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**ENABLING EXTREMISM IN MALAYSIA:
THE RISE OF CAPITALIST, FAR-RIGHT MUSLIMS
AND THE PRELUDE TO LIPSTICK JIHAD**

ENABLING EXTREMISM IN MALAYSIA: THE RISE OF CAPITALIST, FAR-RIGHT MUSLIMS AND THE PRELUDE TO LIPSTICK JIHAD

by Dina Zaman. IMAN *brief* | August 2021

Introduction

This paper's title mentioned that this study is a prelude to a bigger study and project that IMAN Research is planning to pursue. For this brief, I will explain how women are persuaded to join religious classes, and how their consumption behaviour

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In spite of a worldwide health scare, the coronavirus, Malaysia's economy is expected to grow by 6.7 percent in 2021 following a projected contraction of 5.8 percent in 2020 caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the latest edition of the World Bank Malaysia Economic Monitor: Sowing the Seeds. The Finance Ministry had floated a stimulus package to cushion the potential hit to the economy from the ongoing coronavirus outbreak, which has so far killed over 900 people and infected more than 100,000,000 worldwide (CNN February 9, 2021). All in all, Malaysians can look towards a slower growth in spending and consumption while they hold on tight to their purse strings, while the country recovers.

Malaysia has always been viewed as one of the most stable countries in Southeast Asia, having had uninterrupted democratic elections since independence. The country is relatively secular and has experienced positive economic growth. In 1958 more than 60 percent of Malaysians lived in poverty, a stark difference from the situation in 2016, when only 0.6 per cent lived below the poverty line. Today, Malaysia is a highly open upper-middle-income country, providing universal access to twelve years of basic education and healthcare. In terms of gender equality, Malaysia is doing relatively well, with women accounting for the majority of students in public universities, and with nearly 32.3 percent of decision-making positions in public service held by women. They make up the majority of the Malay middle class. The Edge Markets reported in August 2020, that "... bumiputera households made up 53.5% of the 1.72 million households in Malaysia that had more than RM10,000 in monthly gross income in 2019."

The New Muslimah of the 21st Century is educated, a professional and if not already part of the T20 demographic, aspires to be part of the group.

Who Are The New Malay Rich? Halal Consumption And Identity

WundermanThompson Intelligence in their 2017 report, “The New Muslimah: Southeast Asia Focus”, forecasted that the Muslim consumer market, was estimated to be worth \$1.9 trillion. Globally, the halal market is projected to grow from \$1.9 trillion in 2015 to \$3 trillion in 2021, according to the “State of the Global Islamic Economy Report 2016/2017” by Thomson Reuters and DinarStandard. The report also ranks Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan as the top three countries where millennials are engaged with Islamic economic topics, as measured by Facebook interactions.

The report focused on Muslim women. The Muslimah (Muslim women) demographic has money, is social media savvy, wants to look good, but religion is very important to them.

WundermanThompson Intelligence reported, “Nearly all say they pray five times a day; 94% say Islam is “very” important to them, ranking higher than family (92%), happiness (91%), and peace or serenity (89%),” the survey found out. The resurgence of public piety has made more and more Muslims, both men and women, very aware of the need to balance being religious and looking modern.

They are also very well versed with the Internet. The United Nations’ International Telecommunication Union (ITU) 2013 reported that Malaysia stood out as having the fourth-highest proportion of “digital natives” in the world, approximately 13.4 percent. Nearly three quarters of Malaysian youths are “digital natives”. In 2014, the number of Malaysian Facebook users alone was 9.24 million and expected to increase to 12.66 million by 2018.

Likewise for Muslimah women, being seen as observant of their faith and modern, has become urgent for many Muslims in Malaysia. This is due to the fact that they realise public perception of Muslims is not favourable. The 9-11 attacks spotlighted Muslims globally, and until today, Muslims are seen as regressive, backwards, rigid and potential terrorists.

One way of battling such negative perceptions is through entering the middle class and becoming more upwardly mobile.

Entry to Country Clubs and the Middle Class

Halal consumption is a growing commercial movement in compliance with the Shariah -- Islamic law -- and to enhance Muslims' economic prowess. Muslim wealth has become its people's identity and economic bargaining power. This is apparent in Southeast Asia, followed by Europe and non-Muslim countries like Japan and Korea, who realise the goldmine the halal economy is. Indonesia and Malaysia are very similar to how they approach what they consider economic jihad

Islam is a way of life, Malay Muslims declare, and with the state embodying and promoting religion into every detail of daily life, it would seem so. And in recent years, Malay-Malaysia has moved further to the right, and reclaiming their identities as Muslims and Malays.

Dr Hew Wai Weng, wrote about middle class competition and Islamic populism for *The New Mandala*, as representing the growth of Islamic populism, and the "... new middle classes tend to be pious Muslims, while existing middle classes have been perceived as mainly non-Muslims and not-so-religious Muslims—though of course, this is a simplified generalisation. In other words, some emerging middle class Muslims see Islam as an identity marker or a symbolic capital to compete with their existing counterparts."

Thus, the spike in support for halal goods and services, and a call to buy muslim products first. To the consumer, this is not just a religious move, but also a strategic choice in purchases; he or she has more to choose from, and even better, the products are halal and the profits go to a Muslim entrepreneur or business. One reason among many is that 60 per cent of halal product manufacturers are non Muslim², and Muslims want to reclaim that space.

Still, as the Buy Muslim First campaign gains traction by the day, politicians and business are worried. Not only would this fray the social fabric of multicultural Malaysia even further, but impact business in Malaysia. The then Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said that such a move would threaten Malaysia's harmony, and former Finance Minister, Lim Guan Eng said that "... it could also cause consumers to lose out by boycotting products which are superior in price and quality."

Other ministers who had spoken up against the boycott include Entrepreneur Development Minister Redzuan Yusof and Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Saifuddin Nasution.

“Interestingly, these new pious Muslim middle classes are in many ways imitating the lifestyles of their non-Muslim counterparts,” he observed. This phenomenon however, is being “... manipulated by the radicals and supported by the so-called conservatives. In order to expand influence, to challenge ruling elites, and to gain popular support, some radicals and politicians are manipulating and mobilising the sense of insecurity among conservative-inclined Muslims, especially the young and new middle class Muslims.”

But First, Religion: The Ideal Malay Woman And The Socialisation of Malay Muslim Women Into Religiosity

The Malay- Muslim community represents 53.3% of the population of Malaysia with nearly half consisting of females. (Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics Report, 2010).

According to *The Role of Malay Women in the Malaysian Workforce and its Impact on the Consciousness of Ethics and Integrity*, by Khalidah Khalid Ali, Department of Management and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS, Malay women represent the majority of the nation’s population and play diverse roles in the Malaysian community as students, parents, educators and professionals in both the private and public sectors. Some even drive local and global businesses as prosperous entrepreneurs in today’s competitive environment. The influx of women into the workforce has been one of the dominant national social trends during the past thirty years similar to that globally.

This demonstrates how impactful (Malay-Muslim) women are to Malaysia’s productivity and well-being. Malay Muslim women and their sisters are not just full participants in the labour force, but their presence is noted: there are many notable Muslim politicians like Nurul Izzah Anwar, and her mother, the former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr Wan Azizah Wan I Smail, for example, and many sit on boards of corporates and lead government-linked companies. To note, in the civil service, women in decision making is above 30 percent. Malay women are very active in community work too. And that they now contribute economically to household income, **they also have a say in the religious instruction and education of their spouses, families and friends.**

The reader must take note of a wave of Islamic revivalism that began in the late 1970s and 1980s. Many Malay students on government scholarships studied abroad in the United Kingdom, America and Australia and of course the Middle East.

Most of them came from middle class backgrounds as well as rural, and were exposed to global politics and different cultures and lifestyles when they studied there. The wave of Islamic revivalism and the Iranian revolution had indefinitely impacted these students. The rise of reactionary post colonial discourse and the emergence of Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood) against the backdrop of a volatile Middle East shaped the rise of Islamism in Malaysia and influenced the trajectory of socio-political Islam in Malaysia.

Organisations such as PAS, ABIM, Jemaah Islah (JIM) for example - have been influential in how Islam is practiced in Malaysia today. Each of these groups have politically influenced Islam. Within all organisations, the Women's wing has always been known to be the most robust. Malay-Muslim women are highly political and involved. This can be seen from the ground work done within political parties alone.

While the country lacks female political leaders, they are not short of foot soldiers. The success of UMNO and PAS during elections are usually attributed to the work done by the women's wing in canvassing votes.

The scholar Sylva Frisk noted that religious education in Malaysia flourished beginning the 1980s, developing out of a broad current of Islamisation of society. And the movement is not male dominated, as "closer observation usually shows large numbers of active female participants and members." (Janet L Bauer, Conclusion. The mixed blessings of women's fundamentalism and democratic impulses in a patriarchal world. 1979).

The importance of education, what more religious, is deeply in many Muslims' psyches. In fact, religious education helped, rather than hindered Malay women's political awakening. The spaces that women congregate are of course mosques, classes in private homes, religious lectures held in the workplace's surau and dakwah groups. Now, modern technology has created a boom in Islamic religious teachings: online webinars conducted by organisations such as The Al Maghrib Institute (<http://almaghrib.org/>), Bayyinah TV (<http://www.bayyinah.tv/sp/9942-bayyinah-tv>), social media plat-

forms such as Facebook, and telecommunications' instant messaging platforms such as What's App and Telegram, have reached Muslims in ways they could not have before. Videos on tajweed and prayers are forwarded and photos of Islamic duas and supplications are viraled. The observant and seeking Malay Muslim woman need not go far to find out more about her faith.

(Note too that the organisations mentioned above are of Salafi/Wahabbi leanings. I do not mean to profile nor suggest that such leanings are criminal, but to demonstrate that the spiritual lineage these groups belong to.)

The strong pull and influence of friendship among women cannot be underestimated. The minutes before a class is used to catch up on familial news, and the more enterprising members would be selling wares such as batik, telekung. Among the younger set, usrahs are also a place to network for professional gain.

Where's Your Money Going?

In February 2021, Bank Negara Malaysia's deputy governor Marzunisham Omar said there have been growing concerns that terrorist groups are using the Covid-19 pandemic to advance their propaganda and fundraising efforts.

"Although the risk seems muted at the moment due to strengthened border enforcement, online activities and financial transactions related to terrorism could easily go under the radar of authorities, Marzunisham said on Tuesday (Feb 2) in his speech in conjunction with the Asia/Pacific Group (APG) Annual Typologies Workshop."

The financial trail of terrorism is one aspect we monitor. IMAN Research has noted that there are various avenues of funding unhealthy activities, one being terrorism.

Malaysians are a caring and giving lot. One example is Nestle Malaysia's RM15million contribution to Covid efforts. Individual efforts run into the millions of ringgit. However, when it comes to the financing of the abovementioned activities, it has not been easy to trace. We do know that charity giving and the act of alms giving to religious teachers may contribute to such activities.

Below are two examples of suspicious acts of charity, of which the donor may have no clue to what activity he or she is contributing to. I also wish to caution the reader: **being an observant, conservative Muslim does not make one a radical nor terrorist. In fact, many adhere to Islam's approach to multiculturalism.**

Field Observation 2018

In 2018, IMAN employed a field worker to observe a few groups populated and frequented by the moneyed Malay Muslim. The writer too commenced with fieldwork herself.

Three communities were identified to observe. The duration of the field work was about slightly less than 6 weeks, and the location was the Greater Kuala Lumpur area. We had a few objectives:

- To identify if any, radical or unusual behaviors or characteristics in any given group
- To identify patterns in the participation of women in said groups
- To identify common patterns or themes that occur in order to discover the need for further areas of investigation.

The goal was to cover three different age-groups and social classes in the observation so as to potentially get more varied findings, and each group identified had linkages to salafi leaning ustazs, or thought.

The groups were identified for this main reason - radical or extremist religious teachers have taught there and we wanted to observe and identify if any radical or divisive messages were being disseminated, identify patterns, in the activities of the upper class (possible funding activities, etc) and behaviour or conduct amongst the female congregation.

Foundation A

The foundation was founded in 1973, and is situated in an upper class neighbourhood. It is attended by very wealthy members and friends of the foundation, and are of the upper class or "elite" Malays. They are known to give very charitably i.e: access to a large amount of funds, and conduct weekly religious classes with a stable of religious teachers. One of the teachers is known to enforcement agencies as being involved in IS recruitment.

Foundation B

- Founder has held prominent Islamic positions globally and is a well-known public figure
- Community itself has a very far reach (FB has 89, 557 likes)
- Prominent youth group that hold regular activities (12-18) open to both sexes but seemingly predominantly male.
- Espouse a more fundamentalist message and promote pan-Islamic thought
- Have been known to invite controversial speakers that profess a more divisive message

Trends Worth Noting

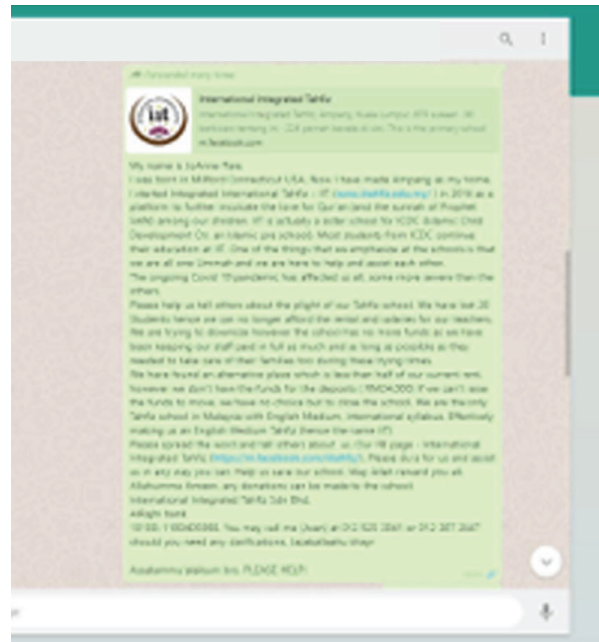
Both foundations signify a selection of people of which funding is possible. The fieldworker noted that at Foundation A, when an appeal for donation was made, a woman at the front of the class, opened her handbag and gave the teacher wads of cash. It is not impossible that close relationships would lead to individual donations.

In both groups, the women that were more vocal were those that were educated or financially independent/stable and were there of their own accord (without husbands present). In both groups these women would speak up if there were messages present in the lectures that they either disagreed with or required further clarity.

Almost all usrahs attended professed a wariness of the "other". While the sentiment was not outwardly divisive it is still present. One of usrahs in particular spoke of the need for the preparedness of Islamic nations which dwelled quite greatly **on the preparedness to go to war which was concerning.**

What's App 2020

Last year, this was sent to me.




An international tahfiz school requested for funds. Upon investigation, it was found that this was fraudulent.

- Director/Vice Principal**
International integrated Tahfiz Sdn Bhd
 Jan 2014 - Kini - 6 tahun 11 bulan
 Taman Nirwana Ampang, Malaysia
 International Integrated Tahfiz School.
 Focus is on building love of studying the Quran, Islamic Knowledge and achieving more through the approach towards academic studies.
- Principal / Training coordinator/ Owner/operator**
ICDC Kindergarten
 Jan 2004 - Kini - 16 tahun 11 bulan
 I train others on how to instill discipline in classrooms of younger children, how to teach English language to small non speaking english children, motivating teachers to fulfill their job requirements of teacher fully and
- IMN Greene Sdn. Bhd.**
 Selangor, Malaysia
 Jun 1993 - Dis 1996 - 3 tahun 7 bulan
 I was an office coordinator who helped the directors assistant when she needed to be out of the office to deal with vendors and clients.
- Store / Store manager**
Roy Rogers restaurants, McDonalds
 Jan 1980 - Apr 1992 - 12 tahun 4 bulan
 I was responsible for the management and running of a Roy Rogers fast food restaurant .

Many among the writer's social circle contributed to this plea,

Conclusion

As said earlier, this brief is not an exhaustive nor definitive look at women's roles in extremism; consider this brief a primer to the work IMAN is conducting. What is apparent is that we need to know where the money is heading and what it is being used for, and that we need to realise that Malay Muslim women have never been passive. Muslim women in Malaysia are assertive, and while many abide by social patriarchy, they are also the ones who influence and steer their husbands and families on which schools the children should attend, and which religious teachers the families should learn from. 

Endnotes

1. Malays strike back as turmoil opens way for return of nationalists
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-politics-malays-analysis-idUSKBN20O1LB>
2. Middle class competition and Islamic populism
<https://www.newmandala.org/competitions-among-middle-classes/>. The scholar Johan Fischer in his book, *Proper Islamic Consumption* (NIAS Press, 2008), also wrote about how the nationalisation of Islam in Malaysia was uneven, is always contested, and that state institutions find ways to incorporate faith into a multitude of everyday practices.
3. Malaysia: 60% of halal product manufacturers non-Muslims, says minister
<https://halalfocus.net/malaysia-60-of-halal-product-manufacturers-non-muslims-says-minister/>
4. Boycott of food products made by non-Muslims would be 'shot in the foot' for Malaysian businesses
https://www.foodnavigator-asia.com/Article/2019/09/25/Boycott-of-food-products-made-by-non-Muslims-would-be-shot-in-the-foot-for-Malaysian-businesses?utm_source=copyright&utm_medium=OnSite&utm_campaign=copyright
5. A closer look at the boycott against non-Muslim products and businesses
<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/490519>
6. BNM: Terrorists using Covid-19 pandemic to advance propaganda, fundraising
<https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/bnm-terrorists-using-covid19-pandemic-advance-propaganda-fundraising>
7. Nestlé helps 200,000 Malaysians with COVID-19 relief effort worth RM15 mil
<https://www.nestle.com.my/media/pressreleases/covid-19-relief>