowned Malay-Islamic philosopher Professor Syed Muhammad Naguib al-Attas [*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 31 May 1984; Kamal Hassan 1986: 53–57, 70–77; Ghazali Basri 1988: 108–109; Roald 1994: 233–251]. As Education Minister in 1975, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad had warmly accepted ABIM's Education Memorandum for scrutiny by a cabinet committee designed to review the National Education Policy. The memorandum owed most of its ideas to Professor Syed Naguib al-Attas and stressed aspects of human development such as spiritual, moral and mental education; without discarding the secular aim of producing good citizens with expertise in various fields of knowledge [Osman Bakar 1993: 49]. Some of these ideas were put into effect after Anwar Ibrahim became Education Minister in 1987. Anwar Ibrahim's educational reforms revolved around seven issues, viz. the coining of a national philosophy of education, the role of the Malay language as the medium for acquiring knowledge at all levels, the emphasis on national unity, human resource development, democratisation of access to quality education, the goal of a continual supply of productive labour to run alongside the National Agricultural Policy and the Main Industrial Plan, and the replacement of narrow-mindedness with intellectual tolerance or "globalisation" [Anwar Ibrahim 1989: 63–75; Wan Zahid Mohd. Noordin 1993]. Underlying such reforms was a national philosophy of education pronounced by Osman Bakar, former ABIM secretary-general and chief of its Education

Bureau,<sup>18)</sup> as “in line with Islamic teachings” and “cannot now be treated as secular” [1993: 51]. This philosophy proclaims:

Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. [Anwar Ibrahim 1989: 65; Roald 1994: 234]

Osman Bakar’s comment above is reflective of the post-1982 mellowing and practical cooptation of ABIM [Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid 2003: 68–71]. PAS too had serious difficulties in confronting Dr. Mahathir’s Islamisation programme. Deprived of any legitimate argument to question its success, PAS could only afford to dispute the government’s sincerity whilst claiming the policies had not gone far enough [Jomo and Ahmed Shabery Cheek 1988: 861]. To the UMNO “old guard,” the implications of the Islamisation drive were so alarming that by 1983, former Prime Ministers Tunku Abdul Rahman and Hussein Onn were publicly calling for a halt to the Islamisation process [Milne and Mauzy 1983: 631]. Party enthusiasts, echoing their leaders, unashamedly referred to UMNO as Malaysia’s oldest and the world’s third largest Islamic party [*ibid.*: 636, fn. 60; Jomo and Ahmed Shabery Cheek 1988: 855; Syed Ahmad Hussein 1988: 624]. In his opening speech at the 1982 UMNO General Assembly, Dr. Mahathir defined UMNO’s struggle as one “to change the attitude of the Malays in line with the requirements of Islam in this modern age” and “to enhance Islamic practises and ensure that the Malay community truly adheres to Islamic teachings” [*New Straits Times*, 11 September 1982]. Undoubtedly, one of the most significant legacies of Dr. Mahathir’s leadership of UMNO has been the acceptance by the party rank and file that UMNO and Islam shared the same fate and interests.

Despite the Islamists’ excitement and the secularists’ apprehension of Dr. Mahathir’s Islamisation policies, a broad examination of policy statements issued by government spokesmen reveals that they stopped short of endorsing the transformation of Malaysia into an “Islamic state,” as defined by contemporary Islamists in terms of the adoption of the *shariah* as the country’s Basic Law and guiding principle [cf. Norhashimah Mohd. Yasin 1996: 220–239]. Having neutralised its Islamic political rivals and forced the pro-establishment secular-nationalists to accept the new Islamic idiom, the state ruled out the possibility of implementing Islam in the politico-legal sphere, which hopeful Islamists

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18) One of ABIM’s principal ideologues in its formative years, Professor Osman Bakar obtained his doctorate in Islamic philosophy from George Washington University, USA, under the supervision of the famous Iranian-Islamic scholar Sayyed Hossein Nasr, and became deputy vice-chancellor (academic affairs) of the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, until the late 1990s.



earnestly see as the eventual outcome of present policies. The multi-cultural character of the Malaysian polity served as the government's favourite alibi. For example, Dr. Mahathir said, "We practise Islam within our means and it is not possible to practise it to the extent of 100% when the country has a sizeable non-Malay population" [*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3 March 1983]. In 1983, Deputy Prime Minister Musa Hitam rejected claims that the government's emphasis on Islamic values was an Islamisation process per se or a response to the PAS challenge; rather, it was merely an endeavour to achieve a healthy balance between spiritual and material development [Milne and Mauzy 1983: 631, fn. 48]. In an interview, he echoed the Prime Minister's contention that Malaysia was already an "Islamic nation" [*ibid.*: fn. 49]. Amidst such ambiguity, Dr. Mahathir clarified the government's understanding of Islamisation in an interview with *Utusan Melayu* in October 1984:

What we mean by Islamisation is the inculcation of Islamic values in government administration. Such an inculcation is not the same as implementation of Islamic laws in the country. Islamic laws are for Muslims and meant for their personal laws. But laws of the nation, although not Islamic-based, can be used so long as they do not come into conflict with Islamic principles. Islamic laws can only be implemented if all the people agree to them. We cannot force because there is no compulsion in Islam. [quoted in Hussin Mutalib 1990: 142-143]<sup>19)</sup>

Similar sentiments were expressed by Anwar Ibrahim in a public speech on "Islamisation and Nation-Building" in October 1985:

The Islamisation process should be seen from the Malaysian context. Although it is more of the reaffirmation of faith and the reaffirmation that the Islamic religious and moral values are comprehensive, measures are being taken for national development, politics and administration; in so doing we must acknowledge the Malaysian reality of a multi-religious, multi-racial society. Therefore the Malaysian Islamisation process must take into consideration the views of both Muslims and the non-Muslims... Islamisation should be shared by all the various religious groups in the country... When we talk about "universal values" why label them "Islamic," as these values are values that are good for mankind... Islamisation will not compromise with any form of narrow religious fanaticism and chauvinism such as over-politicising of Islam by some quarters of the Muslim populace. [quoted in Ghazali Basri 1988: 110-111]

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19) Dr. Mahathir continued to hold that an Islamic state was inappropriate for a multi-cultural Malaysia well through the 1990s [cf. Camroux 1996: 860]. It came, therefore, as a major surprise in 2001 when, on the occasion of the 30th General Assembly of the Gerakan People's Party, a Chinese-dominated component of the ruling coalition, Dr. Mahathir declared that Malaysia was an Islamic state [see the headline news in *Mingguan Malaysia*, 30 September 2001].

Such policy statements as above were intended to allay the fears of non-Muslims, whom the regime fears would transfer their political allegiance to opposition parties which may exploit issues brought forth by Islamisation so as to inflame communal passions. More effectively, the state also used non-Muslim ministers to reassure their respective communities that Islamisation policies meant no harm to the politico-legal rights and socio-economic freedom of religious minorities. For instance, in April 1984, Rosemary Chong, the Chinese Deputy Minister of Youth, Sports and Culture, issued the following statement during the closing session of a national seminar on “The Role of Religion in Nation-Building”:

... the government of Malaysia has no wish to impose Islamic law on non-Muslims. Islamic values, however, are different from Islamic rules and laws. In actual fact, Islamic values are similar to the concept of universal values of good and evil. What are regarded as good values by other religions are considered desirable in Islam too. This means that absorption of Islamic values will not destroy other values in Malaysia. [quoted in *ibid.*: 111]

## V Concluding Remarks

On the whole, the Malaysian government’s reaction to Islamic movements from the mid-1970s, when tangible response really began, and throughout the 1980s, oscillated between coercion on the one hand and cooptation, with a view towards effecting a moderate pace of Islamisation, on the other. The dominance of one strategy over another depended on the extent of the danger that a targeted movement posed to the political influence of the country’s ruling elite. Such a political threat was often masked by the government’s misrepresentation of it, either deliberately or out of ignorance, as “religious extremism.” When vociferous attacks by ABIM in student circles and by PAS in political rallies were feared as potentially erosive on its Islamic legitimacy, the state’s response to them was unequivocally coercive. Coercion had a moderating impact on Islamists, the more accommodative of whom chose to further their aims from within the established political structures. The government consequently relented in its coercive pressures, and reserved its occasional use in case hostile manoeuvres, perhaps from the more hardline Islamist elements, resurface. The appearance of erstwhile Islamist figures as voices of the establishment gave tangible effect to, or at least justified, its Islamisation policies designed to outflank Islamic rivals of all persuasions. The turning point in the state’s response to ABIM was the cooptation of Anwar Ibrahim in 1982 and ABIM’s evident support for subsequent Islamisation measures. Whether Anwar has succeeded in his Islamisation efforts is debatable [Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid 1999: 44–48].

On the part of the state, the accommodative policies of the 1980s were a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it lent legitimacy to the state, for whom support from the

Malay-Muslim masses was crucial for its political survival in an increasingly Islamic social environment. Islamists realise that the government would not go so far enough as to implement an Islamic state in the juridical sense of the term, such that under current conditions, the possibility of Malaysia becoming an Islamic state in the near future remains remote. Yet, *dakwah* activists have to admit that the Islamisation measures concur significantly with their erstwhile demands, and they themselves are not able to translate such demands into reality in their capacity as pressure groups or opposition movements. In any case, *dakwah* movements' verbal and tacit espousal of Islamisation signal the fruition of the government's accommodationist strategy. Some Islamists have even decided to discard altogether their anti-establishment image and pursue their Islamic struggle through channels acceptable to the dominant political elite. Those left in the *dakwah* movements have continued to harbour hopes that an Islamic state may somehow materialise in the future, but as far as practical realisation of such hopes is concerned, formal government channels still provide the primary avenue for change. As for the government, the mellowing of mainstream *dakwah* trends have convinced it that the continuance of piecemeal Islamisation features, combined with ambiguous assurances as to its long-term intentions of guiding Malaysia towards some kind of a modern-oriented Islamic polity, are sufficient to contain the socio-political influence of *dakwah* movements and retain their electoral backing.

On the other hand, accommodative policies sowed the seeds for future confrontation with Islamists, as they were given room and sometimes explicit encouragement to reach out to the masses. In some cases, this in-built competition for the support of the Malay-Muslim masses exploded into outright confrontation [cf. Camroux 1996]. For instance, Darul Arqam, which was largely ignored as a target of coercion and cooptation in the 1970s and 1980s, became the target of harsh repression in 1994 and 1996 [Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid 2000; 2001]. PAS' confrontational approach, while still evident in the constant censures against the government, was nevertheless compromised to some extent in the wake of the necessity of cooperating with the federal administration in governing the state of Kelantan since 1990 [Muhammad Syukri Salleh 1999]. The fallout between co-opted Islamists, symbolised by Anwar Ibrahim, and the ruling establishment in 1998, led to widespread Reformasi protests in which Islamists participated actively. This arguably heralded a new era of a "re-radicalisation" and politicisation of Islamic movements [Muhammad Syukri Salleh 2000]; an era which witnessed more direct confrontation between Islamists and Dr. Mahathir's premiership, which lasted until October 2003. Under Dr. Mahathir's successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, a renewed attempt has been made to accommodate Islamic demands in the form of further co-optation of Islamic figures as electoral candidates of the ruling party and members of his administration, and the enunciation of a progressive form of Islam known as Islam Hadhari. However, such a discussion falls outside the scope of this article.

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