

## 'Family values' and Islamic revival: Gender, rights and state moral projects in Malaysia

Maila Stivens

*Gender Studies, University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia*

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### Synopsis

This article explores the cultural politics of the state's 'family values' project in Islamising Malaysia. It examines some of the complex intersections among versions of local and global family values discourses and their place in nationalist, Islamic and Islamist projects in the country: these versions include local and more global claims about family values, 'Asian family' values, and versions of 'Islamic' family values. Seeing the moral project of family values as occupying a central place in the cultural contests staged by state, religion and the media, the article argues that the embeddedness of this widely-supported project in a number of versions of 'Islamic values' and in wider alliances with conservative global forces has important implications not only for family, gender relations and women's (human) rights within families, but also for understanding Malay(sian) nationalisms. These developments pose significant challenges for activists seeking to reform family relations.

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### Introduction

The children should keep the values of Islam. I don't want the children to be branded as 'modern' [so that] they can't mix with my brothers' and sisters' children. (Middle-class Malaysian interviewee)

'As Asians', Fazlin Badri Alyeope [a reader who had written in to the *New Straits Times*] puts it, 'we know that it is not family values that are to blame for the social ills in society. It is the lack of them. The rule is simple. Children put their whole-hearted trust in their parents to guide them. However, many household breadwinners, their spouses and children, deviate from spiritual values and create their own values... Family values give you principles. They give you a taste of how sweet life can be'. (NST, 1995)

The role of women in moulding happy families and their contribution in national economic and social

development has always been recognised. The success of women in balancing this dual role cannot be denied and is indeed admirable. The responsibility of women in nurturing families based on My Home My Heaven [a recent 'family strengthening' initiative], begins from the birth of a child till adulthood. Budget speech 2004, [Former Malaysian Prime Minister] (Mahathir Mohamad, 2003)

This article explores the cultural politics of the state's 'Family Values' project in Islamising Malaysia, drawing on my research on gender, public and private, and modernity in the country. I examine some of the complex intersections among versions of local and global family values discourses and their place in nationalist, Islamist and modernist Muslim projects in the country: these versions include local and more global claims about Family Values, 'Asian family' values, and versions of 'Islamic' Family Values.

My middle-class Malay informants, like many in the region, are living their everyday 'private' lives in a context

where the 'family' and the domestic sphere are highly politicised, the 'Muslim family' especially so: the moral project of Family Values has assumed a central place in many of the cultural contests staged by state, religion and the media. Apocalyptic discourses of family crisis are omnipresent: a multitude of concerns are aired about families and marriages in trouble, divorce, children born out of wedlock, youthful sloth, sexualities, crime and child abuse (see Mahathir bin Mohamad & Ishihara, 1995). Family values discourses operate with a highly reified and overdetermined category of 'family'. Yet in many of these discourses, the idea of the 'family' is oddly indeterminate, vague and insubstantial: perhaps all mythologies are necessarily and intentionally thus. As I suggest, Malaysian versions of family values are also manifestly part of larger global structures of meaning, from which they draw further power: the state has forged some highly significant global alliances with conservative religious forces, including the Christian right, in order to promote 'family values' and further 'strengthen' families. I argue that the embeddedness of this state moral project in a number of versions of 'Islamic values' and in wider alliances has important implications not only for understanding family and gender relations, but also for understanding Malay(sian) nationalisms and their increasingly global contexts. The article ends with some key questions: How much popular/populist support does this moral project have? And what challenges does such support pose for those working for women's (human) rights within families?

### Islamic modernity in the new Malaysia

Since the mid-1970s I have been researching the dramatic modernisation of (Peninsular) Malaysia. State-promoted industrialisation has produced high rates of economic growth (Jomo, 1993; Kahn, 1996), low unemployment and extensive general improvements in life expectancy, infant mortality and literacy. A 'hypertrophic' public sector and global factory regime has been succeeded by a move from heavy involvement in public enterprises, concentrated in the financial and industrial sectors (Kahn, 1996), towards partnership between the state and the private economic sector, and a Singapore-style Second Industrial Revolution. Malays, who are mostly Muslim and are classified with various indigenous groups as bumiputera (literally sons-of-the-soil), comprise 53% of the total population (see 2000 census report, Malaysia, 2001); bumiputera overall constitute 65% of the total population (Malaysia, 2001).

Malays have seen particular improvements in their economic situation with the positive discrimination of the

New Economic Policy (NEP), which was instituted in 1970. Many critics, however, have seen the NEP as a response to Malay business and intelligentsia demands for a more interventionist state that protected 'Malay' interests. Rather than poverty alleviation per se, they argue, the NEP has produced new middle classes, a shift of power to technocrats and bureaucrats (Khoo, 1992, p. 50) and growing class differentiation.<sup>1</sup>

The same period has seen what many commentators describe as a period of dramatic Islamisation. This process derived from developments in Islam globally and the rise of many Islamic organisations, notably *dakwah* (missionary)<sup>2</sup> groups locally, but it was also strongly promoted within the state-driven modernising project. The state founded a well-endowed Islamic think tank, the Malaysian Institute for Islamic Understanding (IKIM), which was charged with shaping an Islamic work ethic (see Nagata, 1994). There have also been moves to develop Islamic banking, Islamic industrialisation (see Aidit, 1993), many campaigns against forms of entertainment considered un-Islamic, including 'traditional' Malay song and dance forms, and controversial attempts in the states of Kelantan and Terengganu to introduce Muslim criminal law (*hudud*).

The ruling coalition, led by the 'Malay' party, the United Malays National Organisation, has faced a complex juggling act: it has both embraced versions of a 'moderate' Islamic modernity and jockeyed with diverse Islamist forces to establish their respective Islamic credentials (Weiss, 2004). Pressures for an Islamic state have been especially strong within the northeastern state of Kelantan, where the opposition Islamist party, the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PAS, *Parti Islam SeMalaysia*) has had considerable electoral success.<sup>3</sup> (Malaysia is not an Islamic state, but Islam is the official religion of the country and the constitution assumes all Malays are Muslim (Nagata, 1994:69)). The dismissal of deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 played an important part in the development of a pro-democracy *Reformasi* (reform) movement, which was closely but ambiguously linked to sections of resurgent Malay Muslim forces—notably PAS. As Nagata notes, by joining the Reform movement PAS was forced to pick a path between its historic Malay Muslim constituency and the more universalistic ideals of the *Barisan Alternatif* (the alternative front): the latter comprised 'a previously unimagined union of ethnic Chinese and Malays, of socialist and business interests, of religious and secular elements and of Muslims and non-Muslims, in addition to assorted intellectuals, human rights and NGO activists of all faiths' (Nagata, 2001, p. 491).

Othman (1994 p. 139) sees the Malaysian state as ultimately both sponsor and beneficiary of a variety of

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