



### **The rise of Islamic education in Malaysia**

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**COMMENT** Islamic schools have always been part and parcel of the Malay-Muslim community, even long before the British came to shores of Malaya. The traditional Islamic schools are known as 'pondok' and were the only mode of knowledge transmission existed before mass education was introduced by the British.

'Pondok' education, which still exists until today, revolves around a teacher, who attracts students by the dint of his reputation (this is an exclusively male domain). Its educational objective is primarily to inculcate students with the values needed in becoming a good Muslim, with nary an emphasis on real world practical knowledge.

In the 1920s, many Malay graduates from the Middle East, particularly Al-Azhar University in Cairo, came back imbued with reformist ideals to seriously revamp the pre-existing Islamic education.

Muslim reformers (known collectively in Malay as 'Kaum Muda') such as Shaykh Tahir Jalaluddin and Sayyid Shaikh al-Hadi established 'madrasah' (literally meaning school in Arabic) that employed modern pedagogical techniques and introduced secular subjects such as Mathematics, Science and English on top of the normal religious curriculum.



It was also around the same time that the bureaucratisation of state religious authority started to take place, and the newly formed state Islamic agency began to build and support its own Islamic schools.

Meanwhile, the British colonial administration had also introduced Islamic instructions in the Malay vernacular schools in its attempt to shore up student attendance. It is one of the legacies that can still be found in the present national educational system, which absorbed both Malay and English schools into its orbit in the early post-independence years.

Presently, Islamic education in Malaysia can be found in four types of schools: Sekolah Kebangsaan (national schools), Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama (national religious secondary school), Sekolah Agama Negeri (state religious schools), and Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR or people's religious schools).

These schools mainly differ in the portion of religious instruction in their curriculum, management and funding sources. National schools and national religious secondary schools are directly under the jurisdiction of the Education Ministry, while state religious schools are managed by their respective state Islamic agency and the people's religious schools are established by the local community (using combination of funding from federal and state agencies and private donations) and overseen by board of governors.

### **Islamic revivalism**

The Malaysian federal system allows every state to establish and maintain its own religious educational standard and curriculum. As a result, there is stark variance in quality and standard across the country, so much so that a school certificate issued in one state is sometimes not recognised in another. Furthermore, a lot of these state and local schools are poorly funded, lacking qualified teachers (especially for secular subjects) and in such sorry condition.

In 1977, the federal government tried to absorb some of these dilapidated state and people's religious schools into the national school system. It only managed to take over 11 schools out of the 150 originally demanded. The states saw this effort as a challenge to their independence and prerogative in the matters of Islamic affairs and therefore put up stiff resistance.

In 1983, the federal government again attempted to standardise the religious curriculum by establishing the Advisory Council for the Coordination of Islamic Education (or known in Malay acronym as Lepai) via the consent of the sultans at the 126th Conference of Rulers. Lepai's role is to coordinate the teaching of Islamic education in all religious schools that are not administered by the Education Ministry.

However, its authority is limited in the sense that it does not extend to the state religious schools that are already using curriculum by their respective state religious department. In other words, Lepai is only responsible for the people's religious schools, which numbered at 537 by 1977.



The end of 1970s marked the emergence of Islamic revivalism all across the Muslim world, which deeply affected Malaysia. Various Islamic-based groups began to crop up and employ Islamic narrative to question many of the government's policies.

Student leaders such as Anwar Ibrahim (currently the opposition leader) and Ibrahim Ali (now an Umno friendly independent MP) agitated against the perceived depredations of Western secularism and neo-colonial economic policies, which reverberated profoundly across this newly-revamped socio-political landscape. Instead of meeting the Islamists' challenge head-on, the government decided to roll with the punches and try to co-opt the Islamic resurgence movement.

One of the first moves made by then prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad when he came to power in 1981 was to recruit Anwar, who was the president of Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (Abim) and a vociferous critic of the government. This was done with hopes to take the sting out of the Islamist movement.

Anwar, in turn, used his position within the government to promote a more expansive role of Islam in Malaysian society. In the educational arena, more funding was allocated to develop Islamic instructions and build more schools.

In 1983, the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) was established as a centre to Islamise some aspects of human knowledge, particularly in social sciences and humanities, to make it useful and relevant to the Muslim community or 'ummah'. Hence the stage was hereto forth set for increased influence of Islam within the Malaysian society.

### **Graduates of SAR**

As previously mentioned, the government does not have complete control over all Islamic schools in Malaysia. While most of the schools remain compliant to the dictates of federal government, despite being under the aegis of state religious agency, some prove to be "problematic" for the powers-that-be.

The quasi-independent Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR) came into the spotlight when some of its teachers and graduates were charged with teaching deviant Islam and planning to overthrow the government through violent means. In July 2000, a militant Islamic group called Al-Maunah launched a brazen raid into an armoury and managed to get away with sizeable number of

weapons.

Many of the members of Al-Maunah, including its leader Mohammad Amin Razali, were graduates of SAR, and thus landing SAR in the government's bad book.

In August 2001, 25 members of Malaysian Militant Group (KMM) were arrested by the Home Ministry and 19 of them were graduates of SAR, including Nik Adli Nik Aziz, the son of the spiritual leader of the Islamic party PAS and Kelantan Menteri Besar Nik Aziz Nik Mat.

Later in early 2002, Sekolah Tarbiyah Islamiyah Luqmanul Hakiem, a small Islamic school in the rural part of Johor, was shut down by the Home Ministry with 12 of its teachers, including the headmaster, detained for suspicions of being members of KMM.

All 155 of its students were later transferred to other schools. The school was originally founded by Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Bashir (*right*) in the early 1990s - the two spiritual leaders of militant Islam in Indonesia, who were then fugitives fleeing the law in their home country.

The government has shown that it would not hesitate to use harsh measures if the schools cross the permissible boundary, however it is defined. In the aftermath of the crackdown, Mahathir announced: "Of course [we will interfere] if they deviate from the real purpose of education, when they use the premises to inculcate our young with their ideologies and aims to topple the government."



In March 2003, then education minister Musa Mohamad announced in the Parliament that government funding for SAR would be diverted to national Islamic schools due to dismal academic performance and anti-government activities, which resulted in the transfer of almost 15,000 SAR students and 2,000 teachers to other schools.

The funding cut has also forced many SAR to close down or reluctantly agree to be incorporated into the national school system, which would subject them to federal supervision.

### **More funding for religious schools**

Efforts to quell 'anti-establishment' tendencies among some of the SAR prove to be a tricky proposition as the government has to walk the tight rope between repelling challenges to its hegemonic rule posed by the Islamists and at the same time not coming off as 'anti-Islam'.

In the context of a heavily Islamised Malay society, to be branded as such would be a death knell to its legitimacy (at least this was true until a few years ago as Islamic discourse in Malaysia has presently started to become slightly more diversified). Religion, in this particular context Islamic education, is still a useful political tool ready to be instrumentalised if needs arise.

Despite its misgiving of SAR's 'subversive' nature, in November last year the federal government announced a RM35.6 million assistance for religious schools (including 22 SAR) in Kelantan, which has long been the stronghold of the opposition.



In his speech, Education Minister Muhyiddin Yassin (*left*), who is also the deputy prime minister, stated that "this financial assistance proves that the federal government does not play favourite when it comes to elevating the standard of national education".

While it is certainly the obligation of the government to provide adequate resources for all public schools, one does have the right to question its real intention, especially when the general election is looming large on the horizon.

All things considered, Islamic education remains an irrevocable part of the Malaysian society and will continue to be a hotly contested ground for unforeseeable time as the struggle to shape the minds and save the souls of young Muslims wages

on.

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