

Repoliticisation of Islam in Southeast Asia

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Summary

In the aftermath of a series of catalytic events which pitted the West against the Muslim world as we enter the new millennium, Western-based strategists and policy-makers have rekindled arguments postulating political Islam to be a threat to Western hegemony in an increasingly divided world. Long regarded as embodiments of tolerant Islam which peacefully co-existed with modernisation and trappings of multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, Southeast Asian states unexpectedly aroused much attention as potential breeding grounds for Muslim radicals. Rising occurrences of Islamist-related terrorist violence in Southeast Asia have been cited as evidence of surging radicalism among Southeast Asian Muslims. Acknowledging the challenge of radical Islam to the generally moderate approach of Southeast Asian Muslims, analysts have been inclined to locate the origins of such an obtrusive phenomenon to transnational contacts and networks formed in an increasingly globalised world. Such an attitude is reflected in the overblown military crusade against Al Qaeda and a fervent campaign to root out its affiliates in Southeast Asia. Without discounting the significance of such transnational connections in politicising Islam in Southeast Asia in a direction away from moderation, this paper, citing examples mostly from Malaysia and Indonesia as Muslim-majority states of the region, seeks to deconstruct the phenomenon in a way that gives due recognition to local factors in re-igniting political Islam. The local factors, however, were not insular in the sense of being disconnected from the globalising process. Social and economic changes at grass-roots levels are more important in the long term than catalytic events in ensuring whether or not responses to rapid political mutations could be maintained. These changes interacted with government policies vis-à-vis Islam and Muslims – policies which were themselves influenced by globalisation, with multiple understandings attached to the notion.

Keywords: Islam, politics, Malaysia, Indonesia, terrorism

1 Introduction

As the world entered the new millennium, a series of catalytic events pitted the West against the Muslim world in what has come to be viewed as an increasingly uncomfortable relationship that augurs ill for the future of humankind. Despite past efforts by scholars such as Ayoob (1981) and Esposito (1992) to debunk exaggerated conjectures of an impending or existing global Islamic conspiracy against Western powers, the disturbing prognostication of a ‘clash of civilisations’ between Islam and the West, as introduced by Huntington (1993) and fanned by the

popular media in the 1990s,¹ was lent credence by tectonic developments originating from the devastating terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Arlington on 11 September 2001 (hereafter 9/11). In an attempt to ferret out those responsible for masterminding the strikes, the USA, supported by multinational forces mainly from Western countries, aggressively pursued wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, both of whose governments were alleged to have collaborated with Islamist² terrorists and shielded weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) for future use by terrorist elements. The military campaigns, which successfully ousted the Saddam Hussein- and Taliban-led regimes and destroyed operational bases of the Al Qaeda terrorist network, were part of an unprecedented global war on terrorism (“GWOT”).

In accomplishing GWOT’s short-term goals, the long-term consequences of the USA’s over-militarised response to 9/11 have been disastrous. Relations between Muslims and the West have considerably deteriorated, as reported early this year by the World Economic Forum (WEF)-commissioned survey, *Islam and the West: Annual Report on the State of Dialogue* (2008).³ Heightened distrust of the US and its allies among the world’s Muslims puts at risk future solicitation of grass-roots Muslim support in their endeavour to expunge the terrorist threat emanating from extremist or radical Muslim quarters. The USA’s conduct of GWOT has therefore been chastised by foreign-policy analysts as being less than holistic, neglecting the ideological battle to win the hearts and minds of lay Muslims and implementing an aggregation strategy of lumping together all forms of terrorism, hence running the risk of creating further enemies (Kilcullen 2005, Desker and Acharya 2006). To many Muslim minds, inflammatory rhetoric by Western leaders against the perceived dangers of militant Islam merely serves to confirm the impression that Islam has replaced communism as the Western world’s utmost opponent in its fight

¹ See for example, 'Islam and the West', *The Economist*, 22 December 1990, 6 August 1994; Charles Krauthammer, 'The New Crescent of Crisis: Global Intifada', *Washington Post*, 16 February 1990; Fergus Bordewich, 'A Holy War Heads Our Way', *Reader's Digest*, January 1995; Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'The lesson of Algeria: Islam is indivisible', *The Independent*, 6 January 1995; Patrick Bishop, 'Islam's shadow spreads', *Daily Telegraph*, 20 February 1995; Christopher Dickey, 'Muslim Europe', *Newsweek*, 29 May 1995; Rajeev Syal and Christopher Morgan, 'Muslims set to outnumber Anglicans', *The Sunday Times*, 11 May 1997. For an Islamic overview of the Western media onslaught against Islam until this decade, see Tamimi (1996).

² The term 'Islamist' in this article refers to a proponent of Islamism – political action designed to establish Islam as the supreme creed of a polity and social order. The method employed for such action, whether violent or non-violent, is what differentiates between the moderate and the radical Islamist. This departs from the tendency of some Western-based authors to too readily categorise proponents of a greater role for *shariah* (Islamic law) in national political affairs as 'radicals'. See for instance Sukma (2003: 348).

³ The report is available at www.weforum.org/pdf/C100/Islam_West.pdf. For summaries of the findings, see Abdus Sattar Ghazzali, 'Islam-West division is worsening', AMP Report – 22 January 2008, http://www.amperspective.com/html/islam-west_division_worsening.html; and 'Report issued on Muslim-West relations', <http://www.arabamericanews.com/news/index.php?mod=article&cat=World&article=896> (both accessed on 31 October 2008).

to retain post-Cold War global hegemony. For example, President George W. Bush, in addressing graduating cadets of the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point, New York in May 2006, compared “violent Islamic extremism” to communism and caricatured the extremists as “followers of a murderous ideology that despises freedom, crushes all dissent, has territorial ambitions, and pursues totalitarian aims”.⁴ Similarly, British Prime Minister Tony Blair warned his countrymen to brace themselves for a generation-long struggle against militant Islam, which was deemed as an opponent similar to “revolutionary communism in its early and most militant phase”.⁵

9/11 was thus a watershed event in unleashing novel features re-defining terms of relationship between the USA and Europe on the one hand, and Muslims, whether domiciled within or outside the West, on the other (Savage 2004, Singer 2006: 415-416, 422). 9/11’s significance in re-orientating global affairs is underscored by the ensuing emergence of scholarly publications which purport to seek a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of political Islam in the age of globalisation and its attendant relationship with the Western world (cf. Van de Weyer 2001, Rabasa et al. 2004). The New York-based Social Science Research Council (SSRC) has even devoted a page of its website to feature essays by leading social scientists “to bring theoretical and empirical knowledge to bear on the events of Sept. 11, their precursors, and what comes after”.⁶

2 The Western world and Southeast Asian Islam: the post-9/11 discourse

Until the 1980s, Western scholarship concerning the Muslim world was dominated by academics who were inclined to analyse Islam as a Middle Eastern-derived religion and Muslim societies as invariably amenable to Arab influences. The so-called Islamic periphery – Muslim-populated territories other than the long stretch of lands from the western end of the Maghreb to the eastern end of Iraq where Arabic is the primary language – was treated as a reactive participant to changes in the Arabic-speaking core rather than as a prime mover in developments of the *ummah* (global Muslim community). “The Arabs and Islam”, wrote Edward Said, “for almost a thousand years together stood for the Orient [...] because one could discuss Europe’s experience of the Near Orient, or of Islam, apart from its experience of the Far Orient” (Said 1978: 17). Beyond the culturally biased orientalist paradigm, the lack of interest in the Islamic periphery has been variously attributed to its relative geopolitical insignificance due to an absence of the politics of oil and its supposedly

⁴ Quoted by General Wayne A. Downing, Distinguished Chair of CTC, in his foreword to *The Militant Ideology Atlas*, a CTC-commissioned study of the most influential *jihadi* ideologues, edited by William McCants (2006).

⁵ Britain must stay on military frontline – Blair’, *The Star*, 13 January 2007.

⁶ ‘After Sept. 11: Perspectives from the Social Sciences’, <http://www.ssrc.org/sept11/> (accessed on 1 November 2008).

less vigorous manifestation of 'political Islam' (Esposito 1987: 11, Ayubi 1991: ix). Such a tendency to equate Islam with the Middle East, argues Esposito (1987: 10-11, 1992: 13), has blinded many ordinary Westerners to the fact that the largest Muslim populations in the world are to be found in Asia, where the diverse roles played by Islam in public life are also fully manifested.

Within the Islamic periphery, Southeast Asian Islam has had to endure bias not only from Western academic circles, but also from the Muslim brethren in the Middle Eastern core. There arguably exists in the Arab core the prevailing impression of Islam in Southeast Asia as being popular and syncretic as opposed to the scriptural and orthodox Islam of the Arabs, the incorporation of pre-Islamic accretions allegedly rendering Islamic faith and practice in the periphery less pure (Mehmet 1990: 20, von der Mehden 1993: xi). Developed through centuries of inequitable interaction, such a lop-sided view has been accentuated by the dearth of research institutes in the Middle East devoted to the study of Asia and Asians (Abaza 2007). It is therefore hardly surprising that even as political Islam began making a global impact in the 1970s and 1980s, the average Westerner was virtually ignorant of developments within Southeast Asian Islam. As testified by von der Mehden with reference to Americans: "... the [resurgence] movement in Indonesia and Malaysia is totally unknown outside the academic and corporate communities" (von der Mehden 1983: 28). Newsom adds: "The fact that Indonesians and Malaysians feel strongly about aspects of the Arab-Israeli problem comes as a surprise to many Americans" (Newsom 1987: 7). It is thus apt here to echo the call made by the eminent scholar of Islamic law, M. B. Hooker, for Islam in Southeast Asia to be understood beginning "with data from the area rather than with some Middle Eastern and theological formulation of Islam" (Hooker 1983: vii).

Within official policy-making circles, a serious effort to apprehend political Islam in Southeast Asia was not embarked on until after 9/11. The destruction of Al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan through Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001 shifted the attention of GWOT architects and strategists to Southeast Asia as a potential hotbed of Islamist terrorism (Abramowitz and Bosworth 2003: 120, 128-129). The sudden interest in Southeast Asia was prompted by intelligence reports claiming that Islamist elements within Malaysia, unbeknownst to and initially denied by its government, had been facilitating Al Qaeda-linked manoeuvres by providing a haven to meet, transfer illegal funds, procure necessary accoutrements and plan terrorist operations, including 9/11 (Abuza 2002: 443-445, Liow 2004: 246). The designation of Southeast Asia as the 'second front' in GWOT, however, was most probably related to the perceptible rise of radical Islamist factions of Indonesian origin, which, in turn, had extensive links throughout the region, constantly liaised with Al Qaeda via overlapping members and was prepared to resort to violence in order to achieve its pan-Islamist aim of establishing an Islamic state which transcended present borders in Southeast Asia (Rabasa 2004b: 394). The main focus was on *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI: Islamic Congregation), whose plots were unravelled by

the large-scale arrests and subsequent detention and interrogation of its members in 2001-02 in Singapore (Government of Singapore 2003, Desker 2003a). Tracing its ideological roots to S. M. Kartosuwirjo's unsuccessful rebellion against President Sukarno to install an Indonesian Islamic State (NII: *Negara Islam Indonesia*) in the 1950s, JI was founded and led by Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Basyir, both of whom fled Indonesia in 1985 to avoid repression authorised by President Suharto, returning from Malaysia only after the collapse of Suharto's regime in 1998. By the time JI's organisation assumed a formal structure in the mid-1990s, it had built cellular networks linking recruits from Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and the Philippines. Independent Islamic boarding schools⁷ preaching radical ideology and financially sound front companies were instrumental in JI's vitality. JI adroitly exploited Southeast Asian countries' lax financial regulations, porous borders and weak security controls to transform the region into an economic-cum-operational conduit for its illegal activities, simultaneously sowing connections with Middle Eastern funders and Al Qaeda, with whom some JI members shared affinities as alumni of the military *jihad* (holy war) in Afghanistan in the 1980s (Abuza 2002: 450-459, Ramakrishna 2005: 348-357, Gunaratna 2005: 68-70, 75-79). The uncovering of JI cells in Singapore was a landmark discovery for counter-terrorism pundits. According to Hoffman, the Singaporean JI cell embodied "a new breed of post 9/11 terrorist: men animated and inspired by Al Qaeda and bin Laden, but who neither belong specifically to Al Qaeda nor directly follow orders by bin Laden", and as such, together with other radical Southeast Asian Islamists, potentially represented "an even more insidious and pernicious threat than Al Qaeda" (Hoffman 2004: 550).

In Indonesia, the government was in denial mode as regards the existence of JI cells until the Bali bombings of October 2002, followed in quick succession by devastating bombings of the J. W. Marriot Hotel and outside the Australian embassy in Jakarta in August 2003 and September 2004 respectively. In fact, some government figures and influential *ulama* (Islamic scholars) affiliated to the two largest Islamic organisations, the traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama (NU: Renaissance of *Ulama*) and moderately modernist Muhammadiyah, admitted to having relationships with the many militant Islamist *laskars* (militias) that sprouted in post-New Order Indonesia. An oft-quoted example is that of Hamzah Haz, leader of the coalition of Islamist parties known as Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP: United Development Party) and Indonesia's Vice-President in Megawati Sukarnoputri's government (2001-2004). Hamzah had cordially met Laskar Jihad leader Jaafar Umar Talib upon the latter's detention for alleged incitement of violence during the Christian-Muslim Maluku troubles in 2000-01, and publicly defended JI mentor Abu Bakar Basyir on several occasions, shifting the blame for terrorist conspiracies in Indonesia to the USA's own military incursions into Muslim lands (Rabasa 2004b:

⁷ Commonly known as *pondoks* in Malaysia and *pesantrens* in Indonesia.

396, Mujani and Liddle 2004: 109). Such equivocation, according to Abuza (2004: 10, 18, 28-29, 37, 42), extended to parliamentarians and civil servants in the security and legal services and beyond the Bali bombings, even if non-violent Islamic organisations' stance against Islamist terrorism had considerably hardened. Among mainstream *ulama*, those said to have cultivated ties with radical groups or encouraged militancy included Din Syamsuddin, head of Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI: Council of Indonesian *Ulama*) and Amien Rais, erstwhile leader of Muhammadiyah (1995-2000) and chairman of Partai Amanat Nasional (PAN: National Mandate Party) (1999-2004) (Abuza 2004: 20, 37; Adeney-Risakotta 2005: 332). Observing the disturbing trend of a disproportionately high number of radical Islamists coming from within the fold of the Muhammadiyah, Western analysts have urged a re-examination of the Muhammadiyah, in particular its willingness to toe a more Wahhabi-Salafi⁸ line of thinking in exchange for scholarships and financial assistance from Saudi Arabia (Abuza 2004: 48-49).

If 9/11 had started the transformation of Western policy-makers' perceptions of Southeast Asia, the Bali bombings apparently confirmed such sentiments and stiffened the USA's resolve to combat Islamist terrorism in the region. In contrast with previously sour relations, bilateral *rapprochement* has taken place, for example, between the USA and Malaysia, which, despite its measured criticism of GWOT, has immensely benefited from greater defence and security co-operation with the USA (Capie 2004: 230-233). Under US patronage, Malaysia agreed to host the Southeast Asian Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT), established within a month of the Bali tragedy (Tan and Ramakrishna 2004: 95).⁹ While Malaysia has arguably been the "biggest political winner in US-Southeast Asia relations since 9/11" (Camroux and Okfen 2004: 170), the two other 'potential Al Qaeda hubs' identified by the USA, viz. the Philippines and Indonesia, also gained

⁸ The term 'Wahhabi' is derived from the name of the reformer of Nejd in present-day Saudi Arabia, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1787), who struck up a strategic alliance with a local warrior, Muhammad ibn Saud (d. 1765), in 1744. Tribal and religious forces thus united and expanded territories under their control to lay the basis for the first Saudi state. Wahhabi puritanism strove to cleanse the Islamic faith from *shirk* (idolatry) and *bid'ah* (innovations), and equated heretical Muslims with belligerent infidels. Defeated by the Ottomans in 1819, the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance re-emerged in the 1820s, but was defeated again in 1891. The third Saudi state could be dated back to 1926, when Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud and pro-Wahhabi warriors called the Ikhwan conquered the Hijaz. In 1932, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was proclaimed. Salafism is the contemporary movement to reassert the ideals of the pious generations of the first 300 years following the death of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in 633, but is essentially a Saudi-derived reincarnation of Wahhabism. Being strict monotheists, Salafis deplore the use of the term 'Wahhabi' to describe their movement of reform. In any case, the employment of such terms is highly contestable, but has increasingly gained currency in Western analyses of Islamism.

⁹ A perusal of courses and seminars organised by SEARCCT reveals that most were conducted in collaboration with Western governments and a handful directly with the USA State Department; see http://www.searcct.gov.my/site1/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12&Itemid=26 (accessed on 3 November 2008). Nonetheless, Malaysia has strenuously denied overt USA interference in the running of SEARCCT; see Ramakrishna and Tan (2003: 25).

by greater USA attention. USA resumed military ties with both countries, resulting in the flow of millions of dollars worth of aid into their governments' coffers. Manpower in the form of USA special forces personnel, who were to function as military advisors rather than ground troops, were dispatched to the Philippines to help combat Abu Sayyaf guerrillas, long suspected of harbouring Al Qaeda connections and Malaysian nexuses (Capie 2004: 229-230, 233-235; Rabasa 2004b: 394-395, 401-402).¹⁰

In many ways, the Bali bombings represented a turning point for Indonesia's political elites and Muslim groups to take a firmer stance against hard-line Islamist radicalism. In both emotional and policy-making terms, Bali had a greater impact than 9/11. For the masses, Bali was a wake-up call which galvanised national sentiments against the macabre approach that radical Islamists, who were none other than their fellow countrymen, were prepared to adopt in furtherance of their aims (Hafidz 2003: 388-393, Rabasa 2004b: 397-399, Adeney-Risakotta 2005: 330). However, Bali also provoked a less than benign response from the West, whose media were quick to proclaim Southeast Asia as a 'terrorist haven' and whose governments issued travel warnings to tourists contemplating excursions to the region (Ramakrishna and Tan 2003: 2). It became clear that US policy vis-à-vis Southeast Asia had been reorientated towards the 'second front' discourse, which looks at Southeast Asia through the prism of GWOT. On a larger scale, the new approach was characterised by shifts from geo-economic to geo-political priorities and from multilateralism to unilateralism. An early indication of such shifts was the transformation of the first two post-9/11 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summits in Mexico (October 2001) and Shanghai (October 2003) from merely an avenue to further trade liberalisation and market deregulation to a forum for GWOT coalition-building (Camroux and Okfen 2004: 165). In relation to Southeast Asia, it has been shown that the USA's application of its '4D strategy' as outlined by its National Strategy for Countering Terrorism (NSCT), released in February 2003, evinced a military-operational bias which does more harm than good in the long term by potentially inviting a general Muslim backlash (Tan and Ramakrishna 2004: 100-101, Ramakrishna 2003: 310-311).¹¹ This reinforced the methods designed to disrupt terrorist networks outlined in the USA-ASEAN Joint Declaration on Combating Terrorism signed in August 2002.¹² The USA's

¹⁰ On Abu Sayyaf and its purported Al Qaeda linkages, see Chalk (2002: 113-114, 117).

¹¹ The latest version of the document, the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, released in September 2006, rephrases the '4D strategy' as the 'four priorities of action', which are: to prevent attacks by terrorist networks, to deny WMD to rogue states and terrorist allies who seek to use them, to deny terrorists the support and sanctuary of rogue states, and to deny terrorists control of any nation they would use as a base and launching pad for terror. Needless to say, the military-operational bias is still evident; see <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nsct/2006/nsct2006.pdf> (accessed on 3 November 2008).

¹² The declaration commits the USA and its ASEAN signatories to, *inter alia*, improve the sharing of intelligence and terrorist financing information, to enhance liaisons amongst their law enforcement

preference for a direct rather than an indirect strategy in fighting terrorism in Southeast Asia has consequently been reproved by security analysts writing from within the region (cf. Desker and Ramakrishna 2002, Ramakrishna and Tan 2003: 16).

Dissenting voices within Western intelligence communities, however, have frowned upon the US's oversimplified paradigm in approaching the recent challenge of political Islam in Southeast Asia. John Gershman, for instance, had questioned "Washington's tendency to lump together the various Islamist groups in Southeast Asia" early on, thus ignoring the facts that most of them were non-violent and were perfectly capable of disagreeing with Al Qaeda while simultaneously disapproving of the US's Afghanistan war. In his view, the USA's designation of Southeast Asia as the 'second front' in GWOT was misplaced and problematic (Gershman 2002: 62-63). The inability to deconstruct or refusal to acknowledge the myriad shades of post-9/11 political Islam in Southeast Asia has steered recent Western scholarship in the direction of a new, yet misguided, orthodoxy, departing significantly from past orthodoxy which posited Southeast Asian Islam as the quintessence of peaceful and tolerant Islam – an 'Islam with a smiling face'¹³ which prioritised spiritualism over legalism and was perennially prepared to accommodate the concurrent existence of heathen cultures and practices. The emergence of this new orthodoxy has been the result of recent Western discourse on Islam in Southeast Asia being dominated by scholars who overwhelmingly stress security dimensions in their analyses and whose sources suggest that they enjoy distinct access to regional and national intelligence agencies (Wright-Neville 2004b: 5-6). Such agencies might have their own agendas in portraying the presence of a dangerous Islamist threat emanating from Southeast Asia, with global networks reputedly assuming more importance than local influences in shaping the character and direction of Islamist groups. This relationship is mutually beneficial: while the intelligence community derives legitimacy for its information-gathering forays from scholarly research which purports to establish the lurking presence of a threat, the scholars are elevated into the unassailable position of opinion shapers and experts, with wide access to the media and enviable opportunities to seek grants, fellowships, scholarships and resources for further research.

agencies, to strengthen capacity-building efforts through training and education, to provide assistance regarding means of transport, border and immigration controls, to comply with all United Nations resolutions or declarations on international terrorism and to explore mutually beneficial additional areas of co-operation; see <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/ot/12428.htm> (accessed on 3 November 2008).

¹³ A term attributed to Azyumardi Azra, Professor of History at Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN: State Islamic University) Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta, Indonesia. A leading scholar who strenuously argues that Southeast Asian Muslims have remained essentially pacifist and democratic in spite of recent signs of susceptibility to Wahhabi-Salafi influences, Azra had, in fact, picked up the term from several international media outlets. See Ramakrishna and Tan (2003: 31) and Azra (2003).

A former senior Australian terrorism analyst prior to joining academia, David Wright-Neville (2004b: 5-6), has lamented the inclination of such scholars to rely on government-linked sources such as the strictly controlled media in Southeast Asia and unverifiable contacts. He quotes the example of linkages that analysts have laboriously sought to draw out between the mainstream opposition Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS: Islamic Party of Malaysia) and the clandestine Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM: Mujahidin Group of Malaysia), which the Malaysian authorities have stigmatised as Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (Militant Group of Malaysia), in an attempt to prove that PAS harbours terrorist connections (Wright-Neville 2004a: 34-35). Such proven connections would benefit the government in its intention to discredit PAS and draw away crucial support from it in Malaysia's highly contestable electoral politics, but by relying on mainly government-controlled sources, the establishment of such 'sinister' linkages appears to be a *fait accompli*. Wright-Neville (2004a) shows that political Islam in Southeast Asia can be usefully deconstructed by distinguishing between activists, militants and terrorists without denying the potential of Islamists from any variant moving to another. It is the recent propensity of activists and militants to become militants and terrorists respectively within an ascending spectrum of radicalism that counter-terrorism efforts should seek to investigate.

Such typologies, while not claiming infallibility, give more focus for policy-makers to concoct an anti-terrorism strategy which takes into account the complexities and nuances of Southeast Asian Islam. They would obviate or at least reduce the tendency to look at the repoliticisation of Islam in Southeast Asia from troubling security lenses, with their grim projection of the future. Such a tendency, sometimes overlooking profound vicissitudes of Southeast Asian Islam which past scholars have readily identified, places both the West and Muslims in Southeast Asia at a loss. As noted by Singer (2006: 420), the USA's incapacity to understand the dynamics of core-periphery interaction in the Muslim world has resulted in its missing out on the sophistication and vibrancy of discussions on the role of Islam in public policy as have taken place in Indonesia and Malaysia. "The 9/11 War", Singer reminds us further, will only end "when the United States and the Muslim world see each other not as in conflict but as working towards shared goals" (Singer 2006: 422). Without a doubt, this also applies to the relationship between Europe and the Muslim world.

3 Repoliticisation of Islam in Southeast Asia within the context of globalisation

While it is not wrong to speak of a repoliticisation of Islam in the wake of catalytic events since the new millennium, it may be more useful to locate the phenomenon within a long-term process of Islamic revival or resurgence dating back to the 1970s. In locating sources of the post-9/11 'Islamic radicalism', as it is called, a RAND

(Research and Development) Corporation study instituted by the US Air Force identifies this resurgence as the foremost of ‘processes’ – specifically defined as “developments that occur over an extended period of time and that can have a particular outcome or equilibrium state”. The study distinguishes between processes, ‘conditions’ – “factors that have a permanent or quasi-permanent character” and ‘catalytic events’ – “major developments – wars or revolutions – that changed the political dynamics in a region or country in a fundamental way” (Rabasa 2004a: 36-37). While processes and conditions, being long-term in character, interest the scholar, the Western media and policy-making circles are more easily electrified by short-term catalytic events such as the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Soviet-Afghanistan War (1979-89), the Gulf War of 1991 and 9/11. Since the onset of these events, the global wave of Islamic resurgence has been firmly entrenched as a major discussion topic in both Western academic and propagandist circles, underscored by one common theme, viz. the countervailing impact of political Islam upon the global hegemony of a world order broadly governed by liberal-capitalist socio-economic mores, political democracy and secular international law. The need to elaborate on a developing ‘Islamist threat’ became more urgent in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the consequent downfall of international communism. Islam became a potential obstacle to liberal-capitalism prevailing in a world dominated by democratic governance, under the aegis of a United Nations (UN) propped up by the major powers.

The term ‘globalisation’ became *en vogue* in the 1990s to describe the centripetal shrinking of national borders into a ‘global village’ where technologically driven homogenising processes of economic, social, cultural, political and even intellectual resources take place wittingly or unwittingly. One can therefore perceive globalisation as a standardising mechanism at multiple levels, each reaching uniformity at different stages. In addition, liberal-capitalist ideologues attach deterministic qualities to globalisation, often relating it to the concurrent processes of modernisation and secularisation. The emergence of Islam as a salient mobilising factor in world politics was theoretically problematic as the influence of religion was thought to be inversely related to the above processes. The separation of religion and the state was held to be the inevitable consequence of globalisation. As a matter of fact, within such a paradigm, which had been commonly utilised since the 1950s and 1960s, the role of religion as a whole, not merely Islam, was consigned to oblivion in both the social sciences and practical politics and international relations. The decline of primordial factors such as ethnicity and religion was assumed to go hand in hand with modernisation (Fox 2001: 53-59). In line with such orthodoxy, Muslim intellectuals sought manifold explanations for the twentieth century “decline in Islam [...] as an organised institutional force capable of exerting direct influence on society and the state”, to quote Hisham Sharabi (1965: 27). The Islamist challenge of the 1970s and 1980s mainly from the Middle East was considered to be a temporary hiccup, which in any case had subsided by the mid-1990s, when

observers of political Islam were bold enough to proclaim the “decline of Islamic fundamentalism” (Ahady 1992) and the “failure of political Islam” (Roy 1994). In 1997, *Newsweek* even carried an op-ed which curiously questioned whether the Islamic threat had been overtaken by ‘secularist radicalism’ as the Middle East’s “new form of fundamentalism”.¹⁴ Not until 9/11 would Islamism again be foregrounded as a retrogressive threat to the globalised progression of humanity towards modernity. The difference now was that Islamism was deemed to have undertaken a distinctly violent character, often assumed by lay Westerners to have originated from dynamics within the religion itself.

There is a lot of concern within the *ummah* that such globalisation, as predicated by Western control over the world political economy via global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, has served and will serve as a vehicle to further and ultimately crystallise the dual processes of Americanising and Westernising Muslim societies. Notwithstanding the many facets of globalisation as theoretically pointed out by many authors, the fact of the matter is that the economic aspect holds sway in any discussion of globalisation (Pasha and Samatar 1996: 189-191). In this aspect, Muslim nations have arguably been on the losing end for many centuries. Muslims have had bitter experiences with earlier phases of globalisation associated with colonialism and the consequent humiliation suffered at the hands of Western powers (Moten 2005: 236-246). This humiliation is underlined by the wide gulf between the prosperous West and the downtrodden *ummah*. Many Western-based reports have ascribed the present Muslim insurgency to this glaring disparity in material wealth, fuelling envy and discontent among frustrated urban Muslim youth.¹⁵ A number of them have cited figures from Arab Human Development Reports produced by Middle Eastern social scientists for the UN Development Programme to prove their point (Friedman 2006: 479-490, Singer 2006: 417). The *ulama* have been at pains to provide explanations for the persistent backwardness of the *ummah*, who have been acquainted with the fact that temporal accomplishments were in tandem with and indicative of Islam’s spiritual truth (Burrell 1989: 12). Solutions were sought for within and outside the religion, unleashing a distinct but parallel process of globalisation emphasising Islam’s universal ideals. As the argument goes, with the prevalence of transnational economic structures spelling the practical end of the nation-state (cf. Ohmae 1996), the *ummatic* character of Islamic unity offers Muslims the best interface in their unavoidable engagement with a foreign-imposed quagmire of a liberal-capitalist ‘global village’ (Pasha and Samatar 1996: 196).

¹⁴ Carla Power, ‘Secularist radicalism: Has the Islamic threat been replaced by a new form of fundamentalism in the Middle East?’, *Newsweek*, 14 July 1997.

¹⁵ Cf. Andrew Johnston, ‘Disparities of wealth are seen as fuel for terrorism’, *International Herald Tribune*, 20 December 2001.

Such a response, in the form of a concomitant Islamic globalisation, should not strike us as too surprising, for it can be implicitly derived from traditional Islamic theory of international relations, which divides the world into a *dar al-Islam* (realm of Islam / peace) and a *dar al-harb* (realm of unbelief / war) (Piscatori 1986: 42, 47). Notwithstanding the vast diversity of Muslim populations worldwide, as long as the concept of an *ummah* is given credence, the emergence of a transnational political economy based on relations among the Muslim brethren if not among Islamists cannot be underestimated.¹⁶ At the level of nation-state co-operation, the increasing importance of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in charting the course of recent Muslim states' foreign policies, however tenuous the OIC's hold on them is, is an example of Islamic globalisation, or rather counter-globalisation, reacting to the forces of Western-imposed globalisation (Haynes 2001: 152-156). With respect to Southeast Asia, the existence of these two levels of globalisation has been referred to by Meuleman (2005: 35) and Adeney-Risakotta (2005: 331), among others. Southeast Asia is therefore susceptible to two distinct, yet similarly powerful forces of globalisation, even if these are unequal. Both have influenced the region's recent repoliticisation of Islam, with Southeast Asia conventionally being considered to be at the receiving end of both global nexuses. In both sets of relationships, the rich characteristics which have marked out Southeast Asian Islam as *sui generis* have often been overlooked or given perfunctory mention. On another note, the point about Western-imposed globalisation provoking countervailing responses from the Muslim world should not be stretched too far – as though Islam is the sole non-integrating force in an otherwise rapidly globalising world, a black sheep in the comity of nations. As shown by Haynes (2001: 148-152), globalisation has also raised the profile of the Roman Catholic Church as a transnational actor whose religious significance stubbornly transcends nation-states. Both the Roman Catholic Church and the OIC, Haynes (2001: 157) argues, have gradually and successfully absorbed traits of transnational civil society formations.

4 Repoliticisation of Islam: a Malaysian example of interaction between global and local factors

With the above caveats firmly in mind, it must be admitted that there has indeed been a resurgence of political Islam in Southeast Asia in recent years in a direction away from 'moderation', but the degree to which Islamists vacillate along the moderate-radical spectrum constantly shifts. The roles of globalisation and attendant transnational Islamist networks have been instrumental in steering this recent trend. In Malaysia, where Islamist violence has been very rare (Ahmad Fauzi Abdul

¹⁶ For a recent discussion of the concept of the *ummah* from both Islamic and Western perspectives and its link with the politics of transnational Islam, see Akram (2007). Some Muslim scholars, however, contend that the concept of an *ummah*, as far as contemporary Islamic politics is concerned, is nothing but a myth; see Syed Zainal Abedin (1994: 31), for example.

Hamid 2007a), for instance, in 2001-02, secretive cells of KMM, which was later implicated in the pan-Islamist vision and plots of JI (Government of Singapore 2003: 8-9), were uprooted by the authorities. Through interlocking membership with JI's Malaysian chapter, KMM was alleged to have served as a conduit for Al Qaeda activity in Southeast Asia, for example via the setting up of front companies for the transfer of funds and logistical support for terrorist operations (Abuza 2002: 453-454, 2003: 140-143). KMM's purported leader was Nik Adli Nik Aziz, son of mainstream opposition PAS's *Murshid al-'Am* (General Guide)-cum-Chief Minister of Kelantan – a state on the north-eastern coast of Peninsular Malaysia ruled by PAS since 1990, Nik Aziz Nik Mat. KMM was alleged to have launched attacks on a police station and on non-Muslim religious sites, and to have assassinated Dr. Joe Fernandez, a state assemblyman of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN: National Front) coalition in Kedah, who was notorious for his Christian evangelising activities among Malay-Muslim youths.¹⁷ KMM leaders were invariably Malay-Muslim alumni of the Afghan war, during which they were said to have established contacts with fellow warriors who later pioneered Al Qaeda (Abuza 2003: 136).¹⁸ It was further alleged that in 1999, Nik Adli and a PAS official had attended a JI-initiated meeting together in Petaling Jaya, Selangor, which formed *Rabitatul Mujahidin* – a loose coalition of Southeast Asian militant groups (Government of Singapore 2003: 7, Ramakrishna 2003: 322, 2005: 359). Besides its regional pan-Islamist agenda, KMM was said to have harboured the objectives of maintaining and protecting PAS's struggle for an Islamic state (Kamarulnizam Abdullah 2005: 39-42).

The BN government tried to exploit the Nik Adli link to establish a connection between PAS and transnational militancy, and thus recover political initiative following its massive loss of support from Malay-Muslims who resented Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's unceremonious sacking of his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim in September 1998. This debacle had contributed to PAS's electoral victories in the neighbouring states of Kelantan and Terengganu, thereby raising PAS's international profile among Islamists worldwide. In October 2000, for example, upon invitations from Hasanuddin University and Indonesian NGOs, PAS Deputy President-cum-Terengganu Chief Minister Haji Hadi Awang attended an Islamic congress in Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, to speak on the implementation of Islamic administration and laws in PAS-ruled states (PAS 2003). However, since participants at the congress had included prominent Indonesian militants such as JI mentor Abu Bakar Basyir and JI-affiliated *Laskar Jundullah*

¹⁷ 'Anak Nik Aziz ditangkap: Disyaki antara tokoh terpenting Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia', *Mingguan Malaysia*, 5 August 2001.

¹⁸ See also David Childs, 'In the Spotlight: Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM)', <http://www.cdi.org/program/issue/document.cfm?DocumentID=3109&IssueID=56&StartRow=1&ListRows=10&appendURL=&Orderby=DateLastUpdated&ProgramID=39&issueID=56>, published on 12 August 2005 (accessed on 6 November 2008).

leader Agus Dwikarna, the state-controlled media made a furore out of the trip.¹⁹ PAS President Haji Hadi Awang was also invited as guest of honour to address the Jamaat-i-Islami party in Bangladesh (Farish A. Noor 2004: 650). When the moderately Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP: *Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*) first rose to power in Turkey in November 2002, a PAS delegation paid a courtesy-cum-learning visit to its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.²⁰

By the time 9/11 occurred, PAS had not only cemented transnational links with mainstream Islamist parties adhering to variants of the Egyptian-based Muslim Brotherhood and Pakistani-based Jamaat-i-Islami Islamic state ideologies, but it also disavowed association with militant groups, both local and foreign. This does not deny that elements sympathetic to KMM may have existed in PAS without the PAS leadership's formal blessing or even knowledge, just as the purported KMM-JI connections were said to have been maintained by KMM's single-minded Selangor cell, based on independent liaisons between leaders on both sides (Kamarulnizam Abdullah 2005: 41). Apart from information forcibly gathered from arrests and subsequent detention without trial of KMM and JI activists under the Internal Security Act (ISA), evidence adducing a militant stripe in PAS was spurious. However, following 9/11 and the United States' incursion into Afghanistan, PAS-orchestrated anti-US demonstrations and its decision to throw support behind Osama bin Laden and Afghanistan's Taliban government in its open rallies served the government's intentions of portraying PAS as harbouring a furtive fifth-column agenda (Farish A. Noor 2002: 165-170, 2004: 667-682). Such toying with causes widely regarded as 'extremist' alienated it from both non-partisan Malay Muslims and non-Muslims who had previously supported PAS out of revulsion against abuses committed by the ruling government. The withdrawal of such support contributed to huge setbacks suffered by PAS in the 2004 elections, including losing Terengganu and just barely retaining Kelantan.²¹ It was not until the eve of the 2008 elections, after which PAS had reinvented its moderate image, retracted open advocacy of an Islamic state, participated actively in more general civil-society causes such as the movement for electoral reform and struck an alliance with the multi-racial Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR: People's Justice Party) and Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party (DAP), that it recovered political ground and went on to score stunning electoral victories.²² For the first time in Malaysian

¹⁹ 'Kehadiran Hadi di Makassar bukti Pas cenderung keganasan', *Utusan Malaysia*, 10 February 2003; 'Hadi boleh dikenakan tindakan undang-undang', *Utusan Malaysia*, 11 February 2003.

²⁰ Brendan Pereira, 'PAS Gets Tips From Turkey on How to Win Elections', *The Straits Times*, 5 December 2002.

²¹ For a profound analysis of PAS's defeat in 2004, see Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid (2006).

²² On PAS's revamped image and newly inclusive policies, see for example, 'Before Vote, PAS Drops "Islamic" Malaysia', http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&cid=1203515505407&pagename=Zone-English-News/NWELayout, published on 21 February 2008, and 'PAS New Look Won Malaysian Hearts', http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&cid=1203757

history, the opposition pact managed to deny the ruling coalition a two-thirds majority in Parliament. PAS itself now has twenty-three Members of Parliament (MPs), leads the state governments of Kelantan, Kedah and Perak, and is part of the Selangor state government.

The political ascendancy of PAS in mainstream Malaysian politics over the last ten years or so has been due to a combination of global and local factors. Rising interconnectedness in the global economy rendered Malaysia vulnerable to sudden bouts of economic fluctuations, such as during the 1997-98 regional financial crises, whose aftershocks included political upheaval, which in Malaysia was manifested in the realignment of forces between Islamists and liberal civil society. Such realignments, embodied in the present Pakatan Rakyat (PR: People's Pact) and the Barisan Alternatif (BA: Alternative Front) coalitions in 1999 and 2008 respectively, have made significant inroads in introducing discourses on a 'new [type of] politics' which transcends the divisive issues of race and religion (cf. Loh 2005). Even PAS's own discourse has arguably undergone transformations, without yet reaching equilibrium, with respect to the establishment of a juridical Islamic state. Protestations of PAS's commitment to democracy, at least at the official level, should not be treated as mere rhetoric even if doubts linger. At the same time, as individual panderings towards KMM signify, segments within PAS are not immune to less than democratic influences from global Islamism. PAS's embrace of an *ulama* leadership, as embodied in the establishment of a *Majlis Shura Ulama* (Ulama Consultative Council) consisting of twelve religious scholars and headed by a *Murshid al-'Am*, in spite of the continual existence of the presidential office and the Central Executive Committee (CEC), reflects Iranian influence (Stark 2004: 52-56). PAS leaders have been on record for issuing statements condoning suicide bombing in Palestine and street demonstrations as an election strategy.²³ In July 2008, amidst the uproar regarding attempts to realise UMNO²⁴-PAS talks on the possibility of forming a new pact to safeguard Malay-Muslim unity, it was rumoured that PAS President Haji Hadi Awang left for London to seek advice from Muslim Brotherhood representatives there.²⁵ At the 54th General Assembly a month later, PAS hosted Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood representative Dr. Amman Said as its guest of honour.²⁶ In general, PAS benefited from an overall environment, spurred

851714&pagenam=Zone-English-News/NWELayout, published on 9 March 2008 (both accessed on 6 November 2008).

²³ Interview with Haji Hadi, 'Kepimpinan yang mempunyai ketokohan dalam pelbagai aspek: PAS akan wujud profesional ulama', *Mingguan Malaysia*, 21 September 2003; 'Pilihan raya dan Jalan Raya', *Siasah*, 9-15 May 2007.

²⁴ Acronym for the United Malays National Organisation, the Malay-Muslim and largest component of the ruling BN coalition.

²⁵ Joceline Tan, 'Hadi and Nik Aziz at odds over whether to leave Pakatan', *The Star*, 16 July 2008.

²⁶ Aniz Nazri, 'Dr. Amman Said suntik semangat kepada perwakilan ulama', http://muktamar54.pas.org.my/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=50&Itemid=1, published on 14 August 2008 (accessed on 7 November 2008).

by catalytic events such as 9/11 and the American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, which seemingly put Islam at siege from hostile global forces.

Nonetheless, PAS's political fortunes could not have improved without the presence of long-term local factors, the most important of which is the rise of an increasingly vocal Malay-Muslim middle class, who had coloured the 'new politics' with struggles centring upon universal issues such as participatory democracy, justice and human rights (Saravanamuttu 2001: 113). The creation of this class within a generation owes its origins to state-led development in the form of the New Economic Policy (NEP) enunciated in 1971 to address poverty and economic imbalance among races following ethnic riots in May 1969. The *entrée* of the growing Malay middle class into the upper echelons of PAS has been important to counterbalance the perennially negative image associated with Abdul Hadi Awang's past radicalism.²⁷ PAS was initially treated as the voice of legitimate dissent which could be translated in tangible terms at the polls, but a significant portion joined the party outright. As a result of the social base transformation which has especially affected the Youth and Women's sections of PAS, the past few general assemblies have seen criticisms and counter-criticisms pitting the so-called Young Turks, progressives, professionals and liberals with the Old Guard, conservatives or *ulama*.²⁸ As a result of penetration of middle-class elements into PAS's leadership, for instance, in recent years PAS has shown more tolerance of the ideas of a female Vice-President, PAS-approved entertainment concerts and outlets, limitations to powers of the *Majlis Shura Ulama* and future co-operation with non-Muslims, to the extent of possible acceptance of non-Muslim membership of the party.²⁹ The new

²⁷ This firebrand image has been lent credence by Abdul Hadi Awang's own adamant refusal to withdraw the *Amanat Haji Hadi* – a speech condemning UMNO and exhorting PAS members to wage *jihād* against UMNO members, widely blamed for the bloody showdown between security forces and PAS villagers in Memali, Kedah in November 1985; see Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid (2007a: 11-16).

²⁸ Many of these epithets given by the mainstream media are opposed by PAS, which insists on the feasibility of 'professionalising' the *ulama* and educating the professionals with solid knowledge of the essentials of Islam. See the interviews with PAS *Murshid al-'Am* Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, 'Kita harap tuah Dr. Haron', *Mingguan Malaysia*, 22 May 2005; Youth chief Salahuddin Ayub, 'PAS mesti tahu membaca zaman', *Mingguan Malaysia*, 22 May 2005; and President Abdul Hadi Awang, 'Tidak semestinya dengan DAP', *Mingguan Malaysia*, 12 June 2005. Also, the statement by Vice President Husam Musa, in Razak Beghani, 'Tolak labelan mengenai pimpinan PAS', http://www.harakahdaily.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=7798&Itemid=50, published on 22 May 2007 (accessed on 7 November 2008).

²⁹ Joceline Tan, 'Redefining the role of PAS women', *The Sunday Star*, 10 August 2003; Abdul Razak Ahmad, 'PAS softening its stand on accepted popular culture', *New Straits Times*, 9 October 2004; 'PAS poised for woman veep', *New Straits Times*, 18 April 2005; 'Tidak semestinya dengan DAP', *Mingguan Malaysia*, 12 June 2005; 'PAS cadang terima bukan Islam', *Utusan Malaysia*, 22 May 2006; 'PAS wants to work with DAP', *New Straits Times*, 8 March 2007; 'PAS redefines pop culture', *The Sunday Star*, 3 December 2006; Ian MacIntyre, 'PAS-style dance clubs', *The Sunday Star*, 17 December 2006; Joceline Tan, 'PAS eases up on having fun', *The Sunday Star*, 31 December 2006.

breed of PAS leaders such as Deputy President Nasharuddin Mat Isa has indicated a seriousness in “establishing a mainstream image” for PAS.³⁰

In the repoliticisation of Malaysian Islam, the impact of the Malaysian government’s persistent use of Islam as a political tool to outflank PAS on the latter’s own Islamist grounds cannot be underestimated. The UMNO-PAS Islamisation race, giving rise to a spate of official Islamic institutions in the 1980s (Hussin Mutalib 1990: 134-139, 142-144; Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid 2007b: 457-461), however, has also rendered the government receptive to Wahhabi-Salafi influences from the Middle East (Desker 2002: 386, 2003b: 420). Within the context of the Middle Eastern oil boom of the 1970s and the ensuing increase in the political clout of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) (Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid 2000: 13-20), Malaysia became a major recipient of oil-related aid distributed under the aegis of the Jeddah-based Islamic Development Bank (IDB) (Nair 1997: 62). Some of the primary financial beneficiaries have been government-sanctioned bodies such as the Islamic Welfare Association of Malaysia (PERKIM: *Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam SeMalaysia*) and the Malaysian-initiated Regional Islamic *Dakwah* Council for Southeast Asia and Pacific (RISEAP) (Hussin Mutalib 1990: 93, Nair 1997: 105). The founding in 1983 of the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), jointly sponsored by Muslim countries and using English and Arabic as official languages of instruction, was hailed as a hallmark achievement in the sphere of transnational Islamic education (Mokhtar A. Kadir 1991: 105-108). Islamic faculties at other universities were considerably strengthened. This spurred the production of new cohorts of *shariah*-based lawyers, consultants, economists, judges and religious officials to fill posts in the expanding Islamic bureaucracy and widening network of state-encouraged Islamic financial institutions (Roff 1998: 221-224). These officials were instrumental in the gradual Islamisation of Malaysia’s polity in the 1990s, when Barisan Nasional-controlled states tightened Islamic regulations for Muslims in an apparent attempt to rival PAS’s unsuccessful effort to introduce *hudud* (Islamic criminal punishments) in Kelantan (Martinez 2001: 482-483). Many of these officials, however, lacked the sophistication to interpret Islam beyond the legal context, such that for the Muslim populace, Islam has been widely perceived as nothing more than “rules and laws and fines... always telling us what to do” (Martinez 2001: 485). Under government tutelage, Islam in Malaysia has been repoliticised in an increasingly conservative way, driven ideologically by a Wahhabi-Salafi bias minus the anti-establishment politics as found in the Middle East. With pronouncements made by such luminary figures as the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and the chief judge on Malaysia’s ‘Islamic state’ status,³¹ the

³⁰ Joceline Tan, ‘No antidote for election fever’, *The Sunday Star*, 18 March 2007.

³¹ ‘Malaysia negara Islam – PM: Dr. Mahathir sahut cabaran Fadzil Noor’, *Mingguan Malaysia*, 30 September 2001; ‘Malaysia an Islamic state, and has never been secular: Najib’, *The Straits Times*, 18 July 2007; ‘Minister: Study proposal on switch to Syariah law thoroughly’, *The Star*, 24 August 2007.

discourse among Malay-Muslim politicians of both UMNO and PAS has appeared to move beyond whether Malaysia should be an Islamic state and towards the best ways and means of implementing Islam while concomitantly absorbing Malaysia's non-Muslim minorities in a mutually acceptable *modus vivendi* (Liow 2008: 30).

5 Concluding analysis

In accounting for driving factors behind the repoliticisation of Islam in Southeast Asia, the line dividing global and local factors is not always clear. In large measure, global and local factors interact in such a way that regional variables acquire dynamics of their own. This has been the case not only in Malaysia, as exemplified above, but also to a large extent in other Southeast Asian states as well. Hence, for instance, although international religious solidarity is a contributory factor in the rebellions of Muslim minorities of southern Thailand and the southern Philippines, national political imperatives have been more important in conditioning the nature and extent of the repoliticisation of Islam (May 1992: 409-411). Some scholars have emphasised 'fundamental grievances' of Muslim minorities in Southeast Asia such as prolonged socio-economic dislocation and systematic denial of indigenous identities as underlying causes of dissatisfaction which eventually erupted into sporadic insurrection (cf. Tan 2003: 134-135). As far as links with international militant Islamist networks are concerned, they simply tap upon these root causes, supplying the necessary training and infrastructural know-how in order to instigate spectacular feats in a wide geographical reach, thus sustaining momentum for the war against the 'Western crusaders'. Al Qaeda was a source of inspiration, too, but never actually commanded absolute allegiance from Southeast Asian Islamist militants. Its anti-Western rhetoric gained an audience in Southeast Asia because their own governments, often blamed for perpetual marginalisation of Muslims from mainstream economic and social life, are seen as friends, if not puppets, of Western powers. Since the destruction of its bases in Afghanistan in 2001, Al Qaeda has undergone a metamorphosis from a unitary organisation to an ideological movement which 'franchises' operations and rides on fruits of globalisation such as information and communications technology to spread borderless war-mongering (Hoffman 2004: 551-556). Its foray into Southeast Asia, if there was one, never involved the replacement of local insurgents' domestic agendas with global pan-Islamism (Desker 2003b: 421). In fact, as a recent analysis suggests, the goals of Malay-Muslim separatists and Moro rebels in southern Thailand and the southern Philippines respectively, notwithstanding consistent caricaturing by so-called security and terrorism experts, have remained "decidedly local" (Liow 2008: 31).

In Indonesia, the higher receptiveness of Islamist elements to radical tendencies, which dominated the socio-political scene in the first few years following the downfall of Suharto's New Order regime, can be ascribed to the failure of the nation-state to respond to Islamic sentiments amongst the population. Both

Indonesia and Malaysia were affected by the wave of Islamism that reached Southeast Asia in the 1980s not only from the Middle East but also from Islamist diasporas in the West (van Bruinessen 1999: 169-170, Azra 2003: 44), but while Malaysia responded accommodatively, Indonesia resorted to repression of political Islamists. The climax of state violence against its own Muslim population, the Tanjung Priok massacre of 1984, was a crucial turning point in the formation in Indonesia of Islamic groups by Indonesian escapees (Ramakrishna 2005: 349). Such an authoritarian reaction was a culmination of Suharto's policy of deliberately marginalising Islam in socio-political affairs of the nation, as evidenced by the enforced regulation of Islamist parties (Sukma 2003: 343-344). This ran counter to the general *santrinisasi* – the tendency to become more Islamic among hitherto *abangan* (nominal) Muslims that was taking place in Indonesian Muslim society (Desker 2002: 389, 2003a: 496). This process, resulting in the prevalence of generally pro-Islamist attitudes, defined by affinity towards the *shariah*,³² was itself arguably an offshoot of the political turmoil following Suharto's ascendancy; as van Bruinessen writes of the 1960s, "the fear of being accused of atheism and therefore communism made many *abangan* turn to Christianity or Hinduism and, in the end in larger numbers, to Islam" (van Bruinessen 1999: 168). The political emasculation of Islamists, however, led to a backlash in the form of a mushrooming of Islamic social and educational institutions – a form of 'civic religion' in Muslim society to which Suharto made overtures in the early 1990s, by which time it was too late (Abuza 2004: 15-16, Liow 2008: 28). Suharto's ouster triggered the proliferation of Islamist political parties and radical groups who would unhesitatingly resort to violence to achieve their aims (Sukma 2003: 344-350, Hasan 2005: 305-308). Having been immersed in an authoritarian culture practised by its own political elites, not until after the Bali bombings were such militants widely regarded as a menace to Islam and Indonesian society.

The hyperbolic response among Western strategic quarters to the repoliticisation of Islam in Southeast Asia has been triggered in large measure by a series of catalytic events which are deemed to have global implications. Nevertheless, these events could not have produced the developing trends and contours of political Islam that we see in Southeast Asia today by their own volition. The tectonic shifts chronicled in this article, with a stronger focus on Malaysia and Indonesia, where repoliticisation of Islam has taken place within the Muslim majority and therefore generally Islamically accommodative polities, could not have come about without the preceding existence of long-term processes and conditions whose ramifications

³² See the results of the opinion polls conducted in November 2002 under the auspices of Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat (PPIM: Research Centre for the Study of Islam and Society) by Mujani and Liddle (2004). The survey, however, also discloses that support for the *shariah* lessens when its specific provisions are mentioned, thus buttressing claims advanced by past observers of Indonesia's Islam being 'moderate'. As Mujani and Liddle (2004: 116) point out, *shariah* is understood in different ways by the many layers of Indonesian Muslims.

may differ from country to country. The rich diversity needs to be recognised in any attempt to demystify such a contestable concept as ‘repoliticisation of Islam.’ As the afore-mentioned RAND study admits with reference to 9/11, “while events since September 11 have affected US relations with all parts of the Muslim world, they have done so in different ways in different regions” (Rabasa 2004a: 2). As for mechanisms to curb the rising tide of radical Islamism, the present author is of the view that opening up political systems in the countries concerned would do a great deal to accommodate its protagonists within the official body politic, constricting them to constitutional rules of the game and hopefully mollifying their hard-line stances, though most probably not immediately. Fears that such a liberalisation would result in Islamist capture of the system are not borne out by research, especially with respect to Southeast Asia. On the contrary, recent studies by Murphy (2008) and Welsh (2008) reveal that, in contrast to patterns found in the Middle East, the greater political space given to Muslim professional associations has not resulted in potentially subversive Islamist capture of the middle classes in either Indonesia or Malaysia.

To conclude, the post-millennial repoliticisation of Islam in Southeast Asia is due to a complex interplay of global and local factors specific to the domestic political, social and economic circumstances of the countries involved. Since the immediate goals of the region’s Islamists are local rather than global utopias, some authors would rather call them ‘religious nationalists’ fighting for ‘Islamic nation-states’ (cf. Juergensmeyer 1995: 379). But this does not rule out their being receptive to messages from any variant of global discourse of Islamism, not necessarily the radical one expounded by Osama bin Laden, which Kaldor has simply termed a new variant of a “new nationalism” (Kaldor 2004: 171). Her preceding comments on the relationship between globalisation and nationalism are instructive: “Globalisation processes do not only favour cultural interconnectedness, they favour cultural disconnectedness as well. Globalisation breaks down the homogeneity of the nation-state. Globalisation involves diversity as well as uniformity, the local as well the global” (Kaldor 2004: 166).

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