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Islam and Women's Rights: Discourses in Malaysia

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Abstract

The mostly Muslim nation of Malaysia has always walked a fine line between protecting the rights of Malay women and acknowledging the role that Islam plays in the daily lives of its citizens. Yet many of the obstacles facing Malaysian society disproportionately affect women. There are two different and extreme sorts of discourses: one that strictly adheres to the classical Islamic tradition and the other rejects the mere notion of polygamy as they do not believe that Islam promotes any injustice and mistreatment towards them. This paper therefore engages in analyzing the two different discourses on Muslim women rights in Malaysia.

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The mostly Muslim nation of Malaysia has always walked a fine line between protecting the rights of Malay women and acknowledging the role that Islam plays in the daily lives of its citizens. Yet many of the obstacles facing Malaysian society disproportionately affect women. These include endemic poverty, human trafficking, environmental degradation, a rise in the numbers of refugees, civil unrest, crime and a resurgent Islamic movement. Nonetheless in this mostly Muslim country of nearly 30 million people, by comparison with other Islamic nations, the fight for greater protection of Malaysian women's rights has had some success. This balance between a secular and sectarian society has largely been the result of Malaysia's former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. In contrast to Malaysia's largest neighbor, Indonesia, Mr. Mohamad did make significant concessions to Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), Malaysia's largest Islamic party, to placate religious conservatives.

The issue of Muslim women's rights often involves politics of culture, religion, identity and nationalism. One common feature about the Muslim countries has been the presence of Islamic revivalism and Malaysia is one of the countries that share the history of Islamic resurgence. On account of Islamic revivalism, various events occurred in the later part of the last century, for example, the Iranian revolution of 1979, the soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the Arab oil embargo. These events started to influence the Malaysian political landscape. The religious organization got strengthened and their impact was felt at the social economic level.

Being a nation of many faiths, Malaysia has had to consider the relationship between religion and state, which have become even more entwined. This is mostly due to pressure from the surge of Islamic revivalism and from the opposition parties who seek to reinvent the nation according to Islamic norms and ideals. The Islamic resurgence in Malaysia is often known as *Dakwah* movements which are perceived in opposition to the political, social and economic supremacy of the West and it also defines boundaries between what is traditional and what is western.

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Religious Organizations have been gaining approval nationwide, and the impact is particularly evident at a socio-political level. Being a nation of many faiths, Malaysia has had to consider the relationship between religion and state, which have become even more entwined. This is mostly due to pressure from the surge of Islamic revivalism and from the opposition parties who seek to reinvent the nation according to Islamic norms and ideals. The Islamic revival in Malaysia has been defined by what is known as the *dakwah* movement, which is often perceived in opposition to the economic, political, and social supremacy of their Western counterparts (Nagata, 1984; Narli, 1991). *Dakwah* movement was, for Malay women, a “re-education or re-socialization process, whereby women can be rescued from the throes of Westernization which has permeated Malay culture” (Nagata, 1984). The phenomenon has also been defined as a symbol of the difference between the traditional and the Western.

The *dakwah* movement in Malaysia is also perceived as “women’s subjection to male authority and women’s domestic roles as wife and mother as symbol of religious nationalism for Malays” (Othman, 2006). Women, as the bearers of cultural values and traditions, are important symbols in the politics of Islamic revivalism and Islamic state policy. *Dakwah* advocates claim that good Muslim women should educate others about Islam, be involved in child-rearing, and create a positive social consciousness. the ideology of *dakwah* states that women are a source of support to men, that they do not have the same political rights as men, that they may only lead female organizations, that their careers are limited to being clerks, teachers, nurses, and doctors, that it is their role to educate the new Muslim generation, that they must cover their hair and wear long, loose clothes, and that they should not use so-called Western products such as cosmetics. As such, the veil became an important symbol in the efforts of the Malay female community in establishing their Muslim identity, and the act of unveiling became associated with the West. This is why a majority of working professional women still wear the veil, as visible declarations of their commitment to Islam.

The government in Malaysia has been appropriating these movements, with the overall intention at reforming the image of Islam in accordance with their own plans for modernization. These policies were known as the ‘adaptive upgrading’ of Islam in correspondence with their plans for modernization, in which the government attempted to encourage a more moderate approach to Islam through educational and legislative arrangements. In addition to this, the Mahathir administration, especially in the 1990s, institutionalized a more “corporate” approach to Islam, in an attempt to neutralize the *dakwah* movement and its influence on politics and religion. In doing so, the government aimed to use radical movements such as these in their bid for modernization and to answer criticism faced by their capitalist economic policies. This was also a way of expediting existing Islamization policies in parallel with the burgeoning modernization of everyday life and the increasingly materialistic nature of contemporary culture. The Islamization policies Mahathir implemented include the establishment of the Islamic Bank and the Islamic International University (IIUM) and, to an extent, a reduction of ties with the West. The government of the day also relied heavily on the leadership of the Muslim Youth Movement (ABIM) and the Institute for Islamic Understanding (IKIM), both of which were organizations which they had appropriated, in order to strike a balance between secularization and Islamization. The government’s aim throughout all these efforts was to channel the strengths of *dakwah* into politically-beneficial activities, as they still had to maintain a secular nation. Islamization also fulfilled their economic development objectives. On the political front, the state had managed to divide these rogue Islamist organizations and appropriate them for their own agendas.

The emergence of a politicized Islam has posed a challenge to civil society groups determined to uphold democracy, human rights, and women’s rights. Women groups in many Muslim countries are at the frontline in challenging the religious establishment and their justification of the subordination of women and the discrimination against them, all in the name of religion Muslim women in modern and industrial Muslim nations such as Malaysia are at odds with the patriarchal construct of the so-called “ideal” Muslim woman as subservient and submissive. Progressive Muslim women, for the most part, do not believe that Islam promotes any injustice and mistreatment towards them. Such an organization is Sisters-in-Islam (SIS).

SIS exists as a group of professional women claims to promote women’s rights within the framework of Islam. The mission of SIS is to promote an awareness of the true principles of Islamic equality, justice, freedom and dignity within a democratic state. SIS believes that Islam does not endorse the oppression of women and that Islam has been misinterpreted in justifying the cultural practices that make women inferior and subordinate to men. This has been made possible because men have had exercise control over the interpretation of the Holy text. SIS also

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