

## **The Impact of Non-Violent Muslim Extremism: Reflections on Indonesia and Malaysia**

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### **Abstract**

Numerous pieces of research have addressed the issue of terrorism and radicalism in Southeast Asia, and security studies are inundated with works covering its origin, function, and impact. However, this article argues that equal attention should be given to non-violent extremism and its impact on societies at the discursive level. By examining case studies from Indonesia and Malaysia, two Muslim-majority nations, this article contends that the question is not whether non-violent extremism directly or indirectly leads to terrorism, but how it can also shape policies and regulations through lobbying, trigger mass political mobilization, and nurture intolerance and hatred towards minority groups.

**Keywords:** non-violent extremism; Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia, Shi'a and Ahmadiyya, Islamization

### **Introduction**

Since the 11 September 2001 (9/11) attacks on the United States (US), a sizeable and global effort has been directed to analyzing violent extremist organizations, networks, and individuals.<sup>2</sup> In Southeast Asia, radicalism became an even more pertinent matter with the discovery of terrorist cells and organizations led by Jemaah Islamiah (JI), whose reach stretched across four countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. Several small-scale terrorist attacks were planned and executed in the late 1990s, but JI's most deadly strike was the 12 October 2002 attack on two bars in Bali that killed 202 people and injured 209 more. Traditional security expert Abuza termed the Bali bombings as "a wake-up call to governments in denial [of the terrorist threat] and skeptics in the region".<sup>3</sup> He considered Southeast Asian states of being "countries of convenience" for international terrorists, particularly for Al-Qaeda.<sup>4</sup> Beyond JI, other localized terrorist groups with

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<sup>2</sup> Abuza 2003; Ehrlich and Liu 2002:183-192; Singh 2007

<sup>3</sup> Abuza: 1

<sup>4</sup> Ibid: 10

regional reach were also identified and discussed in academic literature, such as the Malaysian Militant Group.<sup>5</sup> While the threat posed by JI has waned since the 2010s, the world has since witnessed the rise of another global terrorist network called ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also known as Daesh), which attracted sympathizers worldwide, including in Southeast Asia. Hundreds of Muslims from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore reportedly made plans to travel to the Middle East to fight alongside ISIS militants, and some had even flown there. ISIS's rallying cry was to establish an Islamic caliphate to challenge the Western-dominated global order.

The rise of JI and ISIS posed new security concerns for Southeast Asia, and made the call to understand and distinguish between extremism and moderate Islam more imperative than ever. This call is found in religious discourses, but it also dominates numerous academic publications.<sup>6</sup> This article shifts the focus from violent extremism to analyzing the impact of non-violent extremism, which directly or indirectly leads to terrorism. The impact of non-violent extremism transcends violence, for it can also shape policies and regulations through lobbying, trigger mass political mobilization, and nurture intolerance and hatred towards minority groups.

This article contends that studying non-violent extremism is as important as its violent counterpart when analyzing social and political behaviour in Indonesia and Malaysia. Moreover, it argues that extremism can penetrate society directly, through groups openly promoting hatred through online postings or holding mass rallies or indirectly lobbying policymakers to ban certain groups or publications, infiltrating the bureaucracy which can determine how legislations are enforced. This explains why state actors and officials can play significant roles in promoting extremism, and exclusivist discourse facilitate their conduct.

Applying a security lens is necessary for policymakers in tackling terrorism, though it is not the only solution.<sup>7</sup> Think tanks and research institutes have also made the study of violent extremism their agenda.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, collaboration to understand the root causes of terror is not limited to security agencies, think-tanks, and academic institutions, but also with Muslim theologians (*ulama*), whose role it becomes to promote moderate Islam through counselling as a form of counter-terrorism. Similar efforts have not been extended to explicating non-violent extremism. Nevertheless, overemphasizing the security aspects of extremism has overlooked the elephant in the room: its social, political-economic, and

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<sup>5</sup> Aslam 2009: 133-122

<sup>6</sup> See more recent works by Elizabeth A Bodine-Baron 2020; Rhoades 2020; Feillard, and Madinier 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Security studies have also had a fair share of criticisms for being too culturalist—focusing on religion to be the underlying cause of violence—and for overplaying the role of religion in terrorism (Hamilton-Hart 2005: 303-325; Noor Aisha 2009). In this regard, sociologist Syed Farid Alatas argues that rather than attempting to define extremism in the abstract, the focus should be given to “specific problematic orientations” such as the Wahhabiyah ideology [also defined as Salafi-Wahhabi] or JI, since there are extremists who do not condone physical violence (Alatas 2008: 134). In the same vein, he also highlights the role of progressive Islam, which is rooted in universally accepted humanist concerns of equality, social justice, and civil society, as the counter to extremism (Alatas 2020: 94-95)

<sup>8</sup> One example in Southeast Asia is the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) in the Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore.

discursive impact. Since the 2010s, mass protests resulting from the perceived governments' lack of interest in Islamic affairs, and anti-Shi'a and Ahmadiyya (the so-called 'deviant' sects of Islam) are more common in maritime Southeast Asia than terrorist attacks. Some of these resulted in violence, although most did not.

Focusing on case studies from Malaysia and Indonesia, the article first discusses some traits of non-violent extremism and how they impact society. It explains how non-violent extremism impacts societies at the discursive level, followed by policymaking, political mobilization, and terrorism. Last, the article discusses three case studies in which non-violent extremism led to politically charged mass mobilization against minority groups in Indonesia and noble causes in Malaysia, contributed to the excessive application of legalistic discourses in Malaysia and bred intolerance towards religious minorities. To demonstrate how non-violent extremism's polarizing and dichotomizing tendencies can have significant political and social consequences, apart from violence, the discussion draws on three case studies: religiously inspired mass mobilization against Chinese-Christian Governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (known as Ahok), in 2016 in Indonesia; the impact of the dichotomization of Islam and the secular towards legal and political thought in Malaysia; and how extremism resulted in violence towards Muslim religious minorities Shi'a and Ahmadiyya in Indonesia and Malaysia respectively.

At the outset, several plausible contentions of the term 'non-violent extremism' need to be addressed. Not all political movements in Malaysia and Indonesia are extreme, as the examples in this article demonstrate. Islamic political parties, civil society organizations, and movements have the legitimate right to participate in the democratic process and civic engagement. Even participation in demonstrations in Malaysia and Indonesia does not make one extreme, as this has already been accepted as part of the democratic process in these countries, although still frowned upon by the states' elites. Extremism—violent or non-violent—is measured based on specific political goals, ideology, and attitudes, and how these impact fundamental human rights, freedom of religion, and multiculturalism. As is discussed shortly, Islamist extremism contains several additional measurements, from being disrespectful of alternative, historically accepted traditions to manipulating facts when promoting a single, yet biased interpretation of Islam, to encouraging violent acts against those who disagree with 'the mainstream'. Applying the term non-violent extremism must eliminate any forms of normative biases.

Moreover, violent and non-violent extremism should not be seen in dichotomous terms but as a spectrum. Violence is easier to characterize, for most constitutes conventional criminal offences in most countries: use of weapons, killing, or physically harming. However, there is also a slippery slope with non-violent extremism, for some countries do not consider these activities as criminal offences. There are varying degrees of non-violent extremism: some that remain within the personal, private realms, including xenophobia, racism, and prejudiced views of other religions which are not expressed publicly, to public expressions of these sentiments, including in movement settings. While the reach of states is when extreme views are articulated in private spaces, for the latter, their attitude varies from state to state, with some more tolerant towards extremism than others.

## Non-Violent Extremism

Before defining non-violent religious extremism, the article wishes to ascertain its violent manifestation, also referred to as terrorism. Juergensmeyer defines religious terrorism as “public acts of destruction, committed without a clear military objective, that arouse a widespread sense of fear. This fear often turns to anger when we discover the other characteristic that frequently attends these acts of public violence: their justification by religion”.<sup>9</sup> Violent extremism can be easily identified through its goals: to endanger lives, inflict injuries on people, and cause damage to properties. The scale of terrorism varies from small-scale, targeted attacks, such as lone-wolf shootings in mosques (such as the 2019 mass shooting at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand) and synagogues to large-scale, large-impact attacks (such as the 2002 bombing in Bali).

Scholars are beginning to consider placing violent extremism and non-violent extremism on two sides of the same coin.<sup>10</sup> Non-violent extremism appears to be on the increase before violent acts occur. Observations on non-violent extremism have been neglected in the past because it is difficult to identify, measure, or pigeonhole. Security agencies are faced with the dilemma of whether to charge or arrest someone who holds extreme views but does not condone violence, since they can be brushed off as differences of theological or political opinion. Unlike terrorism, non-violent extremism does not directly lead to losing life or property. However, non-violent extremism can lead to far-reaching consequences. According to Schmid,

Although most of these Islamists were not openly advocating jihad, nevertheless, they were, to varying degrees, 'extremist' in their political outlook when compared to the mainstream of their host society. Nevertheless, some of these so-called 'non-violent extremists' were thought to have greater 'street credibility' among rebellious and alienated youth Muslims in western diasporas than orthodox Muslim leaders.<sup>11</sup>

The goals of non-violent extremism are not as explicit. Several notes from Alatas on extremism are helpful in ring-fencing the term: (1) intolerance of other points of view, Muslims and non-Muslims; (2) legalistic and focusing too much on right and wrong instead of spiritual matters; (3) declaring groups accepted as mainstream Muslim to be non-Muslim; (4) non-contextual reading of Islamic texts; and (5) closed reading of texts.<sup>12</sup> These traits may imply privileging certain normative positions and liberal assumptions, and those who adopt them may contend that it is their right to practice their religion. In the spirit of respecting freedom of religion—a universal human right principle—it is one’s right to be conservative or liberal. However, there is one key caveat when dealing with extreme ideology: it is difficult to distinguish between private and public expressions of extremism. For example, a prominent religious leader may harbor hatred towards a particular sect and

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<sup>9</sup> Juergensmeyer 2000: 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Schmid 2014; Knight, Sarah, Keatley, David and Woodward, Katie 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Schmid: 2

<sup>12</sup> Alatas 2008:128-129

consider it 'deviant', but although he does not go about attacking them, he also does not stop others from hurling hate speech towards the group, thus encouraging others to act violently.

Schmid applies several traits generated from Britain's debate about integrating Muslim minorities in the country following the revelation that some are becoming extreme. These traits are useful in defining non-violent extremism. He lists four questions that David Cameron's government asked before deciding whether to collaborate with Islamic organizations: Do they believe in universal human rights, including those of women and people of other faiths? Do they believe in equality of all before the law? Do they believe in democracy and the people's right to elect their government? Do they encourage integration or separatism?<sup>13</sup>

Scholars concerned about bias and research objectivity may dispute the indicators of what constitutes extremism as proposed by Schmid and Alatas. An 'extremist' to one person may be a 'moderate' or even a 'freedom fighter' or 'hero' to another. While the issue of bias or privileging certain norms and values of one group over others needs to be addressed, being too occupied with these can deter research efforts on extremism, and privilege more descriptive research, in line with Geertzian 'thick description' methodology. Geertz explains: "I take culture to be those webs, and their analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, considering social expressions on the surface enigmatical".<sup>14</sup> The approach undertaken in this article is not merely describing extremism and its impact, but arguing why it should be tackled.

This article proposes that any attempt to distinguish the two must consider fundamental human rights principles and the reality of most nation-states today: diverse and multicultural. Unlike in the past, where religious identity can easily distinguish a population, people today tend to live in multicultural societies, and no society is truly homogeneous. Thus, a moderate (or non-extreme) person must adhere to the following principles: respect for religious freedom, the rule of law and equality before it, and social integration. Here, one can take the lead from the universally accepted human rights principles, the sanctity of human life, freedom of belief and expression, and privacy rights. Societies can be religious (or pious) and moderate at the same time if they respect these fundamental and universally acclaimed human rights; therefore, any reading of religious texts must consider contemporary context and how they can be applied to meet today's needs.

How consistent these traits are promoted also defines whether an individual or group is moderate or extreme. For example, the person must believe in gender equality today as much as (or more than) he believed in the principle a decade ago. The person must believe that a woman can lead mosque committees as much as a woman can be a legislator in parliament or a business head. One must be wary of those who alter their viewpoints for political reasons: upholding moderate views by voicing 'politically correct' answers for fear of a backlash from the public or elites or getting into trouble with law enforcers. Thus, a

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<sup>13</sup> Schmid: 5

<sup>14</sup> Geertz, 1973:5

person is not a moderate if he is critical of terrorist groups but shows little respect or hatred towards religious minorities. In another instance, a group may publicly promote inter-faith diversity but remain averse to intra-faith dialogue. For example, a Muslim preacher may urge his congregation to respect festivals associated with Christians or Jews but may not extend the same view to Shi'as, Ibadis, or Sufis.

### **Discursive Impacts of Non-Violent Extremism**

Attaching the term extremism to those who do not condone terrorism may invite objections, for the term extremism has been understood in the pejorative sense. Still, it is vital to measure how some ideas and orientations impact societies negatively even though they do not lead to violence. The impact of violent extremism (or terrorism in short) is evident, for the intention is to cause hurt or loss of life, and often such acts intend to make a political statement. The impact of non-violent extremism is twofold. Both are interlinked at the discursive level, which legitimizes groups to cause social discord or conduct violent attacks, and at the policymaking level, through lobbying bureaucrats and politicians who enforce and make laws. The causes of violence are multifold and not static; Horgan states that “The reality of involvement in terrorism today is typified by its complexity: involvement in terrorism seems to imply—and result in—different things to different people, as well as different things to the same person over time and experience.”<sup>15</sup> Describing terrorist movements as merely “the tip of the iceberg”, Horgan describes the significance of factors as funding, protection, and informants in perpetrating violence.<sup>16</sup> Although Horgan did not specifically mention the role of discourse as one of the contributing factors, this article contends its significance.

All terrorist acts are supported by ideas. There may be psychological reasons why extremists choose violence when making their views heard. They may have been raised in a hostile environment, deprived of basic economic needs, socialized in a fundamentalist religious community, felt repressed or alienated by state policies, or a combination of these. This article does not deny that there are those who hold radical ideas but do not conduct violent acts, and vice-versa, those who act violently even though they do not hold extreme ideas. Calling for evidence-based analysis of terrorist acts, Wolfowicz, Litmanovitz, Weisburd, and Hasisi distinguish cognitive and behavioral radicalization to explain why many radicalized individuals did not commit violence.<sup>17</sup> In the same vein, this article posits that radical or extreme ideas can be channeled through non-violent means but can equally be the source of tension in societies. A 2019 survey of Malaysian youths conducted by IMAN Research, a counter-terrorism think-tank based in Malaysia, suggests that the causes of violent extremism are complex and transcend religion, economics, and education levels, but includes psychological ones, such as manipulateness and ethnocentrism.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, studies have shown that non-violent extremism can also influence how society reacts to violent attacks, apart from radicalizing individuals. Terrorism has been

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<sup>15</sup> Horgan, 2008: 80-94, 86

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Wolfowicz, Litmanovitz, Weisburd, and Hasisi 2020

<sup>18</sup> Zurairi, 2019

linked to lone-actor violent attacks without attachment to any groups.<sup>19</sup> But the lack of response by society to problematize terrorism and conservatism is a sign of non-violent extremism creeping in.

Whether society condemns or supports acts of terror depends on how it is socialized. Non-violent extremism can create an ideological environment that terrorists or would-be terrorists can utilize to legitimize violent conduct, especially on religious and theological grounds. For instance, some Muslims openly condemn attacks on Palestinians or Rohingyas but remain silent if similar attacks are aimed at non-Muslims. They condemn the 2019 mass shootings at a Christchurch mosque but do not react in the same way when their fellow Muslims mounted similar attacks against other faiths. In the same vein, they argue for Muslims' right to wear the headscarf in schools, in line with the spirit of freedom of expression, but would not give the same right to Muslim minority groups to practice their faith, or to disagree on their theological position on headscarves, for they consider them heretics. The extent to which ideas are socialized poses a more significant threat than acts of terror because it influences whether societies support states' counter-terrorism responses. If they are not supportive, they may not be forthcoming in promoting inter-faith dialogue, for they do not see the need.

Lobbying is a tool used by non-violent extremists to restrict alternative viewpoints from being circulated among the masses. Their goal may not be violent per se but they intend to deny others' rights by shaping how policies are enforced. So strong are such lobby groups that even populist politicians cater to their interests at the expense of the broader community. Here, Scott's work on loose groups' ability to unite and coalesce around particular interests and shape policies is worth noting. According to Scott,

Policy often starts with the development and marketing of policy ideas or solutions. These ideas come from a variety of actors—politicians, lobbyists, citizens, academics, think tanks—and can float around for a long time. Some ideas will get on the agenda for a decision by a policymaker who might be a legislator, a regulator, or a judge, but only a few ideas can be on a decision agenda at any one time.<sup>20</sup>

Once extremist interest groups enter into the internal structures of power, they are likely to conduct state capture. Influential individuals with exclusivist minds can penetrate key state institutions and shape policies to their liking. For example, extremists may capture departments in religious affairs and shape policies on religion, which may not be directly under the state's purview. They may adopt policies that restrict individuals and groups with certain orientations not in line with the extremists and claim that they do not have the necessary tools or capacities to teach religion, even though the focus of talks deal with sociology or religion or are speaking about Islam through social sciences and humanities lenses. Such an approach to capture the state seems even more dangerous than extremists

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<sup>19</sup> Knight, Keatly, and Woodward: 2

<sup>20</sup> Scott 2018: 50

who seek to garner support through democratic means, such as forming a political party or civil society organization, for the former often escapes public scrutiny.

The influence of lobbying or state capture is pertinent when non-violent extremists paint the world in legalistic, dichotomous terms: right versus wrong, permissible versus forbidden, Islamic versus secular, authentic traditions versus fabricated traditions, and Islamic teachings versus Islamic innovations. This outlook is extreme, but it can be detrimental to modernization and progress, for it belittles alternative viewpoints or becomes authoritarian when speaking about theological matters. El Fadl warns about authoritarian tendencies that close off any form of engagement with texts and religious traditions, and instead locks specific meanings to them, assuming the authority to interpret 'correct' Islam.<sup>21</sup> He discusses how authoritarian legal judgements (*fatwa*) impact women's role in modern society, leading to violence.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, this tendency reduces Islamic history to cover only the period in which Prophet Muhammad and the two subsequent generations lived, negating the significance of 1400 years of history and how Islamic communities, laws, and institutions have evolved. The impact of non-violent extremism on policymaking can be as follows: silencing alternative viewpoints by banning or restricting others from speaking on religious matters; preventing others from expressing their thoughts in writings or publications; banning or censoring certain books; labeling minority religious groups as 'deviants'. These tendencies open the floodgates for public scrutiny, ridicule, or harassment of people and groups holding alternative viewpoints from those in key positions of power.

### Religiously Inspired Mass Mobilization

Radical ideas can be attractive to those who feel alienated or marginalized by their governments or leaders. They may be enticed to join intolerant cause to improve their conditions. Much has been written about the 'Ahok controversy' in 2016. For some, it was a black mark against Indonesia, a country long associated with religious and ethnic tolerance and moderate Islam. The incident is an example of how non-violent extremism in the form of exclusivist religious and racial discourse can lead to political instability. The controversy gave rise to three mass protests in 2016, often referred to as *Aksi Bela Islam* (Movement to Defend Islam) or *Gerakan 212* (212 Movement, for the date of the third protest): the first on 14 October, the second on 4 November, and the third on 2 December.<sup>23</sup> In all, about 200,000 people participated in the rallies, including many who came to Jakarta from other parts of the country. Many scholars consider this to be a turning point in Indonesian identity politics. Fukuyama's definition of identity politics can be applied to this situation, as it applies to the rise of rightist movements in other parts of the world. According to Fukuyama,

The inner sense of dignity seeks recognition. It is not enough that I have a sense of my worth if other people do not publicly acknowledge it or, worse yet, if they denigrate me or don't acknowledge my existence. Self-esteem arises out of esteem

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<sup>21</sup> El-Fadl 2003: 92-95

<sup>22</sup> Ibid: 168-169

<sup>23</sup> Burhani 2018



by others. Because human beings naturally crave recognition, the modern sense of identity evolves quickly to identity politics, in which individuals demand public recognition of their worth.<sup>24</sup>

Some have argued that the anti-Ahok movement must be seen in the broader context of anti-Chinese and -China sentiments in Indonesia.<sup>25</sup> In the lead-up to the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, incumbent governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (affectionately known as Ahok) sought a second term in office against popular Muslim leader, Anies Baswedan. Ahok is a Christian, and though not the first non-Muslim to become Jakarta's governor, he is the first Chinese-Indonesian to assume the highest office in Indonesia's capital city. In one of his campaign speeches, Ahok quoted a verse in the Quran (verse 51 of the *Al-Maidah* chapter) which seemed to insinuate that the country's Islamic religious elite was misleading Muslims to vote against non-Muslims. Ahok's mistake was making references to the Quran and underestimating how extreme groups can manipulate such actions to rally against him. These groups quickly began claiming that Ahok had breached Indonesia's strict blasphemy law. Ahok apologized, but it fell on deaf ears.

Protesters turned a statement made by leaders of the Ulama Council of Indonesia (MUI) into their rallying point. While this sort of statement falls short of a formal religious ruling (*fatwa*) that is legally non-binding, they can carry considerable influence, as past instances have shown.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, some groups did not differentiate these statements from fatwa, and a loosely formed network was formed to defend the so-called fatwa (GNPF-MUI). Even though no fatwa was issued by MUI, MUI members' statements were echoed to give the impression that it was MUI's official legal opinion. That none of the MUI members actively sought to correct this misunderstanding further inflamed anti-Chinese and anti-Christian sentiments. Interestingly, most of the people who joined the GNPF-MUI movement were not MUI members but individuals with exclusivist orientation who sought to wreck Ahok's re-election chances. It did not help that MUI leaders themselves sidelined the moderate voices calling for restraint.

Despite winning the first round of a three-cornered gubernatorial poll in February 2017, Ahok eventually lost in the run-off round. He was later tried for blasphemy, found guilty, and sentenced to two years in jail. MUI Chairman Ma'ruf Amin was seen as one of the figures behind the movement, and was one of the key witnesses in the trial that led to Ahok's guilty sentence. In fact, the Ahok affair made Ma'ruf into a prominent national figure capable of mobilizing conservative forces in the country to rally against a popular governor, even though he was already a well-known Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) ulama and politician even before the protests. Ma'ruf's leadership role in the protests further accelerated his prominence, culminating in his selection as vice-presidential candidate alongside incumbent president Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo in the 2019 election. Jokowi and Ma'ruf were ultimately successfully elected.

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<sup>24</sup> Fukuyama 2018: 10

<sup>25</sup> Suryadinata 2017

<sup>26</sup> Hasyim 2011

The protests were largely non-violent, and they can be easily characterized as part and parcel of democratic life and contentious politics. But it is yet another testimony to non-violent extremism's social, political, and economic ramifications. The protests led to a downward spiral of race and religious relations in Indonesia after the state's general non-action. The state's behaviour could result from weak state capacity, though in reality it likely found allies among the extremists.

To this day, extremist groups refer to the Ahok incident as a triumph. In the foreseeable future, this will serve as an impediment to any non-Muslim or ethnic Chinese seeking to enter any political race in the capital. Moreover, vigilante groups such as the Islamic Defenders' Front (*Front Pembela Islam*, FPI), led by the controversial Habib Rizieq Shihab, felt empowered to conduct 'sweeping' (raids) against anything they considered to be vice. FPI is a classic case of how an initially non-violent group transformed into a violent one, and Shihab rose to prominence as the central figure of the movement, his struggle equated to an Islamic one, making him a hero in the eyes of extremists. Moreover, President Jokowi's attendance at one of the 2016 rallies and sharing the same stage with Shihab was a sign of the head of state's endorsement of the movement. In 2020, the government took strict actions against FPI. Shihab broke several Covid-19 measures after returning from self-imposed exile in Saudi Arabia. FPI has since been banned and crippled after Shihab's imprisonment, but the ideology remains strong.

### **Dichotomizing Islam and Secularism and Its Impact on Policy Making**

According to Tambiah, who studies the origins of ethnonationalism in South Asia, some quarters in the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, contests the 'Western' notion of secularism, insisting that religion has a role to play in the public sphere. Tambiah opines that "many persons reject the relegation of religion to the private domain and are earnestly committed to the idea that religious values and beliefs must necessarily inform politics and economic activities".<sup>27</sup> The push of Islamization or anti-Western and anti-secularism is generally non-violent in nature. The promoters may also push for their views through legally permissible, democratic means, such as airing them during election campaigning through manifestos. Though these are non-violent in nature, the impact of divisive discourse can fan hatred, or be applied or justified by radicals in their violent acts.

Since the 1980s, there have been attempts by certain quarters in Malaysia to demand the federal government to enforce *hudud* laws (punitive punishments), which include stoning, amputation, and the death penalty, regarded to be in line with the Quran. They argue that existing criminal law in Malaysia does not meet Islamic requirements. Malaysia utilizes a dual legal system for civil and criminal offenses on the one hand and Islamic offenses on the other hand. The latter mainly deals with personal laws of divorce, inheritance, and marriages. Since the 1980s, leaders of the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) have championed the implementation of *hudud* laws. Not content that the Malaysian constitution is secular and not Islamic, they have sought convince their partners in government, or to persuade its supporters, to align with Islamic mandates. However, their

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<sup>27</sup> Tambiah 1997: 18

demands to pass the shariah criminal code in the state of Kelantan in 1993 were thwarted by the federal government under the Mahathir government. Subsequent attempts to pass similar laws in Kelantan and Terengganu in 2004 also failed.

Undoubtedly, the pluralist school of thought posits that the push for *hudud* laws is a matter of differences of opinion, and they are entitled to do so since it is conducted through the democratic process. However, there have been instances of violence due to these differences, such as the Memali Affair in 1986, which led to deadly skirmishes between PAS supporters and police officers in Kedah. In July 2000, two security officers were killed during the Al-Maunah arms incident. While there has not been any major violence happening since then, lobbying for *hudud* laws has taken place through other means, and rather successfully. Increasingly, Muslims in the country have begun to consider *hudud* laws as non-negotiable. In some instances, PAS leaders even label those who disagree with their *hudud* proposal as '*kafir*' (infidels or non-believers), even though these so-called '*kafir*' have never denied that the laws are mentioned in the Quran but only argued that said laws could also evolve in response to modern needs, and that punishments must consider the Islamic values of empathy, forgiving, and mercy.

Although *hudud* laws are not implemented in Malaysia, there have been attempts to push for stricter criminal laws in the name of greater shariah. In 2008, PAS seemed to have moderated its position by not pushing too aggressively on *hudud* laws and struggled for '*negara berkeadilan*' ('welfare state'). However, this was short-lived after the opposition coalition between People's Justice Party (PKR) and Democratic Action Party (DAP), Pakatan Rakyat, broke up in 2015. Towards the end of the Najib Razak government (2016-2018), PAS leader Abdul Hadi Awang sought to push a private member's bill in parliament to amend the ACT 355 Sharia Criminal Code to increase the maximum punishments for shariah offences. If passed, the law remains short of *hudud* requirements, but some argue that that would be the first step to implement more stringent Islamic legal interpretation. The bill mainly seeks to increase the maximum sentence from the current three years jail, MYR 5,000 fine, and six lashes of the cane to 30 years jail, MYR 100,000 fine, and 100 lashes of the cane.

The Malaysian people's reaction to attempts to amend ACT 355 is a stark contrast to their reaction to PAS' attempt to introduce the Kelantan Shariah Criminal Code in 1993. Under the then-Barisan Nasional (BN) government, the first Mahathir Mohamad administration (1981-2003) did not run into any major protest from the Malay/Muslim population, except from some pro-PAS supporters, when it prevented the law from being passed. At the time, the community was divided about the role of punitive Islamic laws. The situation is different today. Even within the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), there are sections who agree with PAS on ACT 355. Recent surveys demonstrate that the majority of Malaysian Muslims now agree that for Malaysia to be a truly Islamic state, it must implement *hudud* laws, or enhanced shariah at the very least. In a survey conducted by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (based in Singapore) on Johor residents (Johor is the southernmost state of Peninsular Malaysia with a majority Malay/Muslim population), 75 percent of 573 Malays surveyed agree that *hudud* laws must apply for Muslims. Separately, 57 percent of the respondents say that *hudud* laws applies to all Malaysians

regardless of religion, without distinguishing that *hudud* laws are stated in the Quran (Chong et al. 2017).<sup>28</sup>

The long-term implication is not so much whether *hudud* laws will eventually be enforced in Malaysia or not, but how the thinking underlying this push impacts Malaysia's multicultural and multireligious society, particularly at the discursive level. To be sure, there is little regard for how the dichotomizing outlook towards *hudud* laws will impact non-Muslims, even though they comprise about 40 percent of the total Malaysian population. If *hudud* punishments are pushed unthinkingly, the Malays (who are almost exclusively Muslim) will face a distinct set of laws for the same crimes carried out by non-Malays/non-Muslims, which means undermining the basic principle of equality before the law. For example, different punishments will be meted out to Muslims and non-Muslims who steal from the same person; Muslims may have their hands amputated, but non-Muslims may only be sentenced to jail.

Underlying this dichotomy is the view that Islam provides different sets of philosophies, values, and principles, extending to Islamic law, education, political systems, and democracy. This view stemmed from the Islamic resurgence movement of the 1970s and 1980s, which in turn was brought about by the *dakwah* movement that problematized secularism deemed to have derived from Western civilization. The call for *hudud* also means a larger ethnocentric paradigm at play among the Muslims, the notion that their religion supersedes other faiths. Ultimately, there is the belief that a single, homogenous 'Islamic perspective' exists, ignoring the diversity of views found within the Islamic corpus. Islam is fourteen centuries old and has incorporated external norms, institutions, and practices to align with its broader principles and universal values.

In the same vein, secularism is always cast in doubt.<sup>29</sup> This dichotomy between religion and the secular at times too extreme because it tends to ignore or belittle perspectives from other religious and ethnic communities. Plus, secularism is also treated as homogenous when discussing how some European countries practice the philosophy. Some Muslim scholars agree that secularism is the norm in today's globalized context.<sup>30</sup> An-Naim, for instance, warns against the danger of dichotomizing Islam and secularism:

It is misleading to imagine a sharp dichotomy between an Islamic and a secular state, because the state is by definition, a secular political institution, especially in the present context of Islamic societies. But as emphasized from the beginning, secularism does not mean the exclusion of Islam from public life or the relegation of its role to the purely personal and private domain. The appropriate balance can be achieved through the institutional separation of Islam from the state with regulation of the political role of Islam, whereby Muslims can propose some sharia principles for adoption as public policy or enactment into legislation, provided that it is done in accordance with civic reason and subject to constitutional and human

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<sup>28</sup> Chong, Lee; Norshahril; and Serina 2017

<sup>29</sup> Al-Attas 1978

<sup>30</sup> An-Naim, 2008; El-Fadl 2014.

rights safeguards, which are necessary for Muslims as well as non-Muslim citizens".<sup>31</sup>

What needs to be distinguished is secularism as a philosophy and the idea of a secular state. Right now, the tendency is to make a false dichotomy between Islam and the secular state, which, according to the contemporary Muslim thinkers mentioned, means that the secular state does not necessarily ignore religious groups from practicing their faith. For example, Singapore adopts a secular government, yet it allows freedom of religion and for Islamic institutions, mosques, bureaucracy, and shariah courts to function. However, secularism as a philosophy can be unpacked. On the one hand, there are Muslims who believe the secular philosophy is not certain and what matters is how it is applied—as the group of Muslim scholars mentioned imply—but on the other hand there are those who argue Islam and life cannot be separated, for it is *ad deen* ('way of life').

Similarly, El-Fadl argues that Islamization of knowledge is a response toward orientalism on the one hand and the apologetic desire to meet the totalistic orientation that Islam is "a complete and total way of life".<sup>32</sup> Dichotomizing the world between Islam and non-Islam ignores the historical precedents that constantly borrow and learn between civilizations and religions. Moreover, religions have many shared values, norms, and principles. Muzaffar notes that these values, norms, and principles are "anchored in the Divine, they cannot be relativized to suit one's needs and interests."<sup>33</sup> Today, societies are so complex in a globalized world that no community is truly homogeneous. In this regard, viewing the world through such a lens can be considered extreme. Whether one calls it violent or non-violent is a slippery slope because it depends on the perpetrator's behaviour.

The project to 'Islamize' other fields of knowledge is ongoing in Malaysia, and there is no religious elite or thinker strong enough to challenge this discourse. If this trend is not reversed, there will be attempts to Islamize education and teach geography, history, and literature from an Islamic perspective, even though it means privileging a selective reading of Islamic history from a Middle Eastern lens. There is no doubt that Islam touches on the subjects mentioned, but the religion merely encourages Muslims to continuously pursue knowledge through scientific and rational means. Dichotomizing knowledge will only promote more exclusivism, casting doubt on contributions from non-Muslim social scientists and philosophers. How this trend is manifesting itself on a day-to-day basis is already evident: in 2017, there were reports of launderettes which catered for Muslims only in the state of Johor. There have also been debates about whether Covid-19 vaccines are permissible in Islam, even though the sanctity of life is of utmost priority in Islam. Malaysia is already a booming spot for Islamic finance, halal consumption, Islamic fashion, and Islamic entertainment. Despite the Islamic label being attached to these, the reality on the ground may be complex, as there are different views and contestations as to what constitutes Islamic or halal. For example, Islamic finance itself is being contested among Muslim ulama, and they cannot agree on what constitutes *riba'*, which is forbidden in Islam.

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<sup>31</sup> An-Naim: 260-261

<sup>32</sup> El-Fadl 2003: 81

<sup>33</sup> Muzaffar 2009: 10

Some equate interest payments to *riba'*, while others believe the Quran refers to usury, so interest payments, as what conventional banks pay, are accepted in Islam.<sup>34</sup> These contestations prove that attempts to Islamize contemporary lifestyle are, on one hand, utopian, for it is mainly a way to paint the world as Westernized, liberal, and un-Islamic; and, on the other hand, capitalistic, for it is mainly to create a market niche for Islamic endorsed products. Nevertheless, what happens in the process is worth analyzing: it fans the notion that an Islamic alternative exists, and all Muslims should strive to realize it. While non-violent in nature, these will only sharpen the distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims, which violent groups can exploit to mean Islam does have a 'way of life', and its end goal is to establish an Islamic state.

### **Violence against Religious Minorities**

To scholars who are non-committal to taking a normative position in the name of academic neutrality or objectivity, the examples cited earlier may be easily brushed off as differences of opinions between moderates and pluralists on the one hand, and conservatives and traditionalists on the other hand. However, almost all violent acts begin with extremism, including acts of terror in the name of Islam, which, in most instances, began from the us-versus-them dichotomy. Undoubtedly, other intervening factors lead one to act violently, such as class, environment, economic deprivation, and political socialization. Other factors can be psychological: family upbringing, peer pressure, and, more importantly, socio-economic progress, and feelings of alienation. Extreme religious discourse adds another layer to the numerous factors that trigger violent acts. Moreover, the lack of checks on hate speech, both online and offline, contributes to the continuous persecution of minority communities. Hate speech is non-violent, yet has the effect of fanning anger towards the targeted communities. Since the terror groups JI, ISIS and Al-Qaeda have been well discussed in security studies, the following highlights the genesis of violence against the Shi'a and Ahmadiyya religious minorities in Indonesia and Malaysia.

In Indonesia, the persecution of Shi'a and Ahmadiyya became a significant issue during the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono government (2004-2014).<sup>35</sup> For the Shi'a, what began as a family dispute around a religious teacher, Tajul Muluk, in a small village in Sampang, Surabaya, became a violent religious affair that had severe repercussions on the Shi'a community in 2011 and 2012. It did not help that in January 2012, the MUI chapter in East Java issued a fatwa declaring the sect to be deviant, a sterner ruling than that of the national MUI, which simply called for mainstream Sunni Muslims to be aware of differences between them and Shi'a Muslims. The fatwa triggered the formation of a movement of 40 anti-Shi'a groups. Extremist groups later launched attacks on the Shi'a community in Sampang, killing two and torching 35 houses. Local authorities, police, and politicians did little to stop the violence, and the extreme ideology fueled hatred towards the minority group. Major Muslim organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah issued fatwa for their members, with most being neutral towards the Shi'a, but violent groups justified their acts

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<sup>34</sup> Mallat 1996: 293-296

<sup>35</sup> Suryana 2019: 475-492.

by citing the East Java MUI's fatwa and ignoring the rest, including calls to renounce violence. MUI national leaders in Jakarta claimed they had little control over the East Java chapter.

The same can also be said about the treatment of the Ahmadiyya community in Indonesia, which was declared deviant with a fatwa in 1984. The community has existed peacefully in Indonesia for decades, but in 2005, MUI reaffirmed the previous fatwa, further casting the community under the spotlight. In 2008, a march in Jakarta supporting religious freedom—born during the Ahmadiyya controversy—was attacked by 400 radical Muslims. Often described as the Monas incident, the attack left seventy marchers injured. Anti-Ahmadiyya groups justified their attacks on the Ahmadiyya by citing the re-issued fatwa. However, in this case, the impact of non-violent extremism lies not so much in the perpetrators' utilization of the anti-Ahmadiyya fatwa but in how other groups lobbied the government to restrict Ahmadiyya proselytization efforts, although the restrictions fell short of a ban. These examples again demonstrate how non-violent extremist ideas can shape policies, this time in the form of a fatwa. In his study in the Ahmadiyya community in Indonesia, A'an Suryana (2020) speaks about how state officials were complicit with vigilante groups in violence directed toward the sect.<sup>36</sup> In West Java, vigilante groups in Kuningan Regency are known to collaborate closely with the police, who mobilize their network's surveillance and intelligence against the local Ahmadiyya community.

In Malaysia, there has not been any mass persecution towards the Shi'a or Ahmadiyya communities, nor have there been any mass protests against these sects. Still, this does not mean non-violent extreme views do not significantly impact these communities. They experience silent persecution, harassment, and hate speech at an everyday level. Some of these actions are guided by religious rulings issued by state-endorsed institutions (Mohd Faizal and Tan 2017).<sup>37</sup> Here, one needs to understand how fatwa are issued in Malaysia. Fatwa reach in Malaysia is further than in Indonesia because in Malaysia, fatwa in a can be legally binding and enforced by state religious enforcement officers. In Malaysia, religious affairs fall under the states' jurisdiction, governed by the respective states Majlis Agama (Islamic Council). All appointments in the Majlis are endorsed by the state's respective Malay rulers, including the mufti's position (chief jurist). In Malaysia, fatwa published in the gazette is enforceable by law, and it is a criminal offense to go against them. So far, almost all states have declared Ahmadiyya a deviant sect, and almost all fatwa councils in the country have issued the same opinion on Shi'ism. The caveat that must be placed here is that the fatwa declaring the Shi'a to be deviant was only issued in 1986, following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which significantly impacted the Islamic resurgence movement of the 1980s. With the rise of puritanical Islamic ideologies introduced by the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwanul Muslimin) and Salafi-Wahhabism through preachers in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, the revolution in Shi'a-dominated Iran exported the *vilayet e Faqih* (leadership of the ulama) thinking to Southeast Asia and, evidently, changed the contours of Malaysian Islam. PAS, arguably, modeled its party

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<sup>36</sup> Suryana: 60

<sup>37</sup> Musa and Tan 2017: 308-329.

organization—but not the jurisprudential and theological paradigms—along the lines of the ulama's Iranian leadership model.

During the governments of Abdullah Badawi (2003-2009) and Najib Razak (2009-2018), Shi'a communities in Malaysia came under the scrutiny of the security forces and religious elites. Forced to conduct their study classes quietly, the Shi'a communities still did not escape the religious police's attention. Since gazette-documented fatwa are enforceable by law, some Shi'a Muslims have been charged. Moreover, there was speculation that the number of new Shi'a converts in the country was increasing, threatening the religious life of the overwhelmingly Sunni country.<sup>38</sup> The religious elites' suspicion towards the Shi'a was, of course, uncalled for, because a number of Malaysian elites are signatories of the Amman Message, an initiative by the King Abdullah of Jordan, which clearly states that Sunni, Shi'a, and Ibadi are legitimate Muslims and condemns *takfiri* (declaration of groups as 'kafir' or un-Islamic).

A 2016 incident against Shi'a activist Amri Che Mat in Perlis deserves attention. While there have been many theories and counter theories about his disappearance, and the mystery remains unsolved to this day, much of Malaysian society seems unmoved by the whole episode, with the exception of civil society activists, who allege he was kidnapped. In this case, Malaysian society's neutral position stands in stark contrast to its reaction to the death of fireman Muhammad Adib Mohd Kassim during a temple riot in 2018. Calls for justice to be accorded for Adib took on a religious tone. These two cases demonstrate that while the sanctity of life is a primary value of Islam, Malaysian society reacted very differently to one person not seen as part of the community.

## Conclusion

In recent years, the rise in interest in non-violent extremism among scholars and policymakers is due to its potential in leading to violence or terrorism (violent extremism). A key feature of extremism is dichotomizing the world in terms of religious versus secular, Islam versus heretic, permissible versus non-permissible. The reality is that social and community life is far too complex to be categorized in binary terms.

The impact of extremism does not directly result in violence or loss of life, but it may indirectly trigger them. It impacts societies at the discursive level; thus, terrorists apply exclusivist rhetoric or intolerant ideas to rally support and sympathizers to their cause. The masses may not be directly involved in terrorist activities, yet their silence or lack of support to combat them is a testimony of their endorsement. Moreover, while non-violent extremism does not directly lead to terrorism, it can have a polarizing effect on society, causing political, social, and economic disruptions to people's lives: through mass protests, a reversal of policies supporting human rights causes, and the inflicting of trauma on religious minorities.

However, whether extremism directly or indirectly results in violence is only one reason policymakers or security agencies must pay close attention to it. Extreme ideas can polarize societies. There are also the political, sociological, and theological dimensions of

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<sup>38</sup> Musa, 2020: 158



non-violent extremism, which are interlinked. As the case studies from Indonesia and Malaysia show, the source of a mass protest can be a theological viewpoint that portrays a particular policy as not being in line with Islam. However, politically marginalized groups can rally economically challenged groups to protest popular politicians or noble policies, such as during the Ahok controversy in Indonesia. In another example, a dominant group may feel politically threatened by an opposing group, and the former can accuse the latter of preaching deviant ideas to undercut its support base or even apply legal means to achieve this objective. Moreover, society may not be interested in elites' political motivations behind their speeches but are moved by them when these arguments are couched as theology. In other words, they are made to believe that the elites' views represent an Islamic perspective. This is what happened, and continues to happen, to the Shi'a and Ahmadiyya communities in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Thirty years after the Islamic resurgence hit the shores of Southeast Asia, non-violent extremists, who impede noble causes agreed upon by international bodies, paint the world in dichotomous terms, deny the rights of religious minorities, and are now key drivers in Islamic bureaucracies, think tanks, research institutes, institutions of higher learning, and government agencies. Their placement in these institutions is even more significant than the placement of those who seek change through political or democratic means, for they are in positions of great power and have the ability to determine the direction of policies, what books go to print, and what programs need to be censored. The fatwa that are passed also depend on the orientation of the people in the fatwa committees.

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