Islamist Conservatism and the Demise of Islam Hadhari in Malaysia

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This article argues that Islam Hadhari, as a model for development officially inaugurated during the administration of Malaysia’s fifth Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2003–9), encountered failure. Its lack of success was significantly due to the rise of Islamist conservatives, who deliberately interpreted Islam Hadhari as a political instrument to impose Islamization from above in a manner not conducive to living in a spirit of peaceful coexistence in a multi-ethnic society. While on the one hand it promoted an Islam that cherishes the values of inclusivity, moderation and inter-religious tolerance, on the other hand Islam Hadhari unfortunately triggered defensive responses from Islamist conservatives. This ad hoc conservative alliance comprised religious leaders associated with the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), state religious functionaries, scholars affiliated to the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS: Parti Islam SeMalaysia) and Islamist non-governmental organizations. The rise of this Islamist conservatism aggravated ethno-religious relations during Abdullah Ahmad Badawi’s premiership, leading to the setbacks experienced by his government in the general elections of 2008. By then, the death knell had been sounded for Islam Hadhari. It was steadily consigned to the graveyard of history by the administration of Najib Razak, who took over from Abdullah in April 2009.

Keywords: conservatism; Islamism; Islam Hadhari; Malaysia; Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

Introduction

Islam has been of significance in Malaysian society since its enunciation as the religion of the Malaysian federation in Article 3(1) of the Federal Constitution of 1957. Since its putative resurgence in the 1970s, Islam has by and large been a permanent feature of the country’s political dynamics. During the premiership of Dr Mahathir Mohamad (1981–2003), the state undertook piecemeal Islamization via incentives and measures to counterbalance the challenge emanating from such Islamist rivals as the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS: Parti Islam SeMalaysia) and Islamist non-governmental organizations, especially the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM: Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia), Darul Arqam and Jamaat Tabligh (see Nagata 1984). Muslim–non-Muslim relations became a perennial fault line with explosive consequences for the whole polity.

Since Islam legally features as one of the constituent components of being “Malay” – accepted as the indigenous ethnic group of Malaysia – a threat to Islam is widely regarded as an ethnically charged peril to the unity and constitutionally enshrined special position of the Malays. Ensuing from its secure status as Malaysia’s official religion, Islam has emerged as an independent mobilizing force to be reckoned with, and has practically become the last bastion of Malay identity (Nagata 1984, 57). Recognizing Islam’s usefulness, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) – the major component party of the Barisan Nasional (BN: National Front) ruling coalition, which has ruled the country almost uninterrupted since independence
in 1957\(^{1}\) – has not shied away from manipulating ethno-religious sentiments in concocting political discourse since the onset of Islamic revival. Although UMNO has been known for its moderate Islamic stance since the era of the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman (1957–70), Islamic resurgence and the ensuing UMNO-orchestrated Islamization process still spread the jitters to non-Muslims, ever wary of a seemingly imminent attempt to impose Sharia (Islamic law) and Islamic culture on their lives (see Nagata 1980; Mohamad Abu Bakar 1981; Barracough 1983; Mauzy and Milne 1983). Such a fear, however, is not consonant with UMNO’s brand of modernist Islam, which conceives of being Islamist\(^{2}\) as a progressive undertaking, unfettered by traditional interpretations that prioritize form over substance (Kessler 2008, 68; Ahmad Fauzi 2009, 168–169). Under Mahathir’s stewardship, Malaysia was lauded as having successfully become “Islamic without being an Islamic state” (Nagata 1994, 63). His authoritarian approach, notwithstanding its shortcomings, has been credited for slowing down conservative religious trends that were beginning to show in Malaysia (Ahmad Fauzi 2010, 168). For the 22 years of his premiership, Mahathir held reverently to the concept of Asian Values – arguably the precursor of Islam Hadhari (civilizational Islam) (Mohd Azizuddin 2013, 146, 152–157). As a reflection of conservatism, Asian Values propagated such ideas as the importance of the strong state, continuity of development, inappropriateness of Western-style democracy, greater emphasis on community rights vis-à-vis individual rights, respect for order and authority, rediscovery of traditional values and the assumption that change threatens development (Rodan 1996).

With this backdrop, this article seeks to discuss Islam Hadhari, the scheme inaugurated by Abdullah Ahmad Badawi during his tenure as prime minister (2003–9), from the perspective of conservatism – an ideology generally understood as opposing change and inclined to preserve traditional elements present in a particular socio-political order.\(^{3}\) Employing the contextual paradigms developed by Mannheim (1966, 95–96) and O’Sullivan (1976, 9, 12), conservatism may be understood, respectively, as the doctrine espoused by those bent upon preserving vegetative patterns or embedded aspects of society, and that adopted by those determined to fight radical and comprehensive changes in society. As an ideology, conservatism has been largely consigned to the periphery of political discourse.\(^{4}\) In the Malaysian context, in spite of being frequently referred to in relation to the ideological make-up of Malaysia’s dominant BN–UMNO regime, conservatism has not been employed by scholars as an analytical tool in the admittedly monotonous discursive frameworks of contemporary Malaysian studies (see Abdul Rahman 2010, 10–11, 114). We recognize, however, that conservatism is a fluid concept, without a precise yardstick by which to measure the degree of a particular individual’s conservatism. Even Mahathir Mohamad started off as national leader with a liberal image before being transformed into a conservative. In an earlier article, the present authors divide UMNO conservatives into four factions on the basis of their level of responsiveness to reform and transformation (Ahmad Fauzi and Muhamad Takiyuddin 2012).

Past accounts of Islam Hadhari, despite referring to it as tainted with doses of religious conservatism, have not situated their arguments within a distinctive conservative paradigm (see, for example, Kessler 2008, 71–76; Hoffstaedter 2009; Bustamam-Ahmad 2011, 109–116; Muhamad Ali 2011; Mohd Azizuddin 2013). This article proposes to analyse Islam Hadhari from the perspective of its role as an instrument to countervail the adverse impact of religious conservatism. As contextual indicators of an Islamic-based “religious conservatism,” we propose five characteristics, namely possessing a great desire to adhere to the original teachings of the Qur’an and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad; displaying absoluteness and intolerance in decision-making; exhibiting patriarchal attitudes towards women; having a fixation with the jurisprudential aspects of Islam as if they were more important than the
scripture itself; and, finally, demonstrating rigidity with respect to law and punishment at the expense of inner Islamic consciousness and missionary considerations (see Nagata 1980, 406; Derichs and Fleschenberg 2010, 8; and Chandra Muzaffar, interviewed in Petaling Jaya, December 29, 2009).

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi’s background

A stark difference between Abdullah Badawi and all four prime ministers before him was his religious heritage. Born into a family with strong roots in the lineage of traditional ulama (Islamic scholars), Abdullah had a natural base of legitimacy for his political future. Added to this was a seemingly impeccable individual character summarized in the sobriquet “Mr Nice Guy,” his demeanour being variously described as tolerant, non-confrontational, patient, humble, modest, composed, free from corruption and opposed to political aggression. After his appointment as prime minister, this polished character became a major factor in attracting public support, especially from Malay-Muslims. In the era of Islamic resurgence, images of a leader willing to return to his ancestral home to seek blessings from his mother, and later to lead congregational prayer sessions with his ministerial colleagues, were not superficial (Ahmad Fauzi 2006, 114). During hustings for the eleventh general elections (GE11) in Terengganu, then under PAS rule, he won Malay-Muslim hearts by refusing to retaliate against personal attacks from Chief Minister-cum-PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang, thereby distancing himself from the “holier than thou” attitude commonly associated with religious figures (Moten and Tunku Mohar Mokhtar 2006, 335–336). In the spirit of true Islamic camaraderie, his compassionate gestures transcended political boundaries. When PAS Mursyid al-‘Am (General Guide)-cum-Chief Minister of Kelantan Nik Aziz Nik Mat was hospitalized with a heart attack, Abdullah ordered the best medical treatment to be provided for him and, in addition, granted permission for Nik Adli, Nik Aziz’s son, detained under the Internal Security Act for alleged involvement in terrorist activities, to visit his father regularly.6

Abdullah’s religious background and disposition were thus great assets in his endeavours to project an Islam with a progressive and moderate face. This was significant in the wake of rising conservatism in PAS following its success in wresting power in Terengganu in 1999. Although PAS had experienced a decisive shift towards greater emphasis on issues of democracy and social justice following the imbroglio of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim’s ouster, beating, trial, conviction and imprisonment in 1998–99, it was not enough to counter prevailing conservatism among its leadership. Furthermore, the ulama wing strengthened its hold on PAS’s leadership during its 2003 General Assembly, when Abdul Hadi Awang was officially declared president in place of the deceased Fadzil Noor (Welsh 2004, 148–149). Upon assuming the reins of government, Abdullah sensed that the ascendancy of PAS, which had capitalized on the Anwar Ibrahim saga, was a threat to the legacy of moderate Islam he had inherited from his predecessors. To Khairy Jamaluddin, Abdullah’s son-in-law and reputed ideologue of his administration, such retrogressive actions by the PAS governments of Kelantan and Terengganu as the introduction of separate payment counters for men and women at supermarkets and the drawing of the Islamic head covering on posters depicting women with their hair uncovered were indicative of the negative influence of the conservative ulama said to be dominating decision-making in PAS (Khairy Jamaluddin 2003). Such narrow-mindedness could not be allowed to percolate through to UMNO. Despite the prevalence of moderation among most members of the UMNO Supreme Council, conservative elements at the grassroots level were ever ready to sacrifice hallowed traditions and principles for the sake of securing support. Herein lay Abdullah’s advantage: “Abdullah has not fostered conservatism within UMNO; his scholar credentials have given him the space
to avoid deepening the competition with PAS for religious legitimacy that Mahathir began in 1982” (Welsh 2004, 147). His religious upbringing notwithstanding, Abdullah’s inclination since his youth had tended towards the reformist brand of Islam (Ungku Aziz 2006).

With these points in his favour, Abdullah was in a strong position to declare Islam Hadhari as the official mantra of his administration. Although in existence since the later years of Mahathir’s premiership, Islam Hadhari did not take centre stage under Mahathir’s regime because of his lack of personal credentials and capacity (information from Mohd Yusof Othman, interviewed in Bangi, November 21, 2009). In the midst of Western misperceptions of Islam following the attacks on the World Trade Center, New York, and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, Islam Hadhari served as a useful counterpoint to President George W. Bush’s Global War on Terror. Yet close to a year had passed before Abdullah eventually outlined his 10 principles of Islam Hadhari, on the occasion of the 55th UMNO General Assembly in September 2004. Of the 10 precepts, five are generic, and have been explicitly practised by past UMNO-BN regimes. These are: faith and piety in Allah; freedom and independence of the people; a vigorous mastery of knowledge; a good quality of life; and strong defence capabilities. The remaining five can be regarded as a fair reflection of Abdullah’s leadership aspirations: a just and trustworthy government; balanced and comprehensive economic development; protection of the rights of minority groups and women; cultural and moral integrity; and safeguarding of natural resources and the environment (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi 2006a, 4, 44–45). In comparison with other Muslim countries that have experimented with Islam in governance, Islam Hadhari was liberal in the sense of its general respect for hitherto marginalized aspects of life and segments of the umma (global Muslim community), without changing the face and integral character of Islam (Osman Bakar 2006). Within the Malaysian milieu, non-Muslims, women and environmentalists, for example, no longer feature as fringe groups, their agenda having been subsumed by Islam Hadhari.

From its outset, PAS was convinced of the conceptual flaws in Islam Hadhari (Abdul Hadi 2005). Despite Abdullah’s repeated insistence that the concept was merely about an attitude, the risk of attaching an adjective such as hadhari, which means “civilizational,” is gargantuan considering its interface with generally conservative-minded Malay-Muslims (Chandra Muzaffar 2009). On-going public discussions, via forums, academic seminars and commissioned articles in the mainstream press, were not enough to prevent Islam Hadhari from being perceived as potentially confusing. The fact that the discourse was presented to the public by overtly biased and defensive pro-government interlocutors did not help the cause. Preoccupied by such trappings of modernity as modern education, economic prosperity and rise in social status, lay Malay-Muslims were not yet receptive to the idea that Islam could ever be conceived outside its pristinely defined traditional boundaries. As propagated by PAS, such religious innovation was considered tantamount to heresy, hence the disdain poured onto Islam Hadhari as a pathetic invention – “a new religion” (Ahmad Fauzi 2006, 116; Zainal Kling 2006, 181). In fact, from its early days in 2004, academic-cum-social activist Chandra Muzaffar had warned Abdullah that Islam Hadhari was doomed to failure (Chandra Muzaffar, interviewed on December 29, 2009). Apart from having uncoordinated fundamentals (Muhammad Syukri Salleh 2005), Islam Hadhari suffered from the further weakness of lack of synchronicity between its lofty principles and the diverse emphases placed on them by the agents for its delivery and implementation, particularly the Islamic bureaucrats. There was a glaring disconnect between Islam Hadhari in theory, as enthused about in the official corridors of power, and in practice, as applied to the ordinary man and woman on the street (Gatsiounis 2006, 82–83, Hoffstaedter 2009, 137–138).

To the nation’s non-Muslims, Islam Hadhari’s most effective selling point lay in its moderate, inclusive and tolerant message. For a limited time, Abdullah managed to harness this impression
to boost his image. Several studies of GE11 found that, alongside enthusiasm for a new leader – the “Pak Lah factor” – religious moderation made a significant contribution to BN’s overwhelming triumph at the 2004 polls. Non-Muslim voters had apparently reacted positively towards Islam Hadhari’s openness in contrast to PAS’s narrow emphasis on the implementation of the Islamic criminal code of *hudud* as its most prominent expression of Islam (see Liow 2005; Ahmad Fauzi 2006; Moten and Tunku Mohar Mokhtar 2006).

As time passed, Islam Hadhari began to attract worldwide attention. In the West and Muslim countries alike, Islam Hadhari was showcased as a model of tolerant and democratic co-existence between Muslim and non-Muslim citizens. In contrast, Abdullah’s manoeuvres on religious issues caused dismay among Islamists and Muslim conservatives (see Heim 2004; Marwaan Macan-Markar 2004; Matthews 2004). To Abdullah, the GE11 results were living proof that “a progressive and moderate approach will defeat a conservative ideology and extremist ways” (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi 2004b) – the crux of the message delivered to US President George W. Bush during their meeting in July 2004. Abdullah also promoted Islam Hadhari as far as the United Kingdom, India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, New Zealand, Australia, Germany and even at United Nations and Organization of Islamic Co-operation meetings (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi 2006a, passim). In contrast to Mahathir’s critical way of berating fellow Muslim countries for slow economic growth, Abdullah sought to rectify Western misconceptions of Islam by marrying a steadfast commitment to Islamic faith with robust material development (Derichs 2007, 154). As the first Muslim leader to speak at the World Council of Churches assembly in August 2004, he was forthright on the urgent need for moderation in religious understanding and practice:

> what we need more than ever today is a concerted effort to initiate inter-faith dialogue. We need to talk to one another openly about the issues that impact on all our lives. Let us go beyond arguing over differences in theology and religious practice. A meaningful dialogue will not be possible if we do not respect each other’s freedom of worship. Islam enjoins pluralism and we are reminded of it in the Quranic verse “To you your religion, to me my religion.” (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi 2004a)

Abdullah’s willingness to attend a Christian function and openly advocate inter-faith dialogue was no small feat. A slight mistake on Malaysia’s subtle ethno-religious terrain can cost one’s political career, as former UMNO Vice President Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah discovered during the 1990 general election campaign, when he was caught on camera wearing a Sabahan tribal headdress to which was attached what looked like a Christian emblem. Abdullah’s private life also demonstrated his pluralist credentials. Following the death of his wife Endon Mahmood in 2005, Abdullah married Jeanne Abdullah, a Muslim convert who had been baptized a Christian and whose extended family remained Catholics. Given his religious credentials, such a union powerfully symbolized Abdullah’s ethno-religious tolerance agenda. But it was not long before Islam Hadhari sparked defensive reactions from conservative Islamists, many of whom had the mistaken impression that Islam Hadhari was merely a cloak for liberalizing Islam.

### The ascendancy of Islamist conservatism: the Inter-Faith Commission and the question of religious freedom

Taking the cue from Abdullah Badawi’s encouragement of inter-religious dialogue, in early 2005 the Bar Council resuscitated efforts to establish an Inter-Faith Commission (IFC). However, this initiative, meant to provide a platform where representatives of all Malaysian religions could sit together to sort issues out between them, was stridently opposed by PAS and a myriad of Muslim NGOs coalescing under the Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic Non-Governmental Organizations (ACCIN). ACCIN saw in the IFC a sinister conspiracy to undermine the powers of the state’s departments of Islamic affairs, by-pass Sharia courts in Islamic legal matters, and
interfere in intra-Muslim affairs (accessed April 13, 2012. http://bantahifc.bravehost.com/). In short, all 14 of the demands made by the IFC were regarded as a threat to Islam’s exalted position as Malaysia’s official religion. On the government side, the IFC proposal found its own supporter in Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage Rais Yatim. Not only was Rais supposed to officiate at the opening of the IFC’s founding conference, but he also steadfastly maintained that the IFC was necessary if Muslims were to understand other religions better (Rais Yatim 2005). Beleaguered by conflicting demands, Abdullah decided to abandon the IFC but insisted on continuing closed meetings and dialogue with various religions (Mimi Syed Yusof, and Ahmad Fairuz Othman 2005). Whilst the Bar Council agreed to postpone the establishment of the IFC indefinitely and shift its priority to dialogue, the IFC impasse laid down a marker for future stand-offs between Islamist conservatives on the one hand and liberal Muslim and non-Muslim civil society activists on the other.

The most contentious issues revolved around Article 121 of the Federal Constitution. Through a hurriedly passed amendment sanctioned by Prime Minister Mahathir in 1988, clause 1A was inserted, specifying that civil courts could no longer interfere in the jurisdiction of Sharia courts. By raising the status of Sharia courts and judges to be on a par with their civil counterparts, the amendment effectively created jurisdictional dualism in Malaysia’s legal system. While seemingly upholding Islam’s exalted position, this had worrying side effects, particularly as Malaysia’s overall legal structure remained secular in orientation (Anuar Zainal Abidin 2006). It continued ticking and exploded like a time-bomb during Abdullah Badawi’s tenure as prime minister. First, upon the death of nationally famed mountaineer Moorthy Maniam aka Muhammad Abdullah in December 2005, the Sharia court that heard an application from the Federal Territory Council of Islamic Affairs (MAIWP: Majlis Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan) decided that Maniam’s secret conversion to Islam was legal, and so his body should be buried according to Islamic rites. In adherence to the Article 121 (1A) constitutional amendment, the High Court refused to hear the claim of S. Kaliammal, Moorthy’s widow, who contested that her husband had continued to live a Hindu lifestyle even after the date of the said conversion. If Kaliammal had declined to seek justice through the Sharia courts, which was in any case a constitutionally flawed action since Sharia courts had jurisdiction solely over Muslims, she would have been left with no recourse to justice. However, MAIWP’s resort to an ex parte application involving one side of the dispute, as opposed to an inter partes application involving both sides, strengthened the commonly held negative perceptions of religious bureaucrats (Aziz 2005). This purported denial of religious freedom, apparently approved by the highest law of the land, understandably alarmed concerned non-Muslim religious and civil society groups. The situation was aggravated by the verbal abuse hurled at Moorthy’s family at the Kuala Lumpur Hospital, whose mortuary was holding his corpse pending the conclusion of the legal dispute.

In response, nine non-Muslim federal ministers delivered a memorandum to Abdullah urging a re-examination of Article 121(1A). Such unprecedented boldness was preceded by their mutual discussion with the Malaysian Consultative Council for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS) – founded in 1983 as a body to counterbalance the Islamic resurgence. On the positive side, cooperation between government leaders and civil society activists in pressuring the Prime Minister was unprecedented in Malaysia (Ooi 2008, 98). Refusing to review or abrogate Article 121(1A), Abdullah advised his nine ministerial colleagues that future discussion of sensitive issues be confined to the cabinet. The memorandum was consequently withdrawn, even before Abdullah agreed to a joint meeting with five of the nine ministers. But Abdullah’s giving audience to his rebellious non-Muslim colleagues triggered a backlash from Islamists wary of rising non-Muslim aggressiveness in fighting for their rights.
According to Shamsul Amri (interviewed in Bangi, March 12, 2010):

This issue was the point in time when the UMNO grassroots started to view Abdullah with suspicion. Logically to them, “if such a thing had happened during Mahathir’s era, the delegation would be far from getting an audience with the Prime Minister. Instead, they would be shown the exit. Abdullah, on the contrary, listened to their grievances.”

Abdullah (interviewed in Putrajaya, March 18, 2010) nevertheless defended his action, construing it as “a different sort of political management. This is the standard in developed countries such as in Europe. It is an aspect of an increasingly mature society [wanting to negotiate and discuss].” In the medium term, the Moorthy saga contributed to rising mobilization among Malaysian Hindus, eventuating in the founding of the Hindu Action Rights Force (HINDRAF) whose demonstrations rocked the country on November 25, 2007 (Willford 2013, 138–141).

A few days after the Moorthy issue erupted, the Sharia court in Negeri Sembilan decided that the funeral of the recently deceased Wong Ah Kiu aka Nyonya Tahir was to be conducted according to Buddhist rites, despite claims to her corpse that were made by the Negeri Sembilan Department of Islamic Affairs. The decision was arrived at after testimony from Nyonya Tahir’s daughter on her mother’s lifestyle convinced the bench that Nyonya Tahir had indeed died a Buddhist. Unlike the circumstances in the Moorthy case, Nyonya Tahir’s surviving family was provided the opportunity to appear before the Sharia court to testify regarding her religious beliefs, notwithstanding her religious affiliation at birth as stated on her identity card.

The verdict in Nyonya Tahir’s case, however, was not enough to assuage non-Malay and liberal Muslim fears. Mobilizing under the umbrella of Article 11, a coalition of liberal-secular NGOs, civil society activists organized forums in Petaling Jaya and Malacca in defence of freedom of religion as enshrined in the Federal Constitution. In May 2006, a similar forum held in Penang was violently interrupted and cut short after being raided, despite police monitoring of the event, by members of ACCIN and the Anti-IFC Action Body (BADAII: Badan Bertindak Anti-IFC) (Aliran 2006; see also Tan Ban Cheng 2006; Wong Fook Meng 2006). The liberal-orientated Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department, Nazri Aziz, reacted by strongly chiding the Malay-Muslim protesters for being disrespectful of minority rights.

Similarly, Abdullah Badawi also defended the rights of the organizers, who heeded advice to continue their session behind closed doors. Although expressing disapproval of the rough way in which the forum was halted, Abdullah cautioned the organizers to be extra mindful of the religious sensitivities connected with such meetings, and to avoid turning them into platforms to pressure the government.

The next forum in Johor Baharu took place successfully on July 22, 2006, amidst PAS-led demonstrations outside the venue. Three days later, Abdullah called for a complete stop to public discussions on religion and IFC-related matters.

From the point of view of emergent conservative Muslim groups such as BADAI, it was obligatory to challenge the Article 11 coalition’s struggle for its alleged advocacy of Muslims’ “freedom to apostasize.” BADAI’s raid in Penang in May 2006 was based on rumours that the forum would discuss the IFC. Three months earlier, word spread that up to 250,000 Malaysian Muslims had left their religion. The source of this staggering figure was the highly respected mufti of Perak, Harussani Zakaria. Hence, when the case of Azalina Jailani aka Lina Joy was catapulted into the public arena in 2005–7, the siege mentality of many Malay-Muslims, buoyed by conservative Muslim groups, crystallized. Lina Joy, as she preferred to be called upon her attempted conversion to Christianity, was born a Malay-Muslim and had been applying since 1997 to the National Registration Department (NRD) to remove the word “Islam” from her national identity card, but to no avail. She pursued the matter through the
 civil courts, but her repeated applications were consistently rejected by the High Court in 2001, the Court of Appeal in 2005 and finally the Federal Court in May 2007. Contentious as the issue was, the last two verdicts were arrived at by a 2–1 majority, meaning that there was a dissenting opinion in each case. The basis of the courts’ decisions lay in their stout refusal to encroach on the jurisdiction of the Sharia courts, under whose authority matters concerning apostasy were properly situated (Kortteinen 2008, 217). In comparison with the Moorthy saga, the Lina Joy issue attracted more emotive comments and judgements from non-Muslim communities and religious organizations (Tan and Lee 2008, passim).

Yet another cause célèbre was that of Rayappan Anthony, a Christian convert to Islam who had returned to Catholicism in 1999 in accordance with NRD procedures. Upon his death in November 2006, the Selangor Islamic Affairs Department (JAIS: Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor) claimed his body through an ex parte application. During ensuing discussions between Rayappan’s family and JAIS officials, the latter’s lack of transparency forced the family of the deceased to apply for recourse to the High Court. When the case attracted the attention of cabinet members, JAIS’s enthusiasm to pursue the claim dwindled, and they eventually abandoned it, ostensibly due to lack of evidence. Needless to say, JAIS’s fumbling throughout the Rayappan episode elicited criticism not only from non-Muslims but also from the Sharia Lawyers Association of Malaysia, who considered such uncouth behaviour on the part of JAIS officials as embarrassing, an abuse of due process and a burden on the bereaved family.

Islamist conservatives in UMNO

As far as the ruling elites’ foregrounding of Islam in the public sphere was concerned, 2006 was a watershed year (Hoffstaedter 2013, 478). As the UMNO General Assembly of 2006 approached, two separate events stimulated the rise of ethno-religious sentiments among Islamist conservatives. The first was the publication of a report by the Islamic Consumer Association of Malaysia (PPIM: Persatuan Pengguna Islam Malaysia) regarding a biscuit product that allegedly bore a cross. PPIM was adamant that the manufacturer should be called on to remove this Christian symbol (see Loh 2010). The second was the Muslim siege of a church allegedly planning to baptize Muslim children with the collusion of national yachtsman Azhar Mansor, who was also rumoured to have renounced Islam. The gossip went viral over the short message system (SMS) mobile network, implicating Harussani Zakaria as the source of the news (Marzuki Mohamad 2008, 179–180). Both Harussani and Azhar later denied any knowledge of the rumour, but the dramatic association of both figures with the episode raised the profile of Islamist conservatism, whose influence was steadily making its way up to the highest decision-making level of the country’s political hierarchy.

During the 2006 UMNO General Assembly, the first to be telecast live on mainstream television channels, Malay ethnocentrism mixed with tinges of Islamist conservatism was eloquently displayed, spearheaded by delegates from UMNO Youth (Ramakrishnan 2006; Zubaaidah Abu Bakar 2010). Its leader, Hishamuddin Hussein for the second time in succession, kissed and waved the keris, a traditional Malay dagger, while sternly warning both the IFC and the Article 11 coalition against playing with Malay religious sentiments. UMNO Youth Information Chief, Azimi Daim, asserted the readiness of Malay fighters to shed blood should conditions become unbearable. The frightening scenario of an impending bloodbath was stressed further by Hasnoor Sidang Hussein, representative from Malacca. Perlis delegate Hashim Suboh joined in by rhetorically asking whether the keris waved by Hishamuddin would be used, and if so, when? For no clear reason, UMNO veteran Mohamed Rahmat then reminded all and sundry that Malays were notorious for running amok at critical times.
UMNO Senator from Kedah, Tajul Urus Md Zain, followed suit by calling for Azhar Mansor to be beheaded should allegations of his apostasy prove true (Wan Hamidi Hamid 2006a). Penang delegate Shahbudin Yahya chastised the Konrad Adenauer Foundation – sponsor of the abandoned IFC founding conference, and the liberal women’s rights group Sisters in Islam (SIS) for spreading religious pluralism and liberalism, undermining the powers of the Sharia court and bringing Islam down to the same level as other religions.28

The projection of a religious conservative discourse in full view of the nation marked the ascendancy of the Islamist conservatives. So worried was Abdullah Badawi by the uncontrollable developments that his keynote address was used to admonish certain party elements who had misinterpreted Islam Hadhari to justify adopting radical and ultra-conservative positions, and to disavow their intolerance of deep-rooted customs and traditions of Malaysian society (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi 2006b). But Abdullah’s concerns fell on deaf ears. A year later, two UMNO Members of Parliament (MPs) from Johore, Syed Hood Syed Edros and Mohamad Aziz, openly expressing abhorrence of Christian symbols displayed in the vicinity of missionary schools, requested their removal.29

Islamist conservatives in opposition parties

For the opposition Islamists in PAS, the victories of progressive leaders such as Deputy-President Nasharuddin Mat Isa (2005–11) and Vice President Husam Musa (2005–9 and since 2011), do not mean that conservative influence via its ulama and youth wings has subsided (Ahmad Fauzi 2011, 89–91). Islamist conservatives in PAS have zealously backed controversial actions and stances of Malaysia’s Islamic officialdom such as the Federal Territory Department of Islamic Affairs’ (JAIWP: Jabatan Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan) raid on the Zouk nightclub in January 2005, the demand for a ban on SIS, participation in demonstrations against the Article 121 (1A) constitutional amendment, protests against forums held by the Article 11 group and remonstrations against outdoor concerts by local and foreign entertainers. Yet, even within the so-called progressive group of opposition politicians, there runs a seemingly opposite conservative streak. For example, it was Nasharuddin Mat Isa, once touted as the new face of PAS, who warned of a covert design, allegedly masterminded by Christian leaders of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) – PAS’s partner in the multi-racial Pakatan Rakyat (PR: People’s Pact) coalition – to turn Malaysia into a Christian state (Lim 2012). On the other hand, one of the chief demonstrators against the Article 11 roadshow in 2006, Mohd Rashid Hasnon, then leader of the NGO Society for Islamic Reform (JIM: Jamaah Islah Malaysia) (Hoffstaedter 2013, 482), is today Deputy Chief Minister30 of Penang – which has been ruled by a DAP-led PR government since 2008. Mohd Rashid joined the Anwar Ibrahim-led People’s Justice Party (PKR: Parti Keadilan Rakyat) in 2010 and won the Pantai Jerejak state legislative assembly seat in the thirteenth general election (GE13), held in 2013, in spite of a past association with JIM, which elements in the Penang government had once linked to religious extremism (Tan Sin Chow 2009).

Working hand in glove with PAS conservatives were occasional Islamists from other parties, such as former PKR MP for Kulim-Bandar Baharu, Zulkifli Nordin, and former International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) lecturer Dr Badrul Amin Baharon. Both had played prominent roles in the Islamist raid on a Bar Council-organized “Forum on Conversion to Islam” in August 2008 (Muda Mohd Noor 2008; Zulkifli Nordin 2008). As a member of the Lawyers for the Defence of Islam (PPI: Peguam Pembela Islam), Zulkifli was an anomaly within the PKR’s multi-ethnic framework, as was Dr Badrul Amin, although to a lesser extent. Both had been staunch supporters of Anwar Ibrahim since the days of the Reformasi (reformation) upheavals in 1998–99, but brought with them the baggage of conservatism from
their long history of Islamist activism. When Zulkifli went against the party line, criticizing the use of the word “Allah” by non-Muslims, which had been allowed by the High Court, he was duly sacked by the PKR in March 2010 and became a BN-friendly MP (Samy 2010). In May 2013, Zulkifli, by now Deputy President of the Malay rights NGO Organization for Empowered Indigenous Peoples of Malaysia (PERKASA: Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia) went on to contest the Shah Alam parliamentary seat in GE13 on a BN ticket, losing to PAS’s progressive leader Khalid Samad. As for Dr Badrul Amin, in February 2012 he suffered the embarrassment of being arrested by Pahang religious officials for allegedly committing khalwat (close proximity) with another man’s wife in the wee hours of the morning – a crime he vehemently denied and ascribed to a political plot. In GE13, Badrul Amin lost in the fight for the Silam parliamentary seat in Sabah.

Muslim non-governmental organizations: an Islamist civil society in the making

In its formative phase, Malaysia’s Islamist civil society comprises disparate elements. On the one hand, Islamists with an anti-government bent share their non-Islamist civil society’s diagnosis of the multitude of shortcomings with respect to issues of governance and leadership, but differ on the prescribed remedy. To them, the antidote lies in more Islam, whereas non-Islamist civil society is more inclined to adopt liberal secular solutions congruent with Malaysia’s liberal democratic and plural society (Ahmad Fauzi 2008, 220–221). On the other hand, Islamist civil society is made up of independent NGOs which sprang up to defend punitive actions and judicial decisions carried out by the Malaysian state’s Islamic arm, which have enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy and immunity in recent years. Following the JAIWP raid on the Zouk nightclub, 53 liberal NGOs launched a campaign against moral policing, which was deemed an invasion of personal privacy. Support for the campaign was forthcoming not only from opposition parties such as the DAP, PKR and the Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM: Parti Sosialis Malaysia), but also from liberal UMNO ministers such as Shahrizat Jalil, Rais Yatim, Nazri Aziz, Zaid Ibrahim and Azalina Othman Said. Other influential advocates included the SIS-affiliated daughters of Mahathir Mohamad and Abdullah Badawi, Marina Mahathir and Nori Abdullah respectively. Nori was also wife of Khairy Jamaluddin, UMNO Youth Chief since 2009, MP for Rembau, Negeri Sembilan, and current Minister of Youth and Sports in Najib Razak’s administration.

It is within the context of such opposition that 40 Islamic NGOs mobilized efforts in defence of Islamic morality laws and their enforcement (Syed Nadzri 2005). Further moves were coordinated at the behest of the newly established ACCIN and BADAI, which had previously backed Harussani in calling for the proscription of joint religious celebrations. In the wake of the Lina Joy case, PPI was formed to clarify to the public matters concerning the constitutional position of Islam. PPI acted to counterbalance the Bar Council, which was considered to be unduly biased against Islam. This was followed by the founding of the Organizations for the Defence of Islam (PEMBELA: Pertubuhan-pertubuhan Pembela Islam), which brought together 80 Islamic NGOs. Headed by the then-president of ABIM, Yusri Mohamad, PEMBELA raised the awareness of Muslims regarding the imminent threat to Islam lurking in their midst. Among other things, PEMBELA organized public forums, collected over 700,000 signatures on a petition to be presented to the Council of Malay Rulers and the Prime Minister, launched a website for networking purposes and cooperated religiously with state mufti offices and departments of Islamic affairs. ABIM’s conspicuous role in PEMBELA was directly related to its vision of re-invigorating the struggle for Malay-Islamic interests after years of slumber encountered by dakwah (propagation) movements in the twilight years of Mahathir’s era (Ahmad Fauzi 2008, 229–231).
Yet another purportedly Islamist NGO that acquired popularity under Abdullah Badawi’s auspices was the Islamic Welfare and Missionary Association of Malaysia (PEKIDA: Pertubuhan Kebajikan & Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia). As patron of PEKIDA, Abdullah attended its official functions, but its reputation was overshadowed by allegations of covert involvement in gangsterism and morally deviant activities. At grassroots level, PEKIDA was amongst the main movers of the raid against the Forum on Conversion to Islam in August 2008. The concerted action had witnessed unprecedented cooperation by Islamists from diverse backgrounds, including opposition Islamists from PAS and PKR, 29 NGOs and UMNO conservatives. Panel members from JAIWP and the government think-tank the Institute of Islamic Understanding of Malaysia (IKIM) had to cancel their prior agreement to participate in the forum. In contrast with Abdullah’s own conception of Islam Hadhari, dialogue was not part of PEKIDA’s agenda.

Muslim proponents of liberal Islam and feminist Muslims have been favourite targets of criticism by Islamist conservatives. Liberal Muslims are activists driven by universal humanitarian considerations, without being shackled by ethno-religious priorities and conservative interpretations of religious laws. They endeavour to redefine the public role of Islam in a more modern and inclusive paradigm, ever mindful of Malaysia’s multi-ethnic background (Marzuki Mohamad 2008, 155–158). To the Islamist conservatives, liberal Islam is no better than a “deviant teaching in modern form” while its adherents are deemed “non-Sunnis.” Among social activists alleged by Islamists to belong to this category are SIS founder Zainah Anwar, Bar Council strongman Haris Ibrahim, academics Chandra Muzaffar and Farish Noor, the reform group Aliran Kesedaran Negara (ALIRAN), the Institute for Policy Research (IKD: Institut Kajian Dasar) led by Khalid Jaafar and patronized by Anwar Ibrahim, the acclaimed film director Yasmin Ahmad and former Mingguan Malaysia columnist and editor-in-chief of Al Islam magazine, Astora Jabat. As for politicians, the names that crop up on the list are PKR MP for Balik Pulau Yusmadi Yusof, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department Nazri Aziz, former Minister-cum-Puteri UMNO chief Azalina Othman Said, and former de facto Law Minister who defected to the PKR and later became president of the National Human Well-being Party (KITA: Parti Kesejahteraan Insan Tanahair) Zaid Ibrahim (see Idris Zakaria 2006; Zamihan 2008; Fadhullah Jamil 2009; Mohammad Ariffin Ismail n.d.).

As a Muslim women’s rights group, SIS incorporates elements of both liberal Islam and feminist Islam. At a glance, SIS should have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with Islam Hadhari, whose tenets included protection of the rights of minority groups and women. In emphasizing a modern and progressive Islam, SIS’s and Abdullah Badawi’s agendas arguably converged (Osman Bakar 2004, 19). Short of openly supporting SIS, Abdullah’s legitimation of SIS was manifested in his late wife Endon Mahmood’s and daughter Nori’s patronage of SIS-associated programmes (Perlez 2006; Zainah Anwar 2008; Chow 2009). In March 2003, for example, Endon became patron of the Coalition on Women’s Rights in Islam, which actively campaigned for monogamy as the ideal form of marriage in Islam. This was in response to the Perlis state government’s announcement that it had forsaken the requirement for Muslim men to obtain consent from their first wives before entering into polygynous unions. However, to all intents and purposes, Abdullah’s strategy backfired. His associating with feminist Islam alienated sections of the Islamist civil society previously drawn to his ulama reputation. As things stood, Islamist conservatives were still far from including gender issues in their discourse on Islam (Ting 2007, 95).

From Islamic to Islamist religious bureaucracy

In truth, it was not altogether unexpected that such a quixotic scheme as Islam Hadhari would encounter inertia from within state structures. Not even a year had passed after its inauguration
when public intellectual Fathi Aris Omar brusquely anticipated the failure of Islam Hadhari at the hands of none other than the state-administered Islamic officialdom (Fathi Aris Omar 2004). Other critical observers included IKIM Director in 2005–9, Dr Syed Ali Tawfik Al-Attas. To Syed Ali Tawfik, son of renowned philosopher Syed Naguib Al-Attas, the prevalent narrow-mindedness among contemporary ulama and judicial officers in Malaysia is manifested in their quotidian emphasis on ritualistic and legalistic matters, to the extent that they impose their misplaced interpretations on aggrieved non-Muslims. Lacking knowledge of the variety of shades of opinion and plurality of views allowed in Islam, their anger was understandably directed towards Islam Hadhari, which was being aggressively promoted by the state (Al-Attas 2006, 2007; Hoffstaedter 2009, 130–131).

In many ways, the Islamist transformation of the Islamic Centre, the hub of the federal government’s Islamic bureaucracy upgraded to the Department of Islamic Advancement of Malaysia (JAKIM: Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia) in 1997, can be traced back to Mahathir’s early campaign to inculcate Islamic values into his administration. In 1982, he paved the way for the entree of cohorts of ulama into his administration. When Abdullah Badawi succeeded Mahathir, the Islamic bureaucracy had acquired a dynamic of its own, perennially slanted towards defending the religious status quo, and enveloped by a false pretence of sanctity bordering on infallibility (Mohamed Nawab 2006; Norani Othman 2006, 344; Ahmad Fauzi 2010, 166–168). As embodied at the highest level by the Article 121(1A) constitutional amendment, the gradual codification of the Sharia and its streamlining across the different Malaysian states served as very strong instruments of centralization and invested unprecedented powers in the hands of a privileged bureaucracy. Bureaucratization proceeded in hand in hand with the expansion of Sharia jurisdiction and the augmentation of enforcement authority; ironically, the whole process of formalizing the Sharia into the country’s legal corpus not only made it more rigid but also secularized it (Maznah Mohamad 2010; Ahmad Fauzi 2012, 264–265). Worse still, officers entrusted with its implementation were not trained in the art of hikmah (wisdom), which gives a degree of flexibility to the practice of Sharia. Quite unsurprisingly, therefore, embarrassing incidents took place, for which Abdullah Badawi as chief executive of the government had to shoulder responsibility. Among the faux pas costly to Malaysia’s image as a moderate modern Muslim nation state were: the khalwat raid on a foreign non-Muslim couple on the tourist island of Langkawi in October 2006; the fatwa outlawing yoga to Muslims; the cancellation of the Building Bridges Global Interfaith Seminar scheduled for May 7–11, 2007, despite Abdullah’s support and the agreement of renowned Muslim and Christian scholars and leaders to participate (Fauwaz Abdul Aziz, and Soon Li Tsin 2007; Soon Li Tsin 2007); the leaking via the internet of confidential pictures of improperly dressed couples arrested during a khalwat raid; sexual extortion by religious officials investigating women accused of khalwat; and the arraignment of a Sharia High Court judge in Perak for accepting bribes (Ahmad Fauzi 2009, 180–181). Lamentably, the transmutation from an Islamic to an Islamist bureaucracy happened at the expense of Islamic intellectual growth, as evidenced by the priority placed on banning rather than debating unorthodox literature. Islamic modernist and spiritual discourses bore the brunt of such proscription, some of which arguably flout human rights, as proven for instance by the civil court’s lifting of the ban on SIS scholar Norani Othman’s book, Muslim Women and the Challenge of Islamic Extremism (Marina Mahathir 2007; Surin 2007; Gooch 2010).

The Perak mufti Harussani Zakaria’s claim that Malay-Muslims were being besieged with all-out attempts to induce their youth to leave their birth religion had polarized Malaysian society along ethno-religious lines at an alarming rate since Mahathir’s era. But Harussani was not new to such controversy. From the beginning of Abdullah’s administration, he unabashedly condemned entertainment events such as TV3’s Sure Heboh carnival as unlawful in Islam. He
also proposed that those diagnosed with AIDS be quarantined on remote islands, and that the hitherto unproblematic practice of joint-religious celebrations be reviewed on the basis of Sharia (Johan Jaafar 2006). But figures compiled from actual research showed that fewer Muslims had left Islam than was originally thought to be the case (Selvarani 2006). Moreover, there was a relatively low turnover rate at the faith rehabilitation centre in Ulu Yam, Selangor, operated by JAKIM under the Prime Minister’s Department (Zainah Anwar 2006). Abdullah Badawi, somewhat ensnared by his own indulgence of conservative ulama, flatly rejected Harussani’s proposal to ban joint religious festivals on the basis that they were social rather than religious functions (Vasudevan 2006). But at the societal level, the damage was more serious than anticipated. Just four months later, a Sharia department official of the insurance firm Takaful Malaysia created a furore by sending an email exhorting fellow Muslims to cease offering greetings to their Hindu friends on the Hindu festival of Divali (better known in Malaysia as Deepavali, following South Indian usage).

Still to recover from the few “body-snatching” episodes that pitted them against various faces of the burgeoning Islamic bureaucracy, the passions of Malaysian Hindus were permanently inflamed by the forcible destruction of temples to make way for development. This put them at loggerheads with the UMNO-dominated local authorities. Mobilizing under the banner of the unregistered HINDRAF, Hindus claimed that from early 2006 until June 2007 alone, up to 79 temples in several states had been razed to the ground or served with demolition notices. On June 30, 2007, HINDRAF protested via a petition sent to the office of the Attorney-General. The reputation of BN-UMNO state administrations as caring governments was permanently damaged, however, when on October 30, 2007, the municipal authorities tore down a historic temple in Kampung Rimba Jaya, Shah Alam, Selangor, despite Abdullah Badawi’s poignant plea to defer the demolition, and MIC President Samy Vellu’s protests, especially since Divali was only one week away. The explosive HINDRAF demonstrations, starting from the hallowed Hindu site in Batu Caves, Selangor, on November 25, 2007, was by then a fait accompli. Islamist conservative elements within the bureaucracy had prevailed even over ruling politicians, with frightening ramifications for ethno-religious relations.

The demise of Islam Hadhari

As Abdullah Badawi’s administration staggered on from 2006, it became ever clearer that Islam Hadhari’s failure was inevitable, given its disappointing disconnect between theory and practice, between what was portrayed as lofty civilizational ideals and poor implementation by religious officials who had neither a knowledge-driven appreciation of it nor concern for its future. In short, even before Abdullah’s tenure as prime minister had reached its expiry date, Islam Hadhari was already a spent force. His leading of the BN and UMNO to disastrous election results in 2008 tarnished his reputation forever, practically putting an end to Islam Hadhari. As soon as it became obvious that Islam Hadhari would not be able to survive Abdullah’s embattled premiership, its death knell was sounded by outspoken figures from the religious bureaucracy and from all sides of the political divide. Enthusiasm to pursue its cause swiftly evaporated as the certainty of Abdullah’s exit from power inched nearer. Yet, in retrospect, even in its honeymoon period, Islam Hadhari was richer in hype than in substance, never wholeheartedly embraced by ordinary Malaysians of all persuasions, although parroted out of deference to authority. No tears accompanied its steady demise. Najib Razak’s assurance that he would continue Islam Hadhari after assuming the premiership was given more out of respect for Abdullah than for any programmatic reason (Shahanaaz Habib 2008).

Today, Islam Hadhari is unheard of even as a government slogan, having been overtaken by Najib’s One Malaysia scheme. Only Abdullah, in his intermittent statements to the media, speaks...
of it approvingly. At the international level, only Malaysia’s Western allies recognized Islam Hadhari as reassuring evidence that Malaysia was not going down the path of extremism in a global order increasingly influenced by the US-led Global War on Terror. The response from Middle Eastern heartlands of Islam was lukewarm at best (Alles 2010, 19–20). In his final press conference as prime minister, Abdullah did not hide his disappointment that Islam Hadhari had metamorphosed into a seemingly repressive mechanism:

> It is a big problem – overseas the idea is welcome. Even Indonesia. But here it is all in a mess. Because we are fighting each other politically. Some PAS members do not like the idea. It is a battle that goes on. Changing of the mind. To do anything like that is not easy. (Cheah 2009)

Abdullah’s quoting the example of Indonesia is significant in view of the atmosphere of more open appreciation of diverse Islamic discourses there, as shown by the productiveness of its “liberal Islam” scholars. Small wonder, though, that some conservatives viewed Islam Hadhari as no more than a reincarnation of liberal-cum-neo-modernist Islam as propagated in Indonesia (Bustamam-Ahmad 2011, 113–114; Muhamad Ali 2011, 20–21). Abdullah’s foregrounding of Islam Hadhari was seen in a similar manner to the indulgence of former presidents B. J. Habibie and Abdurrahman Wahid in neo-modernist Islamic discourses whose genealogy runs to prominent thinkers Nurcholish Majid (1939–2005) and Harun Nasution (1919–98) (Ahmad Fauzi 2012, 257–262). Unfortunately for Abdullah, however, the Islamist intelligentsia entrusted with making Islam Hadhari a success lacked both the intellectual sophistication and the fortitude required to present and apply the grand scheme in universal terms (Ahmad Fauzi 2008, 232–233). While the roots of liberal and neo-modernist Islam can be traced back to genuine intellectual stirrings at grassroots level, even if from a somewhat isolated segment of society, Islam Hadhari, by contrast, “woefully unexplained and unelaborated…discursively underdeveloped and intellectually impoverished” as it was (Kessler 2008, 73), lacked popular legitimacy by having originated from and being fully reliant on the government for its implementation (Bustamam-Ahmad 2011, 122).

Since Najib Razak’s assumption of the premiership in April 2009, Islamist conservatism has continued to drive a wedge between Muslims and non-Muslims. Issues involving Christians have been particularly worrying. The High Court decision of December 2009 permitting the use of the nomenclature “Allah” in Catholic Malay language publications triggered arson attacks on churches around the Klang valley in January 2010 (Maznah Mohamad 2010, 521–523). Christian discontent was caused by the Home Affairs Ministry’s confiscation of Malay-language Bibles, which were finally released but only after being stamped with the words “For Christianity” in large print (Aruna 2011; Carvalho 2011). Following Utusan Malaysia’s headline news on an alleged conspiracy by opposition politicians and some priests to make Christianity Malaysia’s official religion, PEMBELA issued a statement claiming that Islam was under grave threat from aggressive Christian evangelization (Shazwan Mustafa Kamal 2011). Raising tension further, PERKASA declared its readiness to launch a crusade against subversive Christian influence (Aidila Razak 2011).

In the aftermath of GE13 in May 2013, which saw the BN continuing in the doldrums with its failure to regain a two-thirds parliamentary majority, tension has accelerated with regard to an alleged intensification of Christian missionary activities among Muslims and abuse of Muslim prayer facilities for non-Muslim worship purposes. On October 14, 2013, the Court of Appeal momentously overturned the High Court’s 2009 verdict allowing the use of the word “Allah” to refer to God in the Malay language section of The Herald, enforcement of which had been delayed pending the government’s appeal against it. In ruling otherwise, the three-judge bench opined that the term “Allah” was not integral to the faith and practice of Christianity. The verdict immediately put the vast numbers of indigenous Christians of Sabah
and Sarawak in a dilemma, as they had been using the term in their native language liturgies for generations, even before the incorporation of their states into Malaysia. Catholic Archbishop Murphy Pakiam was forthright in denouncing the ruling as amounting to a persecution of Christians.  

Fearing a backlash from Sabahan and Sarawakian Christians, who had overwhelmingly backed the BN in the two most recent general elections of 2008 and 2013, cabinet members from the Borneo states sought to assure them that the verdict applied only to The Herald, and did not affect their religious practices in local churches. The Home Affairs Minister and the Prime Minister later joined the damage limitation exercise by affirming the limited applicability of the verdict, but such antics were dismissed by opposition figures as lip service to merely salvage the Sabahan and Sarawakian votes, besides being disputed by veteran legal experts.

Concluding remarks

This article has outlined the vicissitudes undergone by Islam Hadhari, the scheme that became the mainstay of the administration of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, from its beginning until its end. By focusing on the relationship between Islam and conservatism, we have argued that the failure of Islam Hadhari may be attributed to the rise of reactionary Islamist conservatives, made up essentially of four groups: UMNO ultra-conservatives; opposition party Islamists; a nascent civil society; and religious bureaucrats. On some issues, they combined as a united force against the inclusive, moderate and tolerant message presented by Islam Hadhari. They contributed in no small measure to the erosion of Islam Hadhari’s legitimacy, as demonstrably reflected in the BN’s, UMNO’s and Abdullah’s own loss of popular support in the twelfth general election in 2008.

Since his elevation to the premiership, Abdullah Badawi’s successor, Najib Razak, has been at pains to mollify Islamist conservatives, who at times seem to threaten the inclusive path of his One Malaysia scheme. His primary concern has been to satisfy all political stakeholders, each with his or her own vision and interpretation for Malaysia and its political variables, often competing with one another. Up to now, Najib has preferred ambivalence and rhetoric, emphasizing his reformist credentials on the one hand and placating conservative factions within UMNO and the Islamist civil society on the other. In the meantime, Islamist conservatives have become increasingly united in their stance that Malaysian Islam is under siege despite constitutional provisions safeguarding it, as allegedly indicated by the existence of a carefully designed plan to encourage Muslim youngsters to leave Islam. The Islamist conservatives, for their part, generally support the unofficial dogma of Malay supremacy, which Najib neither clearly disowns nor espouses. Najib prefers to hold the middle ground, contributing to the prevailing state of what anthropologist Shamsul Amri Baharuddin once called “stable tension” (Shamsul 2004, 121). With belligerent perceptions dominating interaction between Malay-Muslims and non-Muslims, ethno-religious conflict does not show any encouraging signs of receding in the near future. By contrast, Islamist conservatism is enjoying its heyday in Malaysia.

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Notes

1. From 1957 until 1969, the ruling coalition was known as the Alliance (Perikatan), comprising UMNO, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). Following racial riots in Kuala Lumpur in May 1969, a state of emergency was declared, parliament was suspended and a National Operations Council (MAGERAN: Majlis Gerakan Negara) took over the reins of government until the restoration of parliament in 1971. Since 1974, the coalition has been renamed as Barisan Nasional, with the inclusion of smaller component parties from Sabah and Sarawak.

2. ‘Islamist’ here refers to advocates of organized political action designed to establish Islam as the supreme creed of a polity and social order (see Ahmad Fauzi 2010, 170 n. 1).

3. On a spectrum of religio-political thought, conservatism and fundamentalism bear similar traits. Nonetheless, the present authors feel that, in the Malaysian context, conservatism better captures the mood on the ground, not to mention the highly pejorative connotations conveyed by the term “fundamentalism.”


5. Abdullah’s paternal grandfather, Mecca-born Haji Abdullah Fahim (1870–1961) – a towering figure in UMNO’s religious section – has been credited with having chosen the date of Malay independence, August 31, 1957, based on its equivalent date in the Islamic calendar. Abdullah’s father, Haji Ahmad Badawi (1907–78), was a religious teacher who represented UMNO as Penang state legislative assembly member for Kepala Batas from 1959 until his death.


25. Crown Prince of Perak, Raja Nazrin Shah reacted strongly: “I am very sad that people can be so petty. These are unnecessary distractions when there are more pressing matters that deserve our attention” (Wan Hamidi Hamid 2006b).
30. Penang has two Deputy Chief Ministers, the other being Dr P. Ramasamy of DAP.
32. See Nurul Nazirin
33. See
34. See
35. See
36. See
37. See
38. See
39. See
41. The Sharia High Court judge in question, Hassan Basri, was found guilty in December 2010 and fined and sentenced to 10 years in prison.
43. See “Takaful Apologises over E-mail.” The Star, October 14, 2006.


49. See the statement by Dr Abdul Shukor Hussein, Chairman of the National Fatwa Committee, “Denigration of Islam is rising in this country because of lax law enforcement. As a result, adherents of other religions are not afraid of mocking Islam which is this country’s official religion” (“Percaya kes hina Islam dirancang.” Berita Harian, August 13, 2013).


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