



# COSMOPOLITAN ISLAM & THE FORGING OF BANGSA MALAYSIA

*Half A Century of ABIM's Muslim Movement*

MUHAMMAD FAISAL ABDUL AZIZ

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MUHAMMAD FAISAL ABDUL AZIZ

PUSTAKA PERDANA



1013812

Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM)  
Kuala Lumpur

2022



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Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia      Data Pengkatalogan-dalam-Penerbitan  
Muhammad Faisal Abdul Aziz, 1986-

KOSMOPOLITAN ISLAM & PEMBINAAN BANGSA MALAYSIA :  
Memaknai Separuh Abad Gerakan Islam ABIM = COSMOPOLITAN  
ISLAM & THE FORGING OF BANGSA MALAYSIA : Half a Century of  
ABIM's Muslim Movement / MUHAMMAD FAISAL ABDUL AZIZ.

ISBN 978-967-2158-88-2

1. Islamic civilization.
2. Southeast Asia--Civilization--Islamic influences
3. Malaysia--Social conditions.
4. Malaysia--Civilization.

I. Judul.

909.09767

Penerbit:

Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM)

No. 6, Jalan TC 2A/2

Taman Cemerlang

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Sebahagian kos penerbitan dibiayai daripada geran peruntukan projek  
Simposium Penjabaran Kerangka Literasi Bangsa Malaysia, oleh Kementerian  
Belia dan Sukan Malaysia (KBS).

909.09767  
MEF

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## FOREWORD

**N**o religious group in the world today has received so much global attention as that of Muslims. Singled out as a “problem community” in Europe and deemed as “veering towards conservatism” in Asia, Muslims are increasingly stigmatized by the forces of Islamophobia. Such a bleak picture is made worse by the derailment of Islamic activism in the twenty-first century. What began a movement to recover noble ideals of Islam has sadly mutated into exclusivist currents in recent years. Calls for an all-out resistance against the incursion of all norms and lifestyles that are seen as radically different from an “authentic Islam” have become louder and, most times, irrational and driven largely by unchecked emotions. The failure of some Muslims and non-Muslims to recognize that we all share many universal concerns and aspirations has widened rifts between them.

The present book published by ABIM, one of the largest Islamic youth movements today, seeks to offer a potent remedy to the problems of Islamophobia, ethnocentrism, jingoism, and nativism. It seeks to bring to sharp focus “cosmopolitan Islam” that has been a defining feature of the Malay World. A domain long known for its socio-cultural diversity, the Malay world is a melting pot of different and sometimes rivalling and conflicting identities and loyalties, as well as an exemplar of cross-cultural understanding and tolerance between Islam and other religions. Scholars such as Marshall Hodgson, Bruce Lawrence, Seema Allavi, and myself have discussed the idea of “Muslim cosmopolitanism” or “Cosmopolitan Islam” in our works.

ABIM goes beyond mere theoretical discussions over this concept. What the movement seeks to do is to operationalize the concept

through grounded actions and grassroots programs to bridge the gaps between communities in Malaysia and beyond. To achieve this, ABIM pays close attention to resolving some major issues affecting all Malaysians. From poverty to educational inequity to economic insecurity to ethnicized religiosity, these are obstacles to overcome in the path to realize a new destiny for Muslims and non-Muslims in the country. Such a task is by no means easy but it is far from wishful thinking. ABIM has answered the call of many intellectuals to be the vanguard of the youth, encouraging young people of all ages and backgrounds to contribute to the process of community cohesion and inter-civilizational cooperation. This mobilization has taken on many guises, from intellectual engagement through books such as this to civic activities designed to construct and fortify a cosmopolitan outlook among all Malaysians.

I applaud ABIM and its relentless efforts that have stood the test of time for over half a century now. This book should be regarded as part of a long list of notable endeavors and sacrifices by ABIM members to free societies from forces that are abusing religions and cultures for selfish and destructive ends. The future of a Cosmopolitan Islam in Malaysia is in ABIM's hands. *Inshā Allāh!*

**Associate Professor Syed Muhd Khairuddin Aljunied**

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*Senior Fellow*

*Georgetown University, USA*

## FOREWORD

**T**he First and foremost, I would like to congratulate ABIM for the successful 49th Annual General Meeting or Muktamar Sanawi on December 2020. The Muktamar was one of the leading events towards the upcoming ABIM's half century celebration.

Synonym to its feature as an Islamic movement based on intellectual persuasion, ABIM is consistent in finding antidotes for problems of the ummah. The solutions that have been explored are always rooted in a culture of knowledge that has become the foundation of ABIM's activism.

The book *Cosmopolitan Islam & the Forging of Bangsa Malaysia: Half a Century of ABIM's Movement* is a manifestation of the high standards of ABIM's culture of knowledge to explore fresh concepts for the benefits of the people.

This book emphasizes the importance for us to retrace the identity of the Muslim-Malay which indeed is imbued with the characteristics of universality and interaction with one another. Strengthening these characters will indirectly enable the transformation of an "ummatic vision" among the Malays in order to venture out into a more challenging world arena and build a new narrative of Islam globally.

During the time of Prophet RasūlulLāh ṣallalLāhu 'alayhi wasallam, the clash between Rome and Persia was narrated by Allah in his holy book. This was a paradigm shift that Islam brought to transform the Arabs from a nomadic nation busy with internal strife to a visionary ummah globally.

The concept of Cosmopolitan Islam encompasses the foundations of Ummatism similar to the Madinah Society model, the foundations of Globalism that transcends a singular worldview, as well as the foundations of Universalism which is the basis for universality of Islam, and is relevant to be studied in depth in the incomplete construction framework of Bangsa Malaysia to be made a national agenda in the future.

It is hoped that the fresh ingredients from this book can be studied by the entire ummah, especially the younger generation in finding new ways to move forward in becoming a visionary and great ummah.

**Ahmad Azam Abdul Rahman**

*President*

*Wadah Pencerdasan Umat (WADAH)*

This is the Policy Speech delivered by Muhammad Faisal Abdul Aziz (ABIM President) during the 49th ABIM General Assembly held on 26th December 2020.



# COSMOPOLITAN ISLAM & THE FORGING OF BANGSA MALAYSIA: Half A Century of ABIM's Muslim Movement

*Yang Dihormati Profesor Dato' Dr. Mohammad Redzuan Othman,  
Pengerusi Majlis Syura Kebangsaan*

*Yang Dikasihi Profesor Dato' Dr. Siddiq Fadzil,  
Ketua Majlis Istisyyari Wadah Pencerdasan Umat Malaysia*

*Yang Berbahagia Tuan Haji Abdul Halim Ismail,  
Pengerusi Majlis Perundingan Kebangsaan ABIM*

*Yang Berbahagia Tuan Haji Ahmad Azam Ab. Rahman,  
Presiden Wadah Pencerdasan Umat Malaysia (WADAH)*

*Yang Berbahagia Ahmad Farhan Rosli,  
Presiden Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar Islam Malaysia (PKPIM)*

*Yang Berusaha Mohammad Fazril Mohd Saleh,  
Pengarah Muktamar Sanawi ke-49 ABIM merangkap  
Setiausaha Agung ABIM*

*Ahli Majlis Syura Kebangsaan (MSK)*

*Ahli Majlis Perundingan Kebangsaan ABIM (MPKA)*

*Teman-teman seperjuangan, Saf Pimpinan & Ahli Jawatankuasa Kerja  
ABIM Pusat, Negeri, & Daerah*

*Ketua-ketua Agensi WADAH-ABIM-PKPIM*

*Para Petugas & Penggerak Muktamar Kali ke-49 ABIM,*

*Seluruh warga Muktamirin Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM)*

*Assalāmu' alaykum wa rahmatulLāhi wa barakātuh &*

*Salam Sejahtera.*

*Dalam senyuman kita rapatkan ukhuwah,  
Dalam ketegasan kita saling bermuhasabah,  
Dalam sembunyi pengorbanan dicurah,  
Dalam kesatuan kita suburkan rasa cinta dalam Jamaah  
Dan...  
Dalam keyakinan kita bangunkan cita-cita ummah*

## ABIM: A HALF CENTURY OF CONTINUITY

My dear brothers and sisters,

Today, we gather virtually and physically to celebrate ABIM's 49<sup>th</sup> Muktamar (Annual General Assembly). The poem penned above is a reflection of the elements that we traditionally embrace during Muktamar: Brotherhood, self-reflection, sacrifice, love and affection, and a strong conviction to build the aspirations of the Ummah. This is the best opportunity for all representatives and observers from all states, districts, and units to meet and greet in a new norm regardless of how far or near we may be from one another.

Looking at half a century of ABIM's movement, we see a continuity of the struggle of the Prophets in upholding the revelation mandated by Allah to be conveyed to mankind. Idealism and revelation are the foundation for the aspiration of *iṣlāḥ mastata'tu* (to strive for reform as much as one is able to) to act as agents of change in leading the Ummah out of darkness.

Indeed, the preservation of the movement in upholding the religion of Allah is recorded in the al-Qur'ān through the group of people given the title "*Rijālun Ṣadaqū*" which is promised to be born in every era. Allah said in the Qur'an:

مِّنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ رِجَالٌ صَدَقُوا مَا عَاهَدُوا اللَّهَ عَلَيْهِ ۗ فَمِنْهُمْ  
مَّن قَضَىٰ نَحْبَهُ وَمِنْهُمْ مَّن يَنْتَظِرُ ۖ وَمَا بَدَّلُوا تَبْدِيلًا ﴿٢٤﴾

*“Among the believers are men (of highest valor) who have been true to their covenant with God: among them are those who have fulfilled their vow (by remaining steadfast until death), and those who are awaiting (its fulfilment). They have never altered in any way.” (Sūrah al-Aḥzāb: ayat 23)*

Commenting on the examples of “*Rijālun Ṣadaqū*”, who do not betray their promises to their Lord, Imām al-Zamakhsharī narrated the story of the companions who vowed to stand firm with Prophet Muḥammad until the end of their lives. They were ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān, Ṭalḥah ibn ‘Ubaydillāh, Sa‘ad ibn Zayd, Ḥāzmah, Mus‘ab ibn ‘Umayr, and a few other companions.<sup>1</sup>

The activists of ABIM, from one generation to another, stand on this basis of “*Rijālun Ṣadaqū*”, honouring the pact with God to continuously spread the message of the Prophets, particularly to the Malay world. ABIM’s future generations will continue to forge ahead in the effort to fill the poverty of Islamic identity in the character of the nation through the agenda of *al-Islām Niẓām al-Ḥayāh* – Islam as a way of life.

It is also mentioned in the hadith from Ṣāḥiḥ Muslim

<sup>1</sup> Ahmad Mustafa al-Maraghi. *Tafsir Al-Maraghiy*, Jilid 11 (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka, 2011), 5462

## لا تزال طائفة من أمتي ظاهرين على الحق حتى تقوم الساعة

*“A group of people from my Ummah will continue to fight in defence of truth and remain triumphant until the Day of judgment.”<sup>2</sup>*

This group, referred to as al-Ṭāifah al-Manṣūrah, remains steadfast and unharmed until the decree of Allah reaches them.

The arrival of Islam in the Malay Peninsula and the surrounding regions has changed the image of a nation that was once characterized as pragmatic and utilitarian – experimenting with different faiths based on practicality and benefits towards establishing an identity as a religious and cultured nation.

The truly unique ingredients, geographical factors, and creativity of the early missionaries in the Malay world who were renowned for their subtlety and creativity in delivering ‘*aḥsanu qawlan*’ (da‘wah message) have established Islam in the Malay world as a cosmopolitan Islam that is rich with features of openness, inclusiveness, and interactions. These characteristics should be the core for the younger generation of Muslims in shouldering the responsibility of da‘wah as part of the chain of “*Rijālun Ṣadaqū*” and *al-Ṭāifah al-Manṣūrah* with a quality of faith, guidance, and the integrity to fulfil the promise.

## COSMOPOLITAN ISLAM AND THE CONTINUITY OF HUMAN CIVILIZATION

In a lecture series *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* by Thomas Carlyle, a 19th century European historian and philosopher (delivered throughout May 1840), Prophet Muḥammad *ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam* was lifted as a ‘hero’ who became the catalyst

<sup>2</sup> Bukhari & Muslim

to societal reform – not only among the Arab community but also in other parts of the world who were touched by his message: “Zealous missionaries preach it (Islam) abroad among Malays, black Papuans, brutal idolaters;– displacing what is worse, nothing that is better or good. To the Arab Nation it was as a birth from darkness into light; Arabia first became alive by means of it. A poor shepherd people, roaming unnoticed in its deserts since the creation of the world; a Hero-Prophet was sent down to them with a word they could believe: see, the unnoticed becomes world-notable, the small has grown world-great; within one-century afterwards, Arabia is at Grenada on this hand, on Delhi on that; – glancing in valor and splendour and the light of genius, Arabia shines through long ages a section of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

Carlyle’s claim was endorsed by Peter Frankopan, a historian from Oxford University, who, in his latest piece, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, concluded that Islam pioneered a way which initially appeared bleak, but resulted in an outstanding victory. “An unpromising start in a cave near Mecca had given birth to a cosmopolitan utopia of sorts”.<sup>4</sup> A treasure of observations by scholars on Islamic civilization and its history proved that Islam at one time became a key point of reference in world civilization. However, since the era of its decline, the fate of the ummah became unsettled, the future dark and uncertain, as mentioned by Mohammad Khatami “our past has been eventful, but our future remains uncertain”.

Therefore, activists of the movement with self awareness and a sense of responsibility to the world – in line with the trust as vicegerents of Allah in this world – need to formulate strategies to become ‘creative individuals’ who intently plan towards the revival of the contemporary world civilisation in the same way that Muslims did in the past. Islam’s image in human civilization should be portrayed with the renewal of Muslims’ character as a cultured and educated

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Carlyle. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 77.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Frankopan. *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (UK: Bloomsbury, 2015), 75.

ummah, through the forgotten framework of civilization that is 'cosmopolitan Islam' and 'Islamicate Civilization'.

Bruce B Lawrence in *Rethinking Muslim Cosmopolitanism: Civilizational Moorings/Cosmopolitan Options* defines the concept of cosmopolitan Islam as something intertwined with the construction of civilization. He asserts that in the context of the construction of civilization, the characteristics of Islamic cosmopolitan thought came from specific parts of Islamic civilization. He explains:

*"I want to argue that this cosmopolitan longing builds on a related activity, one that stems from a collective belonging. Embedded in the history of empires, it is often heralded as Islamic or Islamicate civilization. Cosmopolitan and civilization become complementary qualifiers. They function in tandem. Two sides of a single coin, each illumines the other"*

5

Here Lawrence emphasizes the term "Islamicate civilization" which is described as a broader and inclusive concept that includes aesthetic (beauty) and literary elements (height of knowledge) shared with Muslims and non-Muslims living under Islamic rule.<sup>6</sup>

When he quoted Malek Bennabi as one of the modern exemplars of Muslim Cosmopolitan Thinking, among the features manifested in the cosmopolitan Muslim character he quoted was the building of an open Islamic society marked by fluid boundaries, multiple ways of being and seeing, living, and feeling the world. He emphasized the character of cosmopolitan Muslims as "deeply rooted in a mindset and memory that is shaped not only by Islam but also by Muslim networks, the crucial index for the formation of Islamic or Islamicate civilization."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Bruce B Lawrence, "Rethinking Muslim Cosmopolitanism," British Association of Islamic Studies (Brais) Plenary Address, 2014, April 10. [https://www.academia.edu/12801178/Rethinking\\_Muslim\\_Cosmopolitanism](https://www.academia.edu/12801178/Rethinking_Muslim_Cosmopolitanism)

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Lawrence, "Muslim Cosmopolitanism", Thirnscholars, 2012, Sept 01. <https://tirnscholars.org/2012/09/01/muslim-cosmopolitanism/index.html>

<sup>7</sup> Bruce B Lawrence, "Rethinking Muslim Cosmopolitanism," British Association of Islamic Studies (Brais) Plenary Address, 2014, April 10. [https://www.academia.edu/12801178/Rethinking\\_Muslim\\_Cosmopolitanism](https://www.academia.edu/12801178/Rethinking_Muslim_Cosmopolitanism)

Marshall Hodgson had also described this cosmopolitan Islam as a process of widely spreading Islam to the world. According to him, Islam arose in the Middle Dry Zone and took on a strange cosmopolitan form that gave this religion extraordinary strength especially along new trade routes and districts. Thus, Islam quickly spread to Central Eurasia and Africa, and reached Bengal, Greece, Albania, Keralam (southwestern India), and Malaysia because these commercial areas depended on cosmopolitan centre.

More importantly, the spread of urban culture which in turn led to civilization through the formation of cosmopolitan Islam has further catalyzed trade in long-distance sea routes. Thus, a network of large oceans forming a long-distance commercialized trade route dubbed the "Seven Seas" was established, covering the East China Sea from Japan to the south, the South China Sea to the Straits of Malacca, the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea and Northeast Atlantic Ocean to Britain.<sup>8</sup>

*The Asian Renaissance* by Anwar Ibrahim elaborated in depth the process of propagation of Islamic da'wah on the cosmopolitan axis in the Malay world without coercion and violence<sup>9</sup> which has forged an identity of cosmopolitan Islam in this region that is open to universality.

Commenting further, Anwar Ibrahim in his writing stressed how the method of spreading Islam in the region which was full of uniqueness and creativity had succeeded in forming a Southeast Asian Muslim community with a cosmopolitan image that was void of resentment and hostility.

He asserted that *"this peaceful and gradual Islamization has moulded the Southeast Asian Muslim psyche into one which is cosmopolitan, open-minded, tolerant and amenable to cultural diversity. Of course, their*

<sup>8</sup> Marshall G.S Hodgson, *Kebangkitan Islam, Gambaran dan Sejarah Dalam Tamadun Dunia Jilid II* (trans) (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka, 2004), 621.

<sup>9</sup> T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam* (Delhi: Renaissance Publishing House, 1984), 363.

*outlook is also fashioned by the strong presence of people of other faiths who reciprocate Muslim tolerance.”<sup>10</sup>*

Hence, the trend of historical development of Islam in this region has been an important influence on the moderate, pragmatic, and cosmopolitan attitude of the nation. This was enhanced by the essential character of the Malays who were generally portrayed as open, forgiving, and big-hearted as an added value that allowed for a peaceful interaction in the presence of multiple beliefs in this region.

However, the pragmatic and moderate attitude of the Southeast Asian Muslims did not mean they compromised on the teachings and ideals of Islam to satisfy contemporary whims and fancies. On the contrary, such an approach was taken to successfully spread the societal ideals of Islam.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, Syed Khairudin Aljunied in his book *Muslim Cosmopolitanism: Southeast Asian Islam In Comparative Perspective* discusses the cosmopolitan features of Muslims with fresh substance driven by the Southeast Asian Muslim community.

*“Muslim cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia is a style of thought, a habit of seeing the world and a way of living that is rooted in the central tenet of Islam, which is that everyone is part of a common humanity accountable to God and that we are morally responsible towards one another. To embrace Muslim cosmopolitanism is to exhibit a high degree of receptiveness to universal values that are embedded within one’s own customs and tradition (adat). Internalizing Muslim cosmopolitanism enables a person to be at ease with his or her own Islamic cultural identities, promoting these identities as a means to enrich public understanding about Islam and Muslims while maintaining and embracing a tolerant attitude towards people of other backgrounds. It follows then that*

<sup>10</sup> Anwar Ibrahim, *The Asia Renaissance* (Kuala Lumpur: Times Book International, 1996), 112.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 113

*Muslim cosmopolitans approach varied ways of thinking about Islam and about life in an open-hearted and empowering way in the path to ensure the protection of faith, life, lineage, intellect, property, and rights of all groups and individuals in society. As living embodiments of Muslim cosmopolitanism, they are committed to a set of practices and actions that are aimed at enlivening the spirit of compassion (rahmah), justice (adil) and consensus (musyawarah) in order to safeguard public interest (masalahah).”<sup>12</sup>*

The cosmopolitan characteristics of Southeast Asian Muslims are also described by him in his book *Hamka & Islam: Cosmopolitan Reform in the Malay World*. Based on the term “cosmopolitan reform”, he explains the framework of the renowned Malay scholar Haji Abdul Malik Bin Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah, or better known as Hamka who had a strong conviction in the universality of Islam. The book stated Hamka’s assertion that

*“Islam is for the world, not for the Arabs as such. Inviting the world [to Islam] requires us to be open-minded, to be embracing, to view the whole world as part of a universal brotherhood.”<sup>13</sup>*

The book concludes that *Hamka’s cosmopolitan reform was aimed at encouraging Muslims in the Malay world to think and act in a more inclusive, fairer, and more pluralistic manner without having to compromise the basic precepts and universal aims of Islam”.*

The emphasis on the cosmopolitan concept of Islam which encapsulates the features of universality and openness should spark a keen awareness on how the construction of civilization is based on historical interactions and relationships between civilizations. In fact, the history of Islamic civilization has acknowledged the fact that we learned from the Indian Civilization in the field of mathematics

<sup>12</sup> Khairudin Aljunied, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism, Southeast Asian Islam In Comparative Perspective* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), xix.

<sup>13</sup> Khairudin Aljunied, *Hamka And Islam Cosmopolitan Reform in the Malay World*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 2018), 6.



# KOSMOPOLITAN ISLAM & PEMBINAAN BANGSA MALAYSIA

*Memaknai Perjuangan Separuh Abad Gerakan Islam ABIM*

MUHAMMAD FAISAL ABDUL AZIZ



ABIM



PERDANA  
LEADERSHIP  
FOUNDATION  
YAYASAN  
KEPIMPINAN  
PERDANA