

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA

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BACKGROUND

One area of concern for religious freedom in Malaysia and Indonesia is the role played by Saudi Arabia. Since the early 1980s, the Saudis have tried to export their version of Islam, widely called Wahhabism. I will not go into details about the belief system of Wahabism other than to say that it is a form of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia that developed in the 18th century led by a cleric Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. In Southeast Asia, scholars normally call them Salafi. In very general terms, Wahhabism/Salafism refers to an interpretation of Islam that seeks to restore Islamic faith and practice to the way they existed at the time of Prophet Muhammad, ie, “pure Islam”. It is widely considered to be a very conservative and intolerant view of Islam, towards non-Muslims and other Islamic sects. They do not accept there are other faiths in human society or other interpretations of the Koran. Many of them believe other faiths are simply Idolatry. They support the death sentence for apostasy. They view religious freedom and liberalism as a Western import that is contradictory to Islamic values. They are part of the Sunni Muslim world.

Saudi Arabia began to “export” Wahhabism starting in the early 1980s. One can make a strong argument that the Saudis, with oil money, were using Wahhabism as a means to create a network of influence around the world. They saw themselves in competition with Iran although Iran is Shia. There are some reports that the Saudis spent more than USD 80-100 billion on this project to assert their influence in the Muslim world through the use of Wahhabism.

SAUDI ARABIA, INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA

Indonesia and Malaysia were targeted by Saudi Arabia because both are Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia. Indonesia, with a population of 280 million, is the world’s largest Muslim country. About 88% of Indonesians called themselves Muslim. Malaysia, with a population of 32 million, is widely seen as an influential, moderate country in the Islamic World. This was especially true in the 1990s when Mahathir Mohammad was the prime minister of Malaysia. He was an important voice in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). About 65% of Malaysia’s population is Muslim.

The methods used to export Wahhabism to Indonesia and Malaysia are quite straightforward.

- 1) Funding of mosques, religious activities, madrassahs, and Islamic groups (many doing charity work).
- 2) Scholarships for young Indonesian and Malaysian Muslims to study in Saudi institutions. The numbers will easily exceed one hundred thousand.
- 3) Penetrating the political parties and the civil service through funded visits by Saudi theologians and clerics and exchange of visits

Many of the activities I have outlined above are done openly via the Saudi Embassy in both countries. It is also important to note that the Saudis are playing the long game and do not

expect immediate results. The Saudis are looking to influence the next generation. In both countries, many of those influenced by Salafi doctrine would be in mid- to senior-level positions since the influence program began in the 1980s.

WHAT IS SAUDI ARABIA AIMING FOR IN INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA?

The Saudis appear to be aiming for the following:

- 1) Reinforce the message that Saudi Arabia is the center of Islam
- 2) Major player in the Indonesian and Malaysian political and religious class
- 3) Block any potential Iranian influence and spread of Shia beliefs
- 4) Pushing for their version of Political Islam and slowly pushing for the establishment of an Islamic state in Indonesia and Malaysia with Salafi features.

The Saudi interest in Indonesia and Malaysia goes back even before they started the worldwide project to export Wahhabism. In the early 1970s, the Saudis were already funnelling money and arms to the Muslim separatists in the Southern Philippines. There was also funding of Indonesian and Malaysian *dakwah* movements (propagation of the Islamic religion to covert non-believers) during this time.

POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS IMPACT

It is difficult to precisely measure the Salafi influence because many Indonesians and Malaysian Muslims do not identify themselves as Salafi in public. There is also confusion among the Muslim population themselves. Many of them would see the Salafi as simply very conservative or strict Muslims. What we do know is that in the past decade, there has been a rise in conservative political Islam in both countries and it is certain that some of the political parties and political culture are influenced by Salafi teachings. Today there are thousands of religious figures in both countries who promote the idea that the state needs to be more Islamic and, over the long run, the country should turn into an Islamic state.

Let me deal with Indonesia first.

An area where we can clearly see Salafi influence is the huge increase in the number of private *madrassahs* (religious schools) operated by graduates from Saudi institutions. There are approximately 120,000 *madrassahs* in the country, and many are outside the control of the government. In other words, they are free to teach what they want, including a Salafi-influenced curriculum. Some of the students and their parents may not even know they are using a Saudi-inspired curriculum.

The two organizations in Indonesia that openly identified themselves with Saudi Arabia are the Indonesian Council for Islamic Propagation (*Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia*) and the College for the Study of Islam and Arabic (*Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Arab*). They established educational institutions such as a branch of the *Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud University* in Indonesia.

Like Indonesia, Saudi Arabia promotes Wahhabism indirectly, via scholarships to Saudi institutions, funding for *madrassah* and Islamic NGOs, and visits by Saudi theologians and religious figures. The Saudis also fund and control the Al-Madinah International University.

There are no political parties in Indonesia, or Malaysia, that subscribe to the Salafi ideology. What you have are political parties that support more Islamisation of the population and the country's institutions. There are Salafi individuals inside some of the major political parties in both countries but, as far as I can tell, none of the present top political leaders in both countries are Salafi.

I also need to state here that for some purists Salafis, politics is a distraction. They see their main role in education and missionary work.

Many scholars will argue Salafi ideology played a major role in the radicalization of Indonesian and Malaysian Muslims. This is a huge topic by itself. All I wish to say here is that some of these groups are involved in terror activities, both internally and externally. For example, ISIS (Islamic State) has a brigade called *Katibah Nusantara*, comprising Malay-speaking militants from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. ISIS even had a special Malay-language newsletter called *al-Fatihin* (the Conquerors) to recruit fighters from Southeast Asia. ISIS-inspired attacks have taken place in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Internally in Indonesia, Salafi followers were known to be associated with *Laskar Jihad* (Warriors of Jihad). They were responsible for killing Christians in Ambon, Sulawesi, and Maluku Islands in the early 2000s. In Malaysia, there has not been large-scale violence traced to the Salafi network.

THE UNIQUE CASE OF MALAYSIA

I want to spend a bit of time talking about Malaysia because I think Malaysia is in a much more dangerous space with it comes to religious freedom when compared to Indonesia.

I mentioned earlier that political parties in Indonesia that the Salafi infiltrates have not been able to take leadership positions in any of the major Indonesian political parties. This is partly due to *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) and *Muhammadiyah*, the two biggest Islamic NGOs in Indonesia. They act as a shield against intolerant Islamisation. Both organizations, with a combined membership of more than 100 million, explicitly reject the Saudi version of Wahhabism and instead promote what is loosely called *Islam Nusantara*. This essentially means Islam in Indonesia must take into account the local socio-cultural conditions. Thus, they believe in religious tolerance, religious pluralism, and moderation. Both organizations said they do not believe Indonesia should be an Islamic state and are committed to a secular Indonesian state.

The national ideology of Indonesia, *Pancasila*, also helps. Comprising of five principles, the first one states *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* (Belief in the one and only God). This is important as it does not name God as Allah. On top of this, there is a Ministry of Religious Affairs (*Kementerian Agama*), which provides state recognition to Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism.

I should also mention here during the Jokowi administration (2014-2024), the government saw conservative Islam as a threat to the republic and they took measures in trying to weed out the Islamists from the bureaucracy. I mention this event to show that the highest level of the Indonesian Government sees conservative Islam as a potential threat to the state.

This of course does not mean it will not change. The good news is that all three contenders for the Indonesian presidency in the upcoming Indonesian elections this year have ruled out

Indonesia becoming an Islamic state. All three candidates accept that Indonesia is a multicultural, multireligious state.

I would like to contrast this with the situation in Malaysia.

In Malaysia, Islam as a whole is getting more intolerant and conservative. A large part of it has to do with the Malaysian Constitution and identity politics. One unique feature of the Malaysian constitution is that it binds Islam with the Malay ethnic group. If you are classified as Malay in government records, then you are Muslim. Thus, from the time of independence in 1957, the identity of the Malay ethnic group is tied with Islam. Under the law, if you are born Malay, there is no legal avenue to leave Islam. This makes Islam a potent weapon in the political arena. The easiest way to gain support among the Malay community is to become an Islamic champion.

Over the years Islamism has also been purposely inserted into the civil and some scholars have termed this as bureaucratized Islam. A powerful government department, *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia) (JAKIM) was established to deal with all issues related to Islam. There is widespread agreement among scholars that JAKIM has played a decisive role in making Malaysia a much more conservative Islamic state. For example, all the Friday sermons given throughout the country are written by JAKIM. Some of these sermons can be described as hate speech towards non-Muslims, especially Jews and Christians. You can also detect Salafi- influence in some of the educational materials produced by JAKIM for religious and national schools. It is almost certain that some of the senior theologians working in JAKIM are Salafi adherents or lean towards Salafi beliefs. Other scholars point to a process of Arabisation among the Malays as a sign that the Salafi is getting more influential. Many of the policies pursued by JAKIM showed they do not accept religious freedom and do not support a religious plural society. This of course is similar to core Salafi beliefs.

The result is that although the Malaysian Constitution does not explicitly state Islam as the state or official religion, the entire Malay political class and the bureaucracy act as if Islam is the *defacto* official religion.

Unlike Indonesia, the Salafis have made inroads into political parties in Malaysia. The Salafis are known to have a significant influence on *Parti Islam Malaysia* (PAS) (Islamic Party of Malaysia). As the name suggests, PAS wants to create an Islamic state in Malaysia. PAS is now the largest bloc in the Malaysian parliament after the 2022 elections, and there is a possibility that they will be elected to power in the next two decades. This does not mean PAS will immediately change Malaysia's Constitution to become an Islamic state. It is more likely that there will be a period of rapid Islamisation before the country officially becomes an Islamic state. One of the key components of this Islamisation phase will be to restrict non-Islamic religions as much as possible. I expect the Salafis in PAS to play a major role in this process.

There are Salafi sympathizers in the current government led by Anwar Ibrahim. However, they are constrained by the fact that the largest party in the "Unity" coalition government is led by non-Muslims. Another important block in the Anwar administration comes from the Borneo states. They are not likely to support any attempts to impose hardline Islamic policies.

DANGER TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Coming back to the work of this committee, the clear danger posed by Saudi Arabia's influence and Salafi beliefs is the creation of an intolerant religious environment. They simply do not subscribe to the idea that there are other faiths and freedom of religion for the individual. Their ultimate aim is to create an Islamic state where non-Muslims do not have any political rights unless they convert to Islam and if they don't, they are regarded as "protected people" with limited rights.

In contemporary Saudi Arabia, there are reports that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has reigned-in the kingdom's Wahhabi religious establishment, declaring its ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam as out of date and often based on a faulty interpretation of the Koran. How this will impact the Salafis in Indonesia and Malaysia remains unclear. Thus far there is no evidence that the Saudi Embassy in both countries has revamped and reduced their religious outreach activities. I would instead argue that even if the Saudi embassy does not promote Salafi beliefs, this will have a very limited impact as most of the outreach is done by the Indonesians and Malaysians themselves. They are unlikely to change their beliefs no matter what happens in Saudi Arabia under Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the main points I wish to make before this hearing, are:

- 1) The export of Wahhabism by Saudi Arabia started a long ago, more than half a century ago. They want to be a major player in Islam and a major player in world affairs. Money was the main reason why they were successful in spreading Salafi beliefs, especially in poor Muslim countries. Competition with Iran is another major factor.
- 2) Islam in Southeast Asia has traditionally been very tolerant, moderate, and accommodating to other faiths, traditions, and cultures.
- 3) The spread of Salafi and other radical teachings has changed the nature of Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia. The biggest change is the element of violence and intolerance towards other faiths and cultures.
- 4) In Indonesia, the Salafis are diverse and decentralized. Politically they have not had a major impact on the major parties.
- 5) Threats to freedom of religion are far more serious in Malaysia when compared to Indonesia. The increasingly intolerant brand of Islam that is being promoted in Malaysia by the government, bureaucracy, and key political parties, can only lead to even more restrictions on Islamic groups deemed incompatible with the official Sunni Islam of the Shafi'i school of thought, and non-Islamic religions. There is no political leader in Malaysia, or Islamic NGOs, on the horizon, who appears willing or able to stop the trend of moving Malaysia into a *defacto* Malay Islamic state over the long term.
- 6) Dealing with the issue in Malaysia is complicated by the way the Malaysian Constitution ties the religious identity of the majority Malay ethnic group with Islam.
- 7) In Indonesia, other religions are recognized by the state through the Ministry of Religious Affairs while in Malaysia, it is the total opposite. The state only recognized Islam, and even holding interfaith dialogues is problematic.

Thank you for listening.