

ZAID IBRAHIM

**ASSALAMU
ALAIKUM**

MAY PEACE BE UPON YOU

**OBSERVATIONS ON THE
ISLAMISATION OF MALAYSIA**

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PUSTAKA PERDANA



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ASSALAMUALAIKUM

Observations on the Islamisation of Malaysia

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First published 2015

Published by



ZI Publications Sdn. Bhd. 378106-W

B-2-19 Merchant Square
Jalan Tropicana Selatan Satu
PJU 3, 47410 Petaling Jaya
Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Zaid Ibrahim, 1951-

ASSALAMUALAIKUM: OBSERVATIONS ON THE ISLAMISATION
OF MALAYSIA/ ZAID IBRAHIM.

ISBN 978-967-5266-32-4

1. Malaysia – Malaysia 2. Islam and state 3. Malaysia – Religion

I. Title

297.09595

Layout & Cover design by
Salt Media Group Sdn Bhd

Printed by
Vinlin Press Sdn Bhd
No 2 Jalan Meranti Permai 1
Meranti Permai Industrial Park
Batu 15 Jalan Puchong
47100 Puchong, Selangor, Malaysia

245382

This book is dedicated to memory of my late mother,
Mariam.

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ZAI

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FOREWORD

Muslims believe the Quran is a guide from God: for all mankind, at all times and until the end of time. That is a matter of faith.

The essence of the Quran is *al-Amr bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nahy an al-munkar*. The approximate translation is “Enjoin good and forbid evil”, or in Malay, “*Biasakan yang baik, jauhi yang jahat.*” It is as succinct and elegant in both languages as it is in the original classical Arabic.

This message is often missed in the thick tomes of religious scholars, erudite sermons of bedecked ulama, and frenzied jingoism of zealous jihadists. Meanwhile in Malaysia, Islam is reduced to a government bureaucracy manned by control-freaks intent on dictating our lives. Yes, they are all men.

Their mission has little to do with that golden rule.

Theirs is an exercise of raw unbridled power, all in the name of Allah of course. Not-too-bright and self-serving politicians are only too willing to ride this Islamic tiger. Once ridden however, it is difficult to dismount, as the Afghans and Pakistanis are finding out.

Malaysia's saving grace is its significant non-Muslim minority, an effective buffer and formidable bulwark against the intrusive reach of these political Islamists. Another is that we are blessed with our share of Hang Jebats, courageous souls committed to justice and offended by these opportunistic Hang Tuahs of Islam.

Zaid Ibrahim is one such individual. He demonstrated his "Jebatism" many years ago by quitting his Cabinet position, a rare occurrence in Malaysia. His reputation soared after that.

He brings this tenacious trait to his latest book, *Assalamualaikum*, where he assails these government-issued ulama for their zealous preoccupation with the superficialities of our faith while ignoring our blatant "unIslamic" core, and our corrupt leaders for the injustices they perpetrate as well as their flagrant and frequent abuses of power.

Such perversions of the faith are now the norm in much of the Islamic world. Malaysians, especially Malays, need to be reminded of this grim and depressing reality. Zaid's collection of essays does this; they are tough, sophisticated, and most of all, brutally frank.

Many have also done this but what makes Zaid unique

is that he marshals the logic, rationality and persuasiveness of the accomplished lawyer that he was in his writing. Many Malays, unsure of their grounding in Islam, obsequiously defer to these civil-servant ulama. Not Zaid. He proves that you do not need a *madrrasah* background, flowing robes or exquisite *tajwid* to expose these pretenders in our faith.

Zaid shies away from long quotations of the Quran and hadith, *de rigueur* in current Islamic discourses. His only paean to Arabism is the title. As he notes in his preface, he could have substituted the warm and welcoming Malay equivalent, *salam sejahtera*. Noting that *sejahtera* is of Sanskrit and thus Hindu origin, he demurred.

To Zaid, such concepts as justice, privacy, the rule of law and representative government—long dismissed by Islamists as Western constructs and thus *ipso facto* unIslamic—have deep roots in Islamic tradition and are very much in consonance with the central message of the Quran.

I agree. Consider the issue of privacy. Legend has it that Caliph Umar once spied an unmarried couple engaged in what Malaysians call *khalwat* (“close proximity”). He barged in to confront the couple, threatening them with the severest penalty—stoning to death, at least for the woman. Unperturbed, the male partner instead chastised Umar, admitting that yes, he had indeed sinned against God, but Umar on the other hand had wronged him and his partner by violating their privacy. The Caliph relented.

Three points here: one, the primacy of personal

privacy in Islam; two, citizens should not hesitate to confront even the highest authorities should they stray out of line; and three, the pivotal difference between wronging God versus wronging your fellow humans. Tell that to those voyeuristic Islamists who are wont to snoop into hotel rooms!

As for our leaders' frequent abuse of power and disregard for the rule of law, consider the last line of Caliph Abu Bakar's immortal inaugural speech: "Obey me so long as I obey Allah and His Messenger. And if I do not, then I have no right to your obedience." Tell that to those overbearing leaders, religious as well as secular.

Islam is more than a religion; it is a complete and total way of life. As such, discourses in Islam should not be the exclusive preserve of only ulama and religious scholars. All have something (and Zaid has much) to contribute.

As a practising lawyer Zaid was concerned with justice at the personal level. As a public figure he fights for justice at the societal level. Without justice, a society cannot be Islamic regardless of its label. It is that simple.

Zaid exposes pervasive injustices in the Islamic world perpetrated by religious leaders as well as secular ones wrapped in religious garb. Little wonder that Ayatollah Khomeini drove more out of Islam than even Stalin could. Deprived of justice, peace eludes much of the Muslim world.

Malaysia might not be led by ulama (except for Kelantan), but as Zaid wrote, it is in "an increasingly steep descent into a more regressive form of Islam

administration...not by the desire to promote Islamic values...but to exert political control.”

As for the idea of ulama leading the state, Zaid’s Kelantan is “Exhibit A” on why they should not. It suffers from appalling poverty as well as the highest rates of AIDS, incest, drug abuse and abandoned babies. It also has the highest number of surfers of pornographic sites.

Zaid renders a great service to Muslims by reminding us of the sterling essence of our great faith. For non-Muslims, *Assalamualaikum* is a lucid exposition of the Islamic foundation of such concepts as justice, privacy, the rule of law, and other humanistic aspirations hitherto wrongly assumed to be exclusively modern and Western.

Stated in a different way, with *Assalamualaikum*, Zaid Ibrahim performs a pristine form of *jihad* and *dakwah*.

M. Bakri Musa¹

¹M. Bakri Musa is a surgeon and author of several incisive books concerning the state of social affairs in Malaysia.

PREFACE

“Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects Evil and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. And Allah hears and knows all things.”

~ Surah Al-Baqarah (2:256)

Islamisation in Malaysia began in earnest in 1985 with the *Dasar Penerapan Nilai-Nilai Islam Dalam Pentadbiran* (i.e. the policy of incorporating Islamic values in government administration). These Islamic values were first described as the “universal” values of hard work, honesty and integrity—a kind of Islamic equivalent of Max Weber’s Protestant work ethic.

Unfortunately, it also led to something new: a brand of political Islam supported by a body of cadres and officials

co-opted into the civil service which proceeded to use its political and administrative power to mould the country according to its own views of what constituted Islam. What these Malaysian Islamists have achieved in the past 35 years has nothing to do with integrity, ethics or universal values but, rather, the accumulation of power. This book will attempt to explain this development, which now threatens to tear our country apart.

I have chosen to write on these subjects because it pains me to see what Islamisation has done to our wonderful country. We once mixed freely with one another with little care for skin colour or whether we prayed towards the Kaabah or in the temples for Lord Krishna, but those days are long gone. Our laws, which once protected us from harm, now instil fear and intimidation. Also, Malays have changed: they no longer resemble the confident, happy and kind-hearted people described by historians and writers of the past. Even Munshi Abdullah Abdul Kadir, who was so critical of the attitudes and work ethic of Malays in the 19th century, acknowledged their magnanimous nature in welcoming foreign traders to their land. That admirable characteristic is in danger of going extinct.

We could have been a happy country with people of many different faiths and cultures working together in harmony. We might even have been more prosperous than South Korea or Singapore had we put our minds to it. But Islamisation has made us blind. Instead of asking the right

questions of leaders who fail us, we talk instead about God's laws and why women must cover themselves up even when they're taking part in sports.

Islamisation has created in many Malay-Muslims a false sense of superiority that is grounded in the idea that an Islamic "panacea" is needed for a new order in Malaysia. As an Islamic country, Malaysia is supposed to have an edge in terms of knowledge, law, economics and justice, but these are lofty dreams based on nothing that we can see. Islamisation in Malaysian public policy is an experiment that has failed miserably but our policymakers keep talking about the need for more Islamisation and are so confident about this path that they are prepared to rewrite history and re-interpret the Federal Constitution. They are willing to demolish our democratic institutions and they believe the numerical superiority of Malay-Muslims gives them complete justification to do what they like with the country.

This is a terrible mistake. The revisionists have neither produced nor discovered anything new; in their zeal, they have only divided the country and let loose a fanatical extremism that has done nothing good for us.

My criticism of Islamisation does not mean that I am criticising Islam. Islam, like all great religions, offers spiritual guidance in understanding this life and the purpose of our existence. It also deals with life's travails and provides a distinctive way of asking questions and reasoning that can help us understand the world we live in. These concepts

tools can be used to revitalise societies generally—beyond Muslim societies—by providing new ethical frameworks capable of tempering human excesses such as unbridled greed and cruelty as well as the social injustices of the modern global economic order. But Islamisation in Malaysia has accomplished none of these things. Instead of tempering excesses, it is the cause of the wave of extremism we are now experiencing. Instead of introducing the religion's true moral and ethical frameworks, it has neglected them totally, proposing to replace them with harsh criminal punishments for Muslims whom the ulama regard as deviationists. Human rights and dignity suffer as a consequence.

A true understanding of Islam can fill the vacuum created by the lack of moral clarity in the country but this requires pluralism in thought. When there is only a single privileged way of thinking—whether about economics, science or any human endeavour—knowledge will not liberate but stifle us. It is therefore incumbent on Muslims to play an active role in making the world a better place not only for themselves but for others who do not share their beliefs, and they can do so only by acting sincerely and by avoiding becoming tools of political power.

The dilemma for Malaysia today is that the more Islamisation progresses, the further away Muslims are from both the true teachings of the religion as well as the mainstream values of the world. Indeed, Malaysian Muslims—and Malays particularly—are being asked to

reject more and more things that have been integral parts of their culture and experience for centuries just because religious bureaucrats and government-paid Muslim scholars do not approve of them.

Only conscientious Muslims who are independent of “sponsors” and party-political obligations can bring about the rebirth of true Islam through their conduct and genuine piety. An Islamic revolution that is compatible with the modern world is possible only without political interference because the quest for less extremism and fanaticism—for moderation in many issues—can be achieved only if paid scholars and state religious departments do not abuse their positions to impose their authoritarian views on all others. In Malaysia, we have already suffered several instances of authorities justifying fascist behaviour in the name of “defending Islam”.

Thus, this book’s main argument is that the ruling Barisan Nasional’s (BN’s) abuse of religion for political ends has not only ruined the administration of the country but has also given Islam a bad name. To be successful, Islamisation needs a political party that understands and embraces the core principles of Islam, the fight for justice for all and the need to protect the dignity of individuals. For Malaysia to progress in the wholesome manner as conceived by our Vision 2020, political Islam and the message the religion brings must not depart from its humanistic essence. The policy of official Islamisation and co-opting religion in the pursuit of busin

or political goals has derailed our nation's progress and will further restrict our ability to become a developed country. For leaders to move the country forward, outdated political ideas couched in the name of Islam as well as orthodox ulama must not play an active part in policymaking.

Unfortunately, today's Malays are attracted to fundamentalist political ideologies, as is evident from the increasing extremism being shown by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), the two biggest Malay Muslim parties. Whilst other Malaysians are growing more open to the world around them and are taking advantage of all a modern country can offer, Malays continue to live by the narrow views of insecure theocrats. No wonder Malays always complain about being left behind: they still do not seem to realise that political and religious leaders have long been keeping them in isolation.

It is this tragedy of Islamisation that forms the story of this book. The Government's so-called efforts to make Islam the way of life for Malaysian Muslims have spiralled out of the control of those who promoted this policy. Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir and his Deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim were under pressure from PAS to Islamise the country after the Iranian Revolution. Unfortunately for both of them, UMNO was an unsuitable vehicle for the implementation of Islamisation. UMNO was and is an elitist party—its leaders are wealthy Malays, who by and large have no interest in sharing their wealth or providing basic

amenities to the poor. Their slogans may be Islamic but their actions are not. Anwar's failure to implement Islamic principles and values was therefore due to the cultural and political values of UMNO, which were inimical to Islam. UMNO was (and still is) concerned with the enhancement of Malay wealth. In the process, it created a culture of greed that rejected Islam's egalitarian principles. This is why Islamisation in Malaysia has focused less on substantive issues than on superficial matters of ritual and attire.

Malaysia today is now in a worse state than it ever was. Malays no longer have an authentic identity and culture that they can relate to and there is no sense of unity amongst the different races. There is no honesty in the administration of the country and secrecy is the operative word in its governance. Brute force is used to frighten the people. There is not even a semblance of the gentler, kinder and more compassionate Islamic society that was meant to come out of this policy.

The deeply Malaysian characteristic of openness, generosity and magnanimity has disappeared and in its place we find narrow-mindedness and religious fanaticism. I hope this book can in some way help us to work together to overcome Islamisation so that it will be the people's good nature, tolerance and sensibility that will determine the kind of Malaysia we want. Malaysians must once again be in control of their country's destiny.

This book contains essays I wrote over the past year

have decided to title this collection of essays *Assalamualaikum* because I believe that it is only in and through peace that we may overcome our present differences. Muslims offer the greeting “*Assalamualaikum*”, which is Arabic for “peace be upon you”, when they meet. It has long been the tradition of Arabs to use this phrase—even before the coming of Islam—and perhaps it has something to do with the war-like culture that prevailed in an era of frequent tribal disputes. In this sense, the Muslim greeting of peace is linguistically related to the Hebrew “*Shalom aleichem*” and is semantically the same as the Latin Christian “*Pax vobiscum*”, which all mean the same thing: peace be upon (or with) you. I offer sincere greetings of peace to all readers of this book—it is not my intention to wage war with Islamists or anyone else—and I pray that readers will receive this book in the spirit in which it is given.

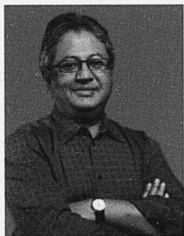
I could have used the Malay greeting “*Salam sejahtera*”, which also means “peace be with you” and is devoid of Muslim connotations. However, the word “*sejahtera*” (meaning “peace” or “tranquillity”) derives from the Sanskrit “*jaitra*” (“victorious”) and there are many Malaysian Muslims today who are sceptical about Malay words of Sanskrit origin. They might think I am trying to pollute their religion. The sad fact is that today, the more Arabic words or phrases you use, the higher the regard that some Malay Muslims will have of you.

I gave the manuscript of this book to some friends for

The rise of political Islamisation in Malaysia in recent decades has raised many questions: what is the nature of this trend, what are its origins, who are its chief personalities, how has it grown and, perhaps most pertinent today in the context of global events, what does it mean for Malaysia?

Zaid Ibrahim explores these and other critical issues with the same passion, honesty and even-handed rationality that distinguished his career as a Government minister and one of Malaysia's top lawyers. A leading social-political critic today, Zaid is known for his compelling discussions of some of Malaysia's most complex and divisive issues through an unshakeable commitment to the principles of justice, liberty and democracy.

Assalamualaikum should be read by all who are interested in the increasing religiosity of Malaysian politics and its implications on the constitutional fabric of a nation at the crossroads.



Zaid Ibrahim was a practising lawyer in Malaysia for over 33 years. He founded the law firm Zaid Ibrahim & Co., which has grown to be the largest law firm in Malaysia. He left the private sector to serve the Government of Malaysia as de facto Law Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, but resigned in protest against the use of preventive detention laws against civilians. During his brief time in the Cabinet, he helped establish the Judicial Appointments Commission, which provides for the procedure in the appointment of judges, and compensated the Supreme Court judges who were dismissed by the Government during the 1988 judicial crisis.



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