

Bringing Politics In: Islam and the State in Southern Thailand

Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship(s) between the state and Islam in Malaysia Southern Thailand. In ascertaining the dynamics between the state and Islam, I focus on the role of the ulama (the Islamic religious scholars), and address the central question: what are the consequences of the relationships between the ulama and the state? I postulate that the interactions between the ulama and the state redefine, or has the potential to do so, the contours of the 'state' and even 'Islam' itself. To further my argument, I draw upon the concept of political opportunity/threat structures: I contend that the more liberating the political opportunity structures are for the ulama, the more the state acquiesces to the ulama's demands, and thus, the latter's understandings of 'Islam'. In Malaysia, the wide political opportunity structures enable the ulama to drive the phenomenon of rising conservatism. In Southern Thailand, where the political opportunity structures are more inhibiting, it is the ulama who have modified their understandings of Islamic concepts, and hence, 'Islam' itself, in accordance with the political realities. The process of defining 'Islam' is not static, as the cases of Malaysia and Southern Thailand demonstrate.

Introduction

This paper investigates the relationship(s) between the *ulama* – Islamic religious scholars- and the state in Malaysia and Southern Thailand. The *ulama*, being custodians of the Islamic faith, have the capacity to fundamentally shape and alter the trajectories of the societies they operate within, and hence, their salience must not be downplayed. Therefore, the research question this paper addresses is: what are the consequences of state-*ulama* relationships in Malaysia and Southern Thailand?

I put forth the following argument. I postulate that the relationship(s) between the *ulama* and the state have an impact on determining the contours of the 'state', and even 'Islam' itself. The state, 'Islam' and even the *ulama* themselves could undergo significant transformations resulting from the constant interactions between the two entities. To explicate this argument, I draw upon the concept of political opportunity and threat structures as articulated by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001). While they were studying the phenomena of social movements and contentious politics, I apply their model to state-*ulama* interactions. I posit that the wider the political opportunity structures for the *ulama*, the more they can assert their authority on the political outcomes in the systems within which they operate, and the more the state has to

acquiesce to their demands. In Malaysia, the wide political opportunity structures have enabled the *ulama* to drive the phenomenon of rising conservatism of both the state and society. In Southern Thailand, where political opportunity structures are more inhibiting for the *ulama*, it is them who have modified their understandings of Islamic concepts, and hence 'Islam' itself, in accordance to political realities. The process of defining 'Islam' is not static, as the cases of Malaysia and Southern Thailand demonstrate, since the *ulama* adjust the definitions of Islamic concepts based on socio-political conditions. I situate this study within the literature on state-society relations, and Islam in politics.

Malaysia and Southern Thailand are chosen for a couple of reasons. Firstly, methodologically, the two regions are chosen as they are diverse cases (Seawright and Gerring 2008). Malaysia and Southern Thailand exhibit vast differences. Malaysia is a Muslim-majority country, whereas in Thailand, Muslims are a minority and the Southern Thais have to negotiate this fact carefully. Malaysia is a competitive authoritarian state with some features of a parliamentary democracy, where contestation for power from the Islamists comes mostly in the form of constitutionally legitimate party and electoral politics, whereas in Southern Thailand, no such outlet exists. Secondly, the cases of Malaysia and Southern Thailand highlight the importance of Islam beyond the Middle East and South Asia, and have the capacity to underline certain lessons which are applicable to the broader Muslim world. The study of Islam has been disproportionately centred on the Middle East and South Asia, and where Southeast Asia has been discussed, it is usually in reference to Indonesia. This study attempts to fill these gaps.

Ulama and the State in Islam

The *ulama* literally refers to people of knowledge, and are considered to be "the inheritors (or heirs) of the Prophets," according to an oft-quoted hadith (Cooperson 2000). Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali, a classical scholar, states that "They (the *ulama*) succeed the Prophets in their

communities in the sense of calling people to Allah and to His obedience, prohibiting rebellion against Allah and defending His religion.” (Al-Hanbali 2001, 49)

An *alim* can be defined as someone who has received religious training with a proper chain of learning that goes back all the way to the Prophet of Islam and is recognized as one by the rest of the scholarly community (Reichmuth 2004). Since the early days of Islam, political authority was separated from religious authority. This is not to say that the distinction was always manifestly plain: often, the Caliphs invoked religious scripture to justify their rule, and even oppression of the masses. Yet, the two institutions were distinct since the demise of the Prophet and the first few Caliphs who were viewed to be pious companions of the Prophet. Muslims who accepted the Caliphs as political rulers did not necessarily seek their juristic expertise on Islamic law. As Wael Hallaq documents, Islamic law or *Sharia* (which literally means ‘the way’) underwent an evolution after the death of the Prophet and his major companions. The codification of the set of laws based primarily on the Quran, and the Sunnah – referring to the sayings and actions (or even inactions) of the Prophet – required a comprehension of not only the texts, but the contextual circumstances under which they were revealed, a mastery of the Arabic language, knowledge of the chains of transmission with regards to the hadith, and even the ability to deduce laws based on analogical reasoning (*qiyas*). Such an undertaking was evidently not possible for the lay people; and coupled with the early Muslims’ desire to adhere to Islamic teachings, the legal/juristic experts in Islamic tradition took on enormous significance (Hallaq 2005). If the Caliph actually played a role in the legal-jurisprudential sphere, it was due to his knowledge of the law and traditional Islamic scriptures; this meant that “legal authority in Islam was private and personal; it was in the persons of the individual jurists.” (Hallaq 2009, 35) This authority did not lie in a single jurist, but rather, the collective juristic enterprise.

Despite the Caliphs' best efforts, moral and spiritual authority within Muslim communities continued to reside in the *ulama*. As long as Muslims took their religion seriously, the *ulama* would occupy a prominent status.

Argument: Political Opportunity/Threat Structure, the *Ulama* and the State

I utilize and modify the model developed by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001). They proposed the idea of contentious politics arising in response to political opportunities and threats. Studying collective action and social movements, they argue that the greater the opportunity structure, the likelier it is that the claims of actors vis-à-vis the state will be realized. They identify six features of political opportunity structures:

- a. the multiplicity of independent centers of power within the regime
- b. the regime's openness to new actors
- c. instability of current political alignments
- d. availability of influential allies or supporters for challengers
- e. the extent to which the regime represses or facilitates collective claim making
- f. decisive changes in items a to e." (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2009, 263)

They argue that the political opportunity structure differs from "actor to actor and situation to situation." (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2009, 264) It is uncontroversial to suggest that political opportunity structures can "further or restrain the capacity of social movements to engage in protest activity." (Kitschelt 1986, 61) Armstrong and Bernstein critique McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly on the ground that the latter ignore the motivations of the actors and therefore miss an important part of the equation. I build on both these works for my argument on state-*ulama* relations. While McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly's *Dynamics of Contention* delves into contentious episodes and social movements, I apply parts of their model to comprehend the effects of the relationships the *ulama* have with the state. Moreover, I employ Armstrong and Bernstein's critique of the work, by investigating the motivations of the *ulama* as well. In this regard, the *ulama* are treated as active agents, and their voices are heard. The concept of political opportunity or threat structure is retained, although its features are modified. The model offered

by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly does not presume that actors in social movements are devoid of agency; in fact, these actors react to the socio-political conditions in 'rational' ways. However, by precluding the actors' own abilities, weaknesses and standing from the features of political opportunity structure, the end result is a disproportionate focus on the strength and/or weakness of the regime, rather than the qualities of the social movement actors themselves. It would be misleading to view the *ulama*, I argue, as passive actors who merely accept the choices that are put in front of them by political elites. They are agents in a political system, participating in, and shaping it, via many ways.

I postulate a different way of understanding political opportunity structures or threats; one that sufficiently takes into account the motivations and strong suits or weak points of non-state actors, or in this case, the *ulama*. As discussed earlier, the *ulama* derive their authority from both Islamic tradition and the Muslim masses' perceptions of them as the guardians of the faith. The strength/weakness of agents should be understood to form part of the political opportunity/threat structure. There has been a tendency to ignore the roles played by non-state actors in regions where states have been thought to be overly domineering. This propensity has been roundly critiqued by scholars such as Scott and Migdal, who call for a thorough analysis of the various forms of actions that less-powerful actors could take: Scott emphasizes the long-term effects that seemingly inconsequential actions undertaken by peasants could have on the state, whereas Migdal calls for a non-statist approach that takes into account other actors, aside from the state (J. C. Scott 1985, Migdal 2001). While agreeing with McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly's postulation that political opportunity/threat structures differ from individual to individual, this paper will not assess each *alim*'s political opportunity/threat structure. Rather, the focus here is on the *ulama* fraternity's political opportunity/threat structure as a whole. The *ulama* are undoubtedly not monolithic, and each *alim* possesses a varying amount of influence in the political arena. The point in this paper, however, is to understand how the *ulama* in

general have shaped, or have been affected by, their interactions with the state. The *ulama* are most definitely ‘rational’ actors, in that they are aware of the costs and benefits of their actions, although these benefits and costs are not necessarily material. In making their decisions, the *ulama* participate in the political process, and could strengthen, resist or subvert the state, and may even redraw state boundaries, as will be shown later.

Malaysia: Islamization and Redrawing of Boundaries of the State

Background: Understanding the Socio-Political Context

Malaysia has been described as a model for both Muslim and developing nations (Martinez 2002). As of 2010, its population consisted of almost 26 million citizens, of which 67.4% were *Bumiputera*, 24.6% were Chinese, 7.3% were Indians, while the remaining 0.7% belonged to other races. *Bumiputera* literally means sons of the soils, referring to the natives of the land.¹ Most Malays are Muslims, and it is generally assumed that Islam is an integral part of what makes a person ‘Malay’.² 61.3% of the population is Muslim.³ Each of the thirteen states has its own state assembly with some decision-making abilities, though the federal government wields significant power (Crouch 1996). Muftis are the highest religious authorities in the states, in theory at least, whose duties include the issuance of religious edicts or fatwas for the Muslims.

Malaysia is a ‘competitive authoritarian’ state whereby despite the presence of elections, political institutions – such as the legislature, judiciary, and laws of the country - are heavily tilted in the favour of the incumbents (Levitsky and Way 2010). Nevertheless, elections are

¹ Department of Statistics, Malaysia. Population Distribution and Basic Characteristic Report 2010. https://www.statistics.gov.my/index.php?r=column/c%26theme&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09&bul_id=MDMxdHZjWtk1SjFzTzNkRXYzcVZjdz09. Accessed 5 May 2016.

² In fact, the Malaysian constitution uses a ‘cultural’ definition for a Malay, as opposed to ‘ethnic’ or ‘biological’ criteria. A Malay is someone who is born in Malaysia, speaks Malay, practices Malay customs and is a Muslim. See (Hirschman 1987).

³ Ibid.

never skewed to the point that opposition candidates cannot definitively win, and often, the latter do make political gains. Since independence, the country has been governed by one ruling coalition, *Barisan Nasional* (BN) or the National Front. BN is a coalition of major ethnic parties, with the most important one being the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), BN practices a version of consociationalism that is akin to Malay-led multiracialism, whereby affirmative action is practiced for the Malays, while power is shared with the other races (Lim 1985). Lately though, it is evident that BN's dominance is on the wane. In 2008, for the first time in its history, the hitherto hegemonic BN lost its two-thirds majority of parliamentary seats, and the result essentially signaled a turning point in its history (Singh 2009). In 2013, BN managed to form the government despite losing the popular vote (Welsh 2013). It is increasingly clear that BN's hegemony, both electoral and ideological, has been breached (W. J. Abdullah 2017). Increasingly, there are non-governmental actors and/or organizations that are participating actively in the political arena. Civil society is becoming more robust. Some of these actors challenge the perceived growing influence of Islam in the public sphere, while others resist these challenges. Sisters in Islam (SIS), for example, is an influential civil activist group that challenges patriarchal norms in Malaysian society, seeks to restore the 'true' egalitarian teachings of Islam, and in doing so, directly questions the authority of the *ulama* (Moustafa 2013).

Though the prominence of Islam is often taken for granted, what is often overlooked is that Malaysia is constitutionally a secular country with Islam as its official religion, and in reality, that was how the country was governed right until the Mahathir era (R. L. Lee 1990). Nearly three decades later, Mahathir declared Malaysia to be an "Islamic State", much to the bemusement of many (Martinez 2001). Undoubtedly, the conscious decision by the Mahathir regime was, at least in part, an electoral strategy to diminish the influence of PAS (Pan Islamic Party of Malaysia): Malaysia, like many other Muslim-majority nations, was feeling the effects

of global Islamic revivalism in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution (M. A. Bakar 1991). Since then, Islam has never been divorced from the Malaysian state machinery. The Islamization of the state was countered by PAS with a further radicalization of its rhetoric, to the point that PAS leaders routinely declared UMNO and its supporters to be infidels (Liow 2004b).

The *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (Department of Islamic Advancement Malaysia, JAKIM) is the most influential Islamic state organization: it is officially an arm of the state, and is directly under the purview of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). JAKIM's powers are immense and far-ranging: it advises the government on Islamic affairs, it has the ability to issue fatwas,⁴ it can decide which strand of Islam is acceptable or not to be practiced in Malaysia and declare which are deviant groups, and ultimately, is a vital player in "framing the practice of Islam in everyday Malaysian life" (Liow 2009a, 51). The electoral imperatives and economic agenda of the ruling party had undeniably strengthened the position of the *ulama* themselves who aligned themselves to the government and organizations that were officially part of the ruling mechanism.

Redefinition of 'State' and 'Islam': Roles of the Ulama

I aver that the interactions between the state and the *ulama* have important consequences on the very nature of the Malaysian state, Malaysian society and even on Islam itself. Two themes have been chosen. First, the interventions of the *ulama* on the 'Islamic State' debate will be elucidated. Second, the rise of conservatism in Malaysia will be explicated.

Islamic State Discourse: Interventions of the Ulama

⁴ Technically, a fatwa is an Islamic ruling/advice offered by the Mufti/senior *ulama*, and is not legally binding.

The 'Islamic state' discourse has permeated many modern Muslim societies, and Malaysia is no different. In the 1980s was the period whereby the *ulama* authoritatively took control of PAS, and began to advocate for an Islamic state in Malaysia. *Ulama* such as Yusof Rawa, Fadzil Noor and later on, Nik Aziz and Abdul Hadi Awang (the party's current leader), all played crucial roles in the development of the party's ideology. For the PAS *ulama*, the UMNO-led government was an essentially secular entity with no Islamic legitimacy and thus had to be replaced with an Islamic entity (Hudson 1977).

UMNO's reaction to PAS' claims had profound and lasting effects on the country. Beginning with Mahathir, the government sponsored Islamization via supporting Islamic educational institutions, promoting Islamic banking and finance, having a more 'Islamic' outlook on foreign policy matters, but most importantly, by co-opting *ulama* to counter the influence of PAS (K. Abdullah 1999).

What transpired subsequently was the battle of ideas between the *ulama*, on the notion of an Islamic state. Of course, the Malaysian state was no passive actor in this battle. Mahathir not only kick-started state Islamization, but in September 2001, made the (in) famous proclamation that Malaysia was already an Islamic state (Martinez, 2001). Mahathir's redefining of the contours of the Malaysia state to incorporate Islam, was at least in part, a reaction to the *ulama* of PAS asserting their Islamic credentials, and juxtaposing it against UMNO's lack thereof. This is a distinct instance where a group of *ulama* managed to, via subversion and resistance, redraw the boundaries of the state. Mahathir's Islamic state declaration, while grossly exaggerated and obviously politically motivated, was nonetheless more than just a superficial announcement. The Malaysian state did embark on an Islamization project – that required the assistance of *ulama* - which profoundly altered both the state and Malaysian societal dynamics (Nasr 2001). The *ulama*, were indisputably active agents in the making, and refashioning, of Malaysian politics.

Farish Noor documents the development of the ideology of PAS from its inception to recent years. He postulates that it was only in the early 1980s, when the “*ulama* faction” took control of PAS, that the party adopted a more decisive “Islamic” leaning. Yusof Rawa, who became leader of PAS in 1983, reasoned that due to their piety and high levels of religious understanding, the *ulama* would not misuse or politicize Islam for personal or party gains, and hence should rule the country. His successors, Fadzil Noor and Hadi Awang (Nik Aziz was not the President of the party but was its spiritual leader for more than two decades from 1991), continued in the same vein till 2008 (Noor 2003).

PAS’ rhetoric intensified, if not radicalized, during this period: they started to label UMNO politicians and anyone who cooperated with the government, including the establishment *ulama*, as *kafir* (infidels). This, they argued, was because UMNO was not judging by God’s laws (Saat 2014, 51). The key to an Islamic state was two-fold: rule by the *ulama*, and the implementation of the Sharia, which was rather narrowly defined by the PAS *ulama*. Most of the discourses articulated by Hadi Awang and Nik Aziz centred about the implementation of *hudud* (Islamic criminal punishment) laws (Liow 2004a). PAS’ electoral successes gave the party an even more visible platform to make its voice heard, and presence felt, in the public sphere: since 1991, PAS has controlled the state of Kelantan, and for some periods, was even in control of other states such as Terengganu and Kedah (Stark 2004).

Many of the works detailing UMNO’s response have been party-centric (Wain 2012), and have not properly explored the role of the *ulama* who opposed PAS’ ‘Islamic state’ rhetoric. Relying on the *ulama* to successfully counter PAS’ claims was vital for UMNO in this ideological battle. These *ulama* disagree on what constitutes an ‘Islamic state’. According to the state-affiliated Salafi *ulama*, any government that is Muslim, should be obeyed, even if it tyrannical. Dr Sulaiman Nordin, a senior Salafi *alim*, said that it is part of Sunni theology to obey Muslim rulers, and plotting to overthrow these rulers would be akin to following in the footsteps of the

Kharijites.⁵ Dr Fathul Bari shares a similar opinion.⁶ Many of the *ulama* who do not belong to PAS, articulate a similar position too.⁷ Even the usually dissenting Dr Asri, the Mufti of Perlis, concedes that Malaysia is an Islamic state, although he was careful to add that it does not give a *carte blanche* license for its leaders to avoid scrutiny by the public.⁸ Independent *ulama*, especially the conservatives, too seemingly backed the government's Islamic claims. Dr Uthman Al-Muhammady, a renowned independent *alim*, swore by God's name at a public forum that Malaysia is not a secular country.⁹

The discourse of the Islamic State goes beyond scoring political points. One *alim* who warrants special scrutiny in this discussion is Professor Syed Naquib Al-Attas. Al-Attas is considered to be one of the foremost Malay intellectuals of his time (Aljunied 2013). Al-Attas has neither been officially part of the state nor is he an opposition member. He is renowned for pioneering the concept of 'Islamization of knowledge' – alongside Ismail Faruqi and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. His works continue to inform policymakers and *ulama*, many of whom were his students. He was the founder of International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) in Kuala Lumpur, and was a mentor to Anwar Ibrahim, and undeniably influenced many of the latter's understandings of Islamic governance (Abaza 1999).¹⁰ Al-Attas' main assertion is that Western-style secularism is not compatible with Muslim societies, and Muslims must endeavor to reject such notions (S. M. Al-Attas 1993). Suffice to say, Al-Attas has contributed to the increased prominence of Islam in both state administration and societal discourse, both via his

⁵ Interview with Dr Sulaiman Nordin, 4 June 2015.

⁶ Interview with Dr Fathul Bari, 3 June 2015.

⁷ Interview with Dr Ridhuan Tee, 4 June 2015.

⁸ See Asri's website, Minda Tajdid (Reformist Mind), "Adakah Malaysia sebuah negara Islam (Is Malaysia an Islamic State)," 19 June 2014. Accessed 20 May 2016.

⁹ "Demi Allah Malaysia bukan negara secular – Dr Uthman Al-Muhammady (By Allah, Malaysia is not an Islamic country - Dr Uthman Al-Muhammady)," *UMNO Online*, 16 July 2010. <http://www.umno-online.my/2010/07/17/demi-allah-malaysia-bukan-negara-sekular-dr-uthman-el-muhammadi/>. Accessed 16 May 2016.

¹⁰ Although Al-Attas himself was independent, it can be argued that the institution that was established by his students, the Centre for Advanced Studies on Islam, Science and Civilisation (CASIS), has been co-opted by the Malaysian state. The positions it takes on political issues usually mirror that of the state's.

scholarship and his mentorship of individuals who assumed important positions in government. His example highlights the multitude of paths via which the *ulama* affect the state and its various components; one does not need to be officially part of the state to effect such influence. Al-Attas was a public intellectual and *alim* whose scholarly works prove pivotal in affecting public discourse on the religious character of the state.

What warrants emphasis is the role of the *ulama* in defining the very *nature* of the Malaysian state. The majority of both the state-linked *ulama*, those from the opposition, and the independents, define Malaysia to be an 'Islamic State', albeit in different ways. This has a tangible effect on how the state positions, refashions and reinvents itself, especially in the midst of tumultuous political times. The state, which used to see itself as 'secular' in nature, increasingly defines itself, and in fact, is nudged towards identifying itself, as Islamic. The *ulama's* interactions with the state, the state's dependence on them for its credibility, and the resulting growing influence of the *ulama* because of the access they have to key positions, practically ensures the move from a 'secular' to an 'Islamic' state.

Rising Conservatism in Malaysia: State-led and Ulama-approved, or Ulama-led and State-approved?

It cannot be doubted that recent events in Malaysia have shown that the state is gradually adopting more conservative stances. The rise of conservatism is linked to multiple complex factors: the UMNO-PAS competition for Malay votes, the rise of other opposition parties, the progressively tenuous electoral position of UMNO and BN and hence, the need to resort to religious rhetoric to bolster the party's standing, and perhaps most importantly, the nature of the process of Islamization itself. Once the state embarked on Islamization, it could not entirely manage and control the process. The co-optation of the *ulama* into various state mechanisms proved vital in this process. Religious scholars who have propounded conservative interpretations of Islamic texts include both traditionalist and Salafi *ulama*.

In fact, while most analyses centre about the state's deliberate Islamization tactics, one can put forth the argument that Islamization was in actuality, *ulama*-led. At the minimum, their roles were as salient as the state's. To be sure, Mahathir made a sentient decision to place Islam at the forefront of his development agenda, is rightly credited/blamed for altering the face of Malaysian politics, by pushing it toward a more religious-conscious direction. However, he would not have been able to do it without the support of the *ulama*. The *ulama* in state bureaucracies – through their writings, sermons, speeches, public addresses, televised talks, and whatever platforms they had access to– contributed to an atmosphere of heightened religious awareness. This is a point that should not be trivialized; the *ulama* gained even more prominence in the midst of the religious revival atmosphere in the 1970s/80s, and at the same time, augmented the sense of piety amongst many Malaysians.¹¹ The causal arrow thus goes both ways: the *ulama* both benefitted from heightened religiosity, and added to it.

The full phenomenon of rising religiosity must be understood within the context of both international and domestic politics, of which, the spread of Salafism-Wahhabism is but one factor. As PAS and UMNO proposed competing versions of the 'true' Islam amidst the backdrop of religious revivalism and portrayed each other as being un-Islamic – to the point of calling each other infidels – the *ulama* were suddenly thrust in even more overt political positions. Already having been involved with politics on some level since the days of colonialism (M. N. Osman 2014), the UMNO-PAS rivalry – coupled with Mahathir's development agenda and rising Muslim assertiveness - provided an opportunity for different sets of *ulama*. For one, more *ulama* had to be enlisted into state agencies. As Mahathir pursued his modernization agenda, inadvertently, the powers of JAKIM grew, with the introduction of

¹¹ Some of the *ulama* interviewed proudly declared this. A common example that is given to bolster their assertion is the fact that prior to the 1970s, many Malaysian Muslim women did not wear the hijab properly. They used to don the '*selendang*', which exposed parts of their hair and ears, and from the perspective of traditional Islamic jurisprudence, was insufficient. According to these *ulama*, the widespread use of the hijab today is evidence that their efforts at increasing knowledge, and hence piety, of Muslims, have been somewhat fruitful.

more *ulama* into the bureaucracy (Liow 2009a, 51-52). Consequently, by the time Mahathir had stepped down in 2003, the influence of the *ulama* within state agencies had grown substantially. The process of Islamization was truly in full swing by then. In response to state-initiated Islamization, PAS itself drummed up its religious rhetoric, and tried to out-Islamize UMNO by engaging in *takfir* (blasphemy) accusations, claiming that UMNO leaders were essentially infidels for propagating secular laws (Liow 2004b, 187). PAS itself enlisted more *ulama*, as it evolved into a more 'Islamic' entity. The UMNO-PAS political rivalry thus hinged on the support of various sets of *ulama*. These religious scholars regularly called upon their followers to vote for their party of choice, framing it as a religious obligation. It is hence not surprising that both sides of the political spectrum became more conservative; majority of the *ulama* had always held conservative stances on religious affairs.

Perhaps a more important development than the UMNO-PAS rivalry was the expulsion of Anwar Ibrahim from UMNO, and his subsequent foray into oppositional politics. While PAS was a thorn in Mahathir's political life, there was never really a danger of UMNO-BN losing power to PAS; Mahathir had convincingly won all of his four general elections as Prime Minister prior to the incident (Chin 1996). However, with Anwar being sacked, a window of opportunity emerged for the opposition. Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah, formed what eventually became known as the People's Justice Party (PKR), as he was imprisoned for charges of corruption and homosexuality. The party amassed an enormous following (Musalib 2000). The other major opposition parties, PAS and DAP (Democratic Action Party), joined forces with PKR, and for the first time in Malaysian history, proved to be a formidable electoral bloc. After his release from prison, Anwar became the de facto leader of the opposition, Pakatan Rakyat (PR). Anwar's role must be highlighted: he had the Islamic credentials to appeal to PAS and the secular credibility favoured by DAP, and thus was in a unique position to unite the two parties into a formidable force.

In response to the opposition's latest, and hitherto most daunting challenge, UMNO-BN basically had two choices: the ruling coalition could have either liberalized and move toward a more equitable ideology that did not emphasize the predominance of Malay-Islamic rights, or it could move further to the right in a bid to capture the hearts of Malay-Muslim voters. The Najib administration attempted to do both, and was unsurprisingly unsuccessful due to the contradictory nature of the two approaches (Weiss 2013). Despite initial promises of a more liberal and open society based on an inclusive interpretation of Islamic sources, the government ultimately did not follow through on its proclamations.

Najib's retreat to racial-religious pull for electoral purposes when confronted with a more liberal PAS, and a seemingly formidable opposition coalition, was both dependent on, and provided opportunities for, the *ulama* who were willing to collaborate with the state. The need for the government to bolster its Islamic credentials proved favorable for the clerics. The state benefitted from religious edicts from scholars such as Harussani and Fathul Bari, who proclaim that it is impermissible to vote for the opposition. Others such as Dr Juanda Jaya, a former Mufti of Perlis, moved from publicly supporting BN to eventually contesting elections under the BN ticket.¹² In return, these scholars had free rein to continue promoting conservative religious thought. One can see then that there is a palpable link between politics and rising conservatism: while the government may not necessarily directly promote conservative religious expressions, its dependence on the *ulama* for electoral purposes meant that the *latter* attained more freedom in disseminating their understandings of Islam, which tended to be generally be more conservative than what liberal factions in society like SIS and Dr Asri prefer. As already discussed, Najib was facing several scandals that affected his regime's moral

¹² "Daripada Mufti kepada ahli politik, Dr Juanda mahu teruskan kesinambungan BN (From Mufti to politician, Dr Juanda hopes for BN's continuity," *UMNO Online*, 3 May 2016. <http://www.umno-online.my/2016/05/03/daripada-mufti-kepada-ahli-politik-dr-juanda-mahu-teruskan-kesinambungan-bn/>. Accessed 17 August 2016.

legitimacy. Invoking Islam and enlisting the help of the *ulama* were potentially useful electoral strategies.

A few examples are in order. Perhaps the most instructive case in this regard is the treatment of minority sects within the Islamic faith, most notably, the Shi'ites. While controversy has existed between the majority Sunni and Shi'ite schools of thought from early Islamic history, by and large, Shi'ites have been accepted as Muslims. The National Fatwa Council of Malaysia, however, issued a fatwa in 1996 that declared Shi'ism to be deviant (Haji 2014).¹³ It was only during the 2010s that the fatwa came to be aggressively enforced though, resulting in police raids on private Shi'ite gatherings and public pronouncements on the dangers of the Shi'ite menace (Musa 2013). This coincided with the period which Salafi scholars joined UMNO, motivating many to conclude that the rise of Wahhabism could explain the newfound anti-Shi'ite fervor.¹⁴ While the anti-Shi'ite sentiments of Salafis such as Fathul Bari are well-documented, it is erroneous to attribute anti-Shi'ism entirely to Wahhabism. The Mufti of Negeri Sembilan, a well-known Sufi *alim*, issued a fatwa in 2013 stating that Shi'ite understandings of Islam are patently false and must not be followed by any Muslim.¹⁵ The aforementioned traditionalist, Harussani Zakaria, argued that Shi'ism endangered Muslim unity in the country (Haji 2014). Zamihan Zain Al-Ghari, a renowned anti-Wahhabi cleric, warned Malaysians of the spread of Shi'ism and called for a preventive law to curtail its teachings. Anti-Shi'ite attitudes were thus unmistakably not limited to Salafi scholars. In 2013, there was a campaign against Shi'ism by Sunni clerics throughout the nation that led to the

¹³ According to the same report, Shi'ites number between 2000 and 250 000 (estimates vary due to the unreliability of data), which means that the community make up, at best, 0.9% of the total population.

¹⁴ See, for instance, "Saudi petrodollars propagating religious hatred: \$681 million to Malaysia's PM to ban Shia Islam," *American Herald Tribune*, 1 February 2016. <http://ahtribune.com/religion/446-saudi-petrodollars-malaysia-to-ban-shia-islam.html>. Accessed 17 August 2016.

¹⁵ Jabatan Mufti Kerajaan Negeri Sembilan (Mufti's Office for Negeri Sembilan), "Penyelewengan ajaran Taslim, Qadiani dan Syiah (The misguidedness of teachings of Taslim, Qadiani and Shi'ites)," 17 July 2013. <http://muftins.gov.my/index.php/arkib2/himpunan-fatwa/169-fatwa-mufti-negeri-sembilan/867-penyelewengan-ajaran-taslim-qadiani-syiah>. Accessed 17 August 2016.

condemnation of Shi'ism in sermons, mosques and on television programs (Haji 2014). The UMNO elites then reacted to the rising anti-Shi'ite sentiments amongst the clerics and populace. Senior leaders including Najib and Muhiyiddin, then Deputy Prime Minister, declared that Islam in Malaysia was to be defined as 'Sunni' Islam. Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, then Defence Minister, went as far as equating Shi'ism to a national security problem, and announced outright that there was "no place" for Shi'ites in UMNO.¹⁶

The episode is reflective of how the *ulama* have managed to force the hand of the political leaders, in the process, affected the 'state' and society. Shi'ites were now to be considered pariahs, citizens with less than equal status, and were in fact, an abomination to the country. Even more pertinently, the clerics have managed to alter the definition of 'Islam' itself. Islam was now equivalent to Sunnism, and anything that was not Sunni, was no longer 'Islam'.

Other examples include the increasingly draconian approach taken toward civil society groups. The Malaysian state used to be more tolerant in its treatment of liberal organizations. However, as these groups began to challenge the authority of the *ulama*, the latter responded with their own pronouncements. In the process, the state took the side of the *ulama*, upon whom it is reliant for religious legitimacy, and political expediency. For instance, in 2015, the National Fatwa council issued an edict that explicitly dealt with the regime's implementation of a new Goods and Services Tax (GST). The *ulama* on the council ruled that GST was permissible in Islam, as long as national and public interests were protected.¹⁷ These *ulama* thus, intentionally or otherwise, provide religious legitimacy to the ruling regime and some of its unpopular policies, such as the GST. In return, the *ulama* are given free rein to act in domains which do not threaten the state directly. One can look to fatwas issued by the Malaysian *ulama* that point toward

¹⁶ "No place for Shia," *New Straits Times*, 8 December 2013. <http://news.asiaone.com/news/malaysia/no-place-shia>. Accessed 17 August 2016.

¹⁷ Malaysian Ministry of Communication and Multimedia, "Fatwa Berhubung GST (Fatwa on GST)," <http://www.jasa.gov.my/bm/gallery/lang-bm-arkib-lang-lang-en-archive-lang/23-isu-terkini/246-fatwa-berhubung-gst.html>. Accessed 22 August 2015.

conservatism in the country. These include the banning of Yoga,¹⁸ the prohibition for women to reject their husbands' overtures for sex,¹⁹ amongst others. State officials seldom challenge these fatwas or go head-on against the *ulama*, not only because it would be unwise to for a regime that trumps up its Islamic credentials to go against religious scholars, but also, because these fatwas do not threaten the legitimacy of the regime. In fact, as Abdul Hamid and Ismail (2014) notes, during Badawi's premiership, Islamist conservatism stemming from the influence of the *ulama* had begun surfacing to an alarming extent, so much so that even the Prime Minister himself – who advocated a more moderate form of Islam – was unable to halt it.

The above discussion further raises the point of the malleability of 'Islam'. Ultimately, the 'Islam' that is practiced by society, and/or endorsed by the state, represents a confluence of theological, socio-political, economic and other conditions. As these conditions shift, alter and are modified, due to whatever reason(s), so too would 'Islam' evolve.

Southern Thailand: Refashioning the State and Islam: The *Ulama's* Changing Ideas

Islam in Southern Thailand: Background

The Thai South has been a restive region for the most part of the last seventy years. Muslim separatists have battled the central government since the 1940s, with a brief period of respite in the 1990s. While technically the 'South' includes regions like Phuket, Krabi, Satun and Trang, whose inhabitants are ethnically Malay but have generally assimilated into the Thai identity and are Thai-speaking,²⁰ the three regions of Yala, Patani and Narathiwat - the Deep South, or what local Muslims term as '*Tiga Wilayah*' (three regions) - is where the current unrest is concentrated. Locals exhibit a strong sense of 'Malay-ness' in their customs and

¹⁸ Robin Brant, "Malaysian clerics issue yoga fatwa," *BBC News*, 22 November 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7743312.stm>. Accessed 19 August 2016.

¹⁹ "Malaysian fatwa: Women must have sex with husbands, even on a camel," *Al-Arabiya News*, 28 April 2015. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/variety/2015/04/28/Malaysian-fatwa-women-MUST-have-sex-with-husbands-even-on-a-camel.html>. Accessed 19 August 2016.

²⁰ Many of the inhabitants of these regions today do not speak Malay.

traditions. Islam is an important marker in their cultural identity. Malay Muslims (the term I will henceforth use to refer to Muslims in the three regions) tend to view the Thai state with ambivalence, if not suspicion. Historically, the three regions were part of the independent Muslim Patani Raya kingdom, until it was subjugated by the Siamese King in 1786 (Croissant 2005, 22). The Siamese started to further strengthen their hold on the Southern Muslims, and adopted a progressively high-handed approach especially after the Anglo-Siamese treaty of 1909. Subsequently, various governments tried to create a unified 'Thai identity' which was predicated upon Buddhism (Forbes 1982). Soon after, armed resistance in the form of separatist movements emerged amongst Malay Muslims (Kersten 2004).

The importance of the *ulama* is pronounced in Southern Thailand, where levels of religiosity are sturdy. The *ulama* in the Deep South enjoy a level of veneration that is not uncommon to traditional societies. *Ulama* are not just religious teachers; they are also agents of social change. Locals frequently cite the example of the late scholar Sheikh Daud Fatani, as an erudite *alim* who never stopped resisting the Siamese state.²¹

There is a sense of mistrust towards state agencies and those who "collaborate" with the state, including the state-appointed *Chularajmontri*, who is supposed to be the highest religious authority in the land (Yusuf 1998). No *Chularajmontri* has ever been originated from the three regions (Wattana 2006). This has led to the perception that the *Chularajmontri* is a tool of the state and not one who has the interests of the Muslims at heart. The scepticism toward the *Chularajmontri* inadvertently enhances the role of local *ulama* even more. The current *Chularajmontri*, Aziz Phittakumpol, however, has a slightly more encouraging image among Malay Muslims: he hails from Songkhla, which is in the South too, even if he does not originate

²¹ This was a recurring theme in my interactions with the locals.

from the three regions.²² Nevertheless, despite the best efforts of Aziz, there is a lingering suspicion of the institution of the *Chularajmontri* itself.

Redefining the State and 'Islam': Consequences of Stifling Political Opportunity Structures

Reimagining the State: Rehabilitation of the Thai Centre

The hostile relationship between the Thai state and the *ulama* of the past has already been documented above. Siamese/Thai control of the three regions have been perceived as an unwanted occupation, and even a form of colonialism (Jerryson 2011). Ideas of armed resistance against the centre then became commonplace. The *ulama* of the Deep South such as Sheikh Daud and Haji Sulong, like elsewhere in the Muslim world, opposed Siamese/Thai 'colonialism': both advocated resisting the Thai state. With the long history of repression and confrontation between the centre and the Deep South, the *ulama* - post-Haji Sulong - are in some form of conundrum: if they wished to stop opposing the Thai state, or cooperate with it, they would have to reimagine the state. The state could not be categorized as *kafir harbi* (belligerent infidels, who are enemies of the faith) anymore. In reality, that was indeed what transpired. The *ulama* today have refashioned the state, or rather, their imagination of the Thai state. The Thai state was no longer the belligerent infidel that must be fought, but was now a friend, a misunderstood entity or simply a neutral party that was not against Islam, depending on who was doing the describing. What was consistent though amongst the *ulama* I interviewed is that none of them considered Bangkok to be an occupier, even if attitudes towards the centre may vary. Ismail Lufti's characterization of the Thai state may be the most radical in this regard. Not only does he consider the depiction of Pattani as an abode of war by *ulama* such as Sheikh Daud to be erroneous, he considered the region to be a nominal abode of Islam, as the

²² Respondents generally communicated this sentiment to me. Many said that his heart is with the Muslim peoples "berjiwa rakyat", explicitly comparing him with previous *Chularajmontri*.

Thai state ensured that Islam could be practised, in addition to providing assistance for Islamic schools, universities, and mosques (Joll 2012). Lutfi says:

“I adopt the approach of advising them (Thai leaders) with good words and wisdom (*bilhikmah wal mawi'zotil hasanah*).²³ The state does not know much about Islam. Therefore, I have to play this role.”²⁴

Dr Muhammad Kamil was similarly positive in describing the state:

“*Ulama* of Pattani in the past did not want to be *ulama su'* (evil). That is why they did not want any association with the state. Today, the situation is different. The state has guaranteed provisions for Islam in the region. Therefore, the *ulama* must change their approach (toward the state). They (state leaders) are not our enemies.”²⁵

Kamil appeals to the changing nature of the Thai state in explaining his decision to work with Bangkok. What is even more relevant is that in doing so, he had to recast the state's image: the state has clearly changed, and this shift in attitude can be discerned by the fact that Malay Muslims today accept the *Chularajmontri*, a state-appointed religious official. This view was shared by other *ulama*, especially those who either had good relationships with the state or whose *pondoks* had become *mahads*. Baba Nik Abdul Kadir declares outright that the Thai state “is no longer oppressive”,²⁶ while another *alim* glosses over the thorny relationship the *ulama* had with the state in the decades prior and attributed it to a series of misunderstandings.²⁷

It would be remiss though to think that the rehabilitation of the Thai state only occurred amongst the *ulama* who have cooperated with it or benefitted from its patronage. In fact, the opposite is true. The *ulama* who have been described earlier as passively resisting the state too do not perceive the Thai state to be an enemy upon whom war must be declared. Admittedly, they are less complimentary toward the state than the likes of Lutfi and Kamil, but they still

²³ This is a reference to the Quranic injunction found in 16:25: “Call to the Lord with wisdom and good words, and discuss with them in that which is best...”

²⁴ Interview with Dr Ismail Lutfi, 11 June 2015.

²⁵ The moniker “*ulama su'*” is usually given to *ulama* who are evil and/or exceedingly close to rulers.

²⁶ Interview with Baba Nik Abdul Kadir of Mahad Saiburi Islam Wittaya, 12 June 2015.

²⁷ Interview with Baba of Burmin, 14 June 2015. He says that the relationship is now much better since both sides have interacted with each other and therefore know each other's intentions.

apprehend the state as a non-enemy. In spite of promulgating that he would never take assistance from the state, Baba Ismail Sepanjang goes on to add that the state cannot be regarded as an enemy since it “does not restrict the opening of *pondoks*”, or prevent Islam from being practised. The *ulama* of the past resisted the state, according to him, because the “situation was different”.²⁸ Baba Abdul Wahab explains that the state “does not cause problems” for *pondoks*, and thus there is no reason to oppose it.²⁹ Baba Abdul Aziz and Baba Ali, who run *pondoks* with 100 and 300 students respectively, enunciate contentment for the presence of *pondoks* in the Deep South, which reflect the state’s commitment to respect local traditions.³⁰ Baba Abdul Rahman politely articulates that since the government does not disturb the *pondoks*, he has no enmity for it, and does not endorse others who call for violence toward state-linked officials or security personnel.³¹

With the notable exception of Lufti, none of the *ulama* categorically distanced themselves from the past *ulama*, or said that their predecessors were mistaken in issuing edicts calling for resistance against Bangkok. The legacies of those *ulama* are very much intact, as they still command respect amongst their predecessors and the lay Malay Muslim. Rather, the contemporary *ulama* have sought to re-imagine the Thai state. ‘The situation has changed’ was a mantra that was repeated by almost every *alim* interviewed: the fatwas of Sheikh Daud and actions of Haji Sulong are not to be followed not because they were inherently wrong, but because the context has changed. The Thai state is not the aggressive foe of Islam that it used to be.

In reality, is unclear as to whether the Thai state has substantively altered its approach to the problem in the Deep South. Since long ago, the state has pursued a multi-pronged approach of

²⁸ Interview with Baba Ismail Sepanjang, 12 June 2015.

²⁹ Interview with Baba Abdul Wahab of Pondok Dalor, 13 June 2015.

³⁰ Interviews with Baba Abdul Aziz and Baba Ali, 13 June 2015.

³¹ Interview with Baba Abdul Rahman, 12 June 2015.

military involvement, co-optation of key personnel and institutions, and financial exertions where necessary (Quang and Oishi 2016). It would be difficult to say that there has been a distinct break in approach whereby the state adopted a different posture towards the Malay regions. Scupin notes that the Thai state's approach towards its ethnic minorities, including the Malay Muslims, have always been to prioritize assimilation "without openly denying pluralistic tendencies." (Scupin 1998, 222) Don Pathan, a prominent activist and intellectual based in Yala, believes that the nature of the conflict in the South has not changed much over the years.³² The Thai state still adopts a militaristic approach to the Deep South: military personnel are ubiquitous through the region. Bangkok is overly Buddhist in tendencies, and the Thai identity is still predicated upon the Buddhist identity. *Pondoks* are still viewed with some suspicion in the three regions. It does seem as though there have been minimal actual changes in the way the Thai state has dealt with the Southern Thai situation. Yet, the *ulama* seem to unanimously agree that the state is indeed different today. I postulate that it is the *ulama* who have recalibrated their positions, more so than the state has. Successive cases of *ulama* who confronted the state and suffered the consequences left indelible stains on the psyches of the *ulama*: engaging in violent resistance, or advocating it, was no longer a viable option. Therefore, the *ulama* had little choice but to redefine its relationships with the state, and in doing so, had to reimagine the state as a non-enemy. The *ulama*'s understanding of the state was what was eventually reformed, and not the state per se.

To be sure, this is not to suggest that the *ulama* are being dishonest, or they are self-serving and are just concerned with self-preservation. In fact, I would suggest otherwise. As discussed in earlier sections, the 'costs' and 'benefits' for the *ulama* are not necessarily material. The *ulama* are most definitely interested in the welfare of their own constituents, who are the

³² Jonathan Head, "Putting a face to the conflict in Thailand's South," *BBC News*, 19 February 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21504125>. Accessed 25 October 2016.

Muslims, and the future of ‘Islam’ itself. For instance, when the *ulama* say that caution needs to be exercised in advising the state, because greater harm may ensue, they are not just referring to harm which could be inflicted upon themselves. Repeatedly, *ulama* like Baba Ismail Sepanjang explicitly expressed their concerns that if the *ulama* openly resist the Thai state, the situation would worsen for the Muslim laity in the Deep South.³³ Status quo, which involves not challenging the Thai state, would be the best option, given the circumstances, for the *ulama*, their constituents, and ‘Islam’ itself. A similar lens of analysis should be adopted when analysing the next section. The *ulama* do not whimsically redefine and re-appropriate Islamic concepts just out of pure self-interest; rather, the limiting socio-political environment informs their understanding of ‘Islam’, and what it enjoins.

Redefining and re-appropriating Islamic concepts: Interventions of the Ulama

As alluded to earlier, the *ulama* often invoke the concept of changing “contexts” to explain differing actions or understandings of Islamic principles. This concept is not novel at all: it has always been recognized that it is imperative for the *ulama* to understand the environments in which they are issuing fatwa. The Damascene *alim* ‘Ibn Abidin (d. 1836) explained the necessity for muftis and the *ulama* to be socially cognizant:

“The rigidity of the mufti and the qadi (judge) in following (only) the apparent meaning of the reported text (*zahir al-manqul*), while neglecting custom (*urf*) and context (*al-qara’in al-wadiha*), and his ignorance of the (actual) circumstances of the people necessarily entails the loss of numerous rights and (results in) injustice for numerous people.” (Zaman 2002, 19)

Factoring in the ‘context’ then is unquestionably a pivotal part of the *ulama*’s job scope, wherever and whenever they are; without understanding the specific socio-political and cultural conditions, one would not be able to exercise *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and extract the essence of the teachings of the Islamic texts to make it applicable to the daily lives of their

³³ Interview with Baba Ismail Sepanjang, 12 June 2015.

constituents. The contexts would then inform the *ulama* on the most appropriate ways to interpret the texts, so as to ensure *maslahah* (public interest). The rhetoric of the *ulama* of the Deep South, as their counterparts elsewhere, reflects their reactions to the changing ‘contexts’. In this case, the context differs from the past in mostly two ways: firstly, the Thai state’s treatment of previous *ulama* like Haji Sulong and their subsequent ignominious ends, and its continued military approach, entrenched the *ulama*’s beliefs that confrontation with the state was no longer viable; and secondly, the modern economy demands a different set of education and skills, which then requires a changing set of responses.

Baba Nik Abdul Kadir of Mahad Saiburi Islam Wittaya states:

“In the past, I used to oppose the government... Now that the state has stopped mistreating Muslims, I decided to work with our leaders. I found that they were willing to compromise. (That is why) My *pondok* became a *mahad*.... The jihad of the *ulama* today is not fighting against the state, but the jihad is spreading knowledge.”³⁴

Baba Abdul Kadir asserts that his opinion that the state is no longer mistreating Muslims is evinced by the fact that the *ulama* are not prevented from teaching Islam, and neither are Muslims disallowed from practising their faith.³⁵ Another traditionalist *alim* echoes the Baba Abdul Kadir’s view that “jihad” is different today:

“The *ulama* (largely) decided to make the decision to become a *mahad* because they realized that was the way forward for Muslims. For Muslims to be successful and have leadership positions, you need success in academic subjects.”³⁶

What can be seen here is the re-appropriation of the term ‘jihad’ and the responsibilities of the *ulama*. The *ulama* were not required to oppose the state, or provide checks and balance against it. Right now, the priority for the *ulama* was to spread knowledge. Jihad, traditionally

³⁴ Interview with Baba Nik Abdul Kadir of Mahad Saiburi Islam Wittaya, 12 June 2015.

³⁵ As already stated earlier, Islam was never banned in the Deep South. Baba Abdul Kadir’s point thus does not seem to explain the differences, if any, between the Thai state’s approach to Muslims in the Deep South in the past as opposed to today.

³⁶ Interview with Mudir (Principal) of Mahad Nuruddin in Narathiwat, 13 June 2015.

understood as striving in the cause of God, be it in a physical manner such as in armed confrontations against incursions from the enemies of Islam, or in an intellectual endeavour such as making religious knowledge accessible to the masses (Schleifer 1983), was now exclusively defined in terms of the latter. This in spite of the fact that just decades prior, many *ulama* were advocating resistance against the state (Bradley 2013). The relationships between the Thai state and the *ulama* have resulted in a redefining of the roles of the *ulama*, or the purposes they serve. The *ulama* deemed it no longer apt for them to view the Thai state in antagonistic terms, and instead, shifted the focus to enhancing the spirituality of the Malay Muslims. This move was of course contingent upon reimagining the Thai centre to no longer be an enemy, if not an explicit ally. The changing contexts meant that Islamic concepts, especially jihad, had to be comprehended differently, in accordance with the altering socio-political environments. *Ulama* do not operate in a vacuum, and as much as they attempt to maximize their gains in their social milieu, they have to react accordingly to changing circumstances too. The true mettle of an *alim* is judged by how well he adapts to social realities. Mastery of the texts is crucial, but so is a full appreciation of the contexts.³⁷ The *ulama* of the Deep South concluded that jihad as understood by their predecessors was no longer possible nor desirable.

The *ulama* further justify their decisions to work with the state, via accepting the state's version of a 'proper' educational institution, by expanding their definitions of 'knowledge'. The *mudir* of Mahad Muhammadiyah, popularly known as Cerowoh amongst locals, makes this claim:

“In Islam, there is no separation between ‘religious’ and ‘academic’ knowledge. Everything that is useful to humans can be considered as knowledge.”³⁸

³⁷ Interview with Tariq Ramadan, 12 February 2016.

³⁸ Interview with Mudir of Mahad Muhammadiyah (Cerowoh), 12 June 2015.

Baba Abdul Kadir verbalizes the same opinion in an almost ad verbatim manner:

“There is no distinction between ‘religious’ and ‘academic’ knowledge in Islam.”³⁹

As state leaders had asserted before, *pondoks* were not equipping students with knowledge that was relevant for the modern economy (Liow 2009b, 25-26). The Thai state saw traditional Islamic educational institutions as incompatible with the demands of the modern economy, and hence invested a lot of money in the Deep South to convert the *pondoks* to *mahads*. For the *ulama* who went on board with the plan, they had to adjust their understandings, or articulations, of knowledge (*ilm*) itself. Knowledge was not to be divided into the secular and religious realms, these *ulama* contend, and everything that was beneficial to humankind could be accepted as ‘knowledge’. The distinction between *fardhu ain* and *fardhu kifayah*, which are classical concepts in Islam, was employed by these *ulama* (Mutalib 1996, 237). *Fardhu ain* refers to obligations that are required upon every individual Muslim, whereas *fardhu kifayah* refers to communal obligations: if a segment of the Muslim population performs the act that is considered *fardhu kifayah*, it absolves the entire community of sin or blame (Borhan and Abdul Aziz 2009, 330). Muslim scholars had always understood knowledge to consist of both *fardhu ain* and *fardhu kifayah* components (O. Bakar 1992), so in this sense, the *ulama* of Southern Thailand were not advocating something revolutionary. What is different though is their understandings of knowledge vis-à-vis the *pondoks*; while the continued importance of the *pondoks* was emphasized, they argue that the absence of academic subjects being taught in *pondoks* would hurt the Malay Muslims as a whole. This is because their children would not be competitive in the job market, would be deprived of employment opportunities, and the

³⁹ Interview with Baba Nik Abdul Kadir of Mahad Saiburi Islam Wittaya, 12 June 2015.

resultant outcome would go against the spirit of education in Islam. The *fardhu kifayah* aspect of knowledge had to be taken more seriously. As an *alim* maintains:

“For Muslims to be successful and have leadership positions, you need success in academic subjects. This is why becoming a *mahad* is the way forward for us Muslims.”⁴⁰

For the *alim* quoted above, whose *mahad* has an enrolment of about 1100 students, making the decision to turn his *pondok* into a *mahad* was for the benefit of the community; he couched it in terms of communal obligations. This reaction was not dissimilar to the *ulama* whose *pondoks* had gradually moved in the direction urged by the Thai state. The Mudir of Cerowoh was more forthcoming in explicating his position:

“I invite state leaders to come here (visit his *mahad*) regularly. Because, I am doing what they want, and what they will appreciate. I focus on *Dakwah Islami* (propagation of Islam). This includes teaching Math and Science. Our goals are the same.”⁴¹

These *ulama* have accepted, reluctantly or otherwise, the state’s exhortations to modernize the *pondoks* with new curriculum, and in essence, have reaped the financial benefits of doing so. Supporting the state’s goals required a realigning of their understandings of ‘knowledge’, or at least, the admission that the *pondoks* were not fulfilling their supposed responsibilities in providing holistic forms of education – defined by one which includes subjects that trains students for the modern economy – for Muslims. Even the *ulama* who retained their *pondoks* had to accept that academic subjects, such as mathematics, science, history and others, were beneficial genres of knowledge that had to be mastered by at least some Muslims.⁴²

It is not so much that *fardhu kifayah* as a concept was introduced by the *ulama*; the notion had always existed in Islamic jurisprudence, and the distinction between *fardhu ain* and *fardhu kifayah* is one that is emphasized right from the level of a novice in the study of Islamic

⁴⁰ Interview with Mudir (Principal) of Mahad Nuruddin in Narathiwat, 13 June 2015.

⁴¹ Interview with Mudir of Mahad Muhammadiyah (Cerowoh), 12 June 2015.

⁴² Interview with Baba Abdul Aziz, 13 June 2015.

sciences. Rather, a more accurate assessment would be to say that they emphasized it more, especially in the field of *'ilm* or knowledge, after deciding to embrace the *mahad* system. The *ulama* are reacting not just to the state and its overtures, but also the society's demands and attitudes. As the lives of Malay Muslims become more intertwined with the capitalistic system, finding a reasonable-paying job occupies a high priority. This sentiment is encapsulated by Abdullah, a local Muslim who sends his children to the *mahads*:

“In the past, people in Pattani could just be fishermen or farmers. Now, it is not possible. I want the best for my children, which is why I send them to the *mahads*.” (But) Of course we must have *pondoks*. That is part of our history.”⁴³

The sentiment amongst many Malay Muslims seem to be that they overwhelmingly desire that the *pondoks* persist to be in existence, but they are less enthusiastic about actually sending their children to study at the *pondoks* in today's climate. The *ulama* were acutely aware of this sentiment. Baba Mokhtar, who was teaching at a *pondok* before, but now is employed in a government school, observes:

“The enrolment for the *mahads* are increasing because of two reasons. (Firstly) Religion is still extremely important here, and (secondly) people want both religious and non-religious knowledge. In the *pondok* (where he previously taught), many parents stopped sending their children there. Instead, they prefer the *mahads*.”⁴⁴

While the *pondoks* are far from on the verge of evisceration, there is palpably a realization on the part of the *ulama* that the Malay Muslims increasingly value non-religious education more. The *ulama* thus reacted accordingly, and many of the *pondoks* became *mahads*. Their understandings of, and commentaries on, on the concept of *'ilm* in Islam were consequently expanded.

⁴³ Interview with Abdullah, local Muslim, 29 March 2015.

⁴⁴ Interview with Baba Mokhtar, 11 June 2015.

Like some of their Malaysian counterparts, and indeed elsewhere, many of the Southern Thai *ulama* justify their cooperation with the state, or their political quietist stances, by invoking the Islamic injunction against *fitnah*. The *ulama*, in explicating why the state cannot be opposed, repeatedly reverted to the notion of *fitnah*: opposing the state could create more *fitnah* than letting the matter be. In fact, according to them, even the relatively-uncontroversial act of advising the state behind closed-doors, or away from the public eye, could cause *fitnah* and is thus unwarranted.⁴⁵ Again, this is not unlike *ulama* in other parts of the world. In 2011, many Syrian Sunni *ulama*, even those who were not in favour of the Assad Alawite regime, refrained from throwing their weight behind popular protests, branding them as “*fitnah*”. (Pierret 2013, 218) However, unlike in Malaysia and Syria, the usage of the term *fitnah* had different connotations. In those two countries, the *ulama* who supported the state, to some degree, express worry at the disintegration of a Muslim leadership, which would play into the hands of external enemies. The fretfulness on the part of the Southern Thai *ulama* is slightly different; the *fitnah* that is meant here evidently means the possibility of draconian actions taken against the *ulama*, if they are disavowed by the state. There was no external enemy beyond the state that could potentially cause *fitnah*, taking advantage of the ensuing chaos, if the state was opposed; instead, the very act of opposition is the potential source of *fitnah*, because of possible retaliation from the state. As one *alim* candidly explains:

“If you know that opposing the state would cause more *fitnah*, why would you do it? If the *ulama* are no longer around, then Islam would die out. It is better to focus on things that we can change. Education, spirituality...”⁴⁶

Islamic concepts – or ‘Islam’ itself as understood by the *ulama* – garnered different meanings as the ‘contexts’, changed. ‘Islam’ was previously understood by the predecessors of the current generation of religious clerics as being more militant, and they prescribed a jealous

⁴⁵ Interviews with Baba Ismail Sepanjang, 12 June 2015 and Baba Abdul Wahab of Pondok Dalor, 13 June 2015.

⁴⁶ Interview with Baba from a *pondok* in Pattani, 11 June 2015.

defence of their religious rights and protection of their land. Now, however, the same 'Islam' recommends that the *ulama* adopt a more pacifist approach: they should either cooperate with the state, or remain silent. Islamic texts have of course not changed; these *ulama* still rely on the same texts that their predecessors did to justify their respective political stances. The interpretations of these texts, and classical Islamic concepts, are what have shifted. This shift directly corresponds to the altering socio-political circumstances. Not only have the *ulama* reimagined the state, they have also redefined 'Islam'. I contend that 'Islam' itself is more malleable than many would like to think; this is discernible from the Southern Thai example, whereby similar concepts are surmised differently.

Conclusion

Much has already been written on this subject but it is nonetheless worth reiterating: statist approaches often do a disservice to the role of other actors in shaping societal outcomes. The choices of Malaysia and (Southern) Thailand serve to illustrate this point to a further extent. Both are regions with what can be accurately described as domineering states. Yet, in both cases, a category of societal actors, the *ulama*, are active players in the political system. No doubt, the extent to which the *ulama* can affect the political system, or even 'Islam' itself, is dependent on their own political opportunity structures: not every *alim* is able to influence outcomes in the same proportion. The *ulama* in Malaysia, as a whole, are able to be more prominent in their political systems than their Southern Thai counterparts because their political opportunity structures are wider. This, however, does not mean that the Southern Thai *ulama* are completely powerless and are at the behest of the state.

The larger point to be noted here is that the other actors within society, even in illiberal democracies or authoritarian regimes, what more, democracies, should be studied and analysed. Political outcomes are rarely, if ever, straightforward consequences of the intentions of state actors: often, they are results of negotiated tensions, bargaining, compromises, and strategic

calculations on the part of, and between, the state and other actors. States form just one component, albeit an important one, of the puzzle.

The *ulama* is but one group of societal agents. In Muslim societies, the *ulama* are crucial players. One could apply the analyses made in this paper, especially with regard to political opportunity structures and how they affect an agent's political posturing, to other actors, such as peasants, trade unionists, academics, civil society actors, NGOs, and even individuals, amongst others. Agency of individuals must be studied, however limiting the political circumstances may seem to be; as demonstrated, individuals (the *ulama*, in this case), do not just react to the political environment, but also shape them via their interactions with the state, resistance, cooperate or even subversion. The conditions under which these actors get to affect alter, disturb and induce political outcomes must be investigated.

Reading copy - Not for citation

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