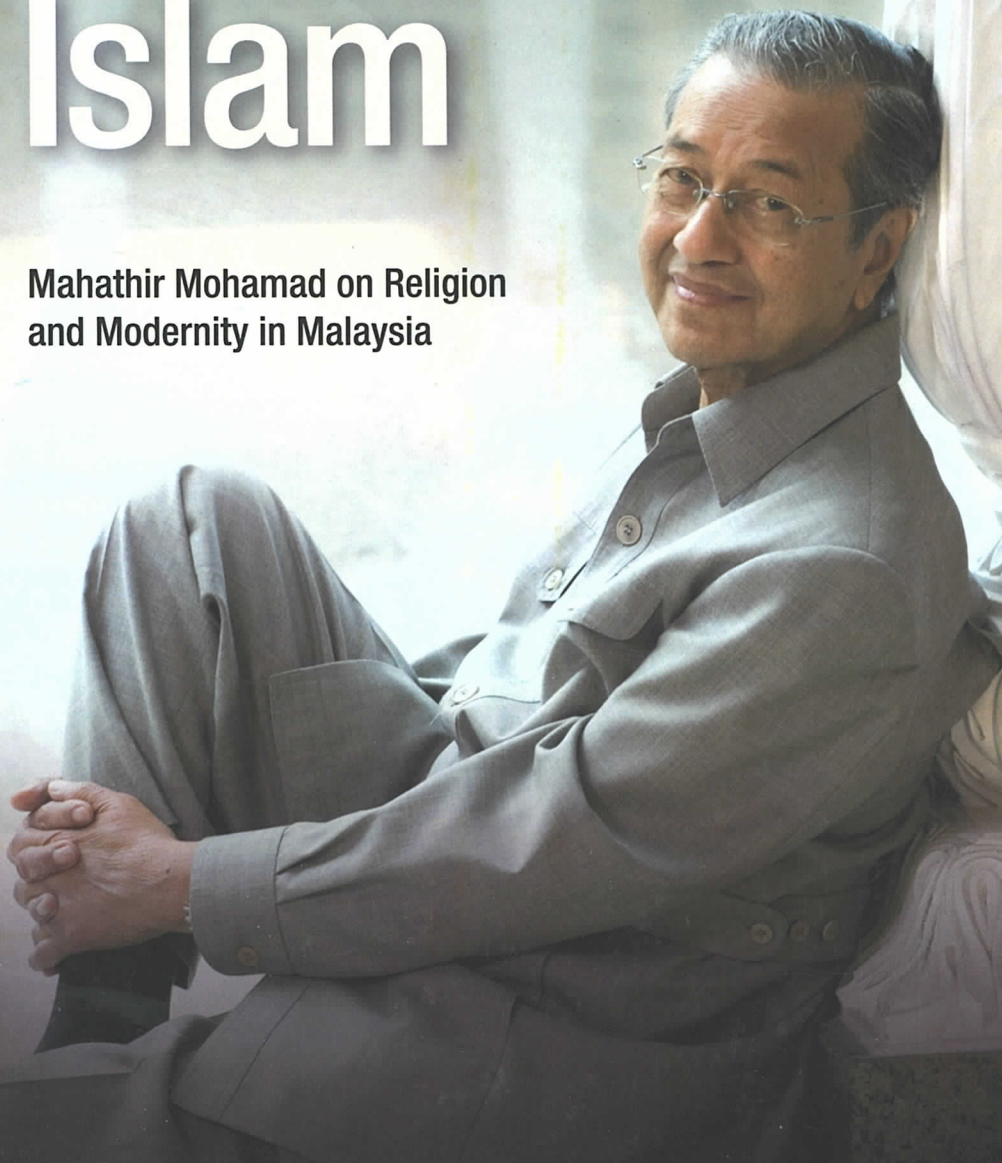


Mahathir's Islam

Mahathir Mohamad on Religion
and Modernity in Malaysia



092

Sven Schottmann



TUN DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

MAHATHIR'S ISLAM

*Mahathir Mohamad on Religion
and Modernity in Malaysia*

Sven Schottmann



University of Hawai'i Press

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Printed in the United States of America

23 22 21 20 19 18 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Schottmann, Sven, author.

Title: Mahathir's Islam: Mahathir Mohamad on religion and modernity in Malaysia/Sven Schottmann.

Description: Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, [2018] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018001939 | ISBN 9780824846749 (cloth ; alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Mahathir bin Mohamad, 1925—Religion. | Mahathir bin Mohamad, 1925—Political and social views. | Islam and state—Malaysia. | Malaysia—Politics and government.

Classification: LCC DS597.215.M34 S36 2018 | DDC 959.505/4092—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018001939>

University of Hawai'i Press books are printed on acid-free paper and meet the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Council on Library Resources.

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959.505L092

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FOREWORD

Majlis Profesor Negara (MPN), or the National Council of Professors, Malaysia, with its 2,200 members representing both public and private universities, launched a special program called the Mahathir Distinguished Fellowship Program (MDFP) in December 2012. The aim of this program is to encourage serious scholars, Malaysians and non-Malaysians, to examine objectively and critically the role played by Malaysia's former prime minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in shaping modern Malaysia and to explore his contributions, as a statesman, to the country, the region, and the world.

From a number of domestic and international nominations, Dr. Sven Alexander Schottmann from the Centre for Dialogue at La Trobe University in Melbourne was chosen as the inaugural recipient of the Mahathir Distinguished Fellowship. The choice was based on his excellent academic record and, particularly, his attractive proposal to focus on Mahathir's Islamic discourse within the broader context of his "modernization project" for Malaysia and especially for the Malays. This book is the product of his effort that began long before he was awarded the fellowship, which allowed him to complete it successfully with the support of a generous grant.

There have been numerous commentaries and op-eds written by academics and journalists from around the world on Mahathir's take on religion. One of the earliest academic papers that analyzed Mahathir's Islam published in the English language was an essay by Diane Mauzy and Robert S. Milne entitled "The Mahathir Administration in Malaysia: Discipline through Islam," published in *Pacific Affairs* in 1983. Most of the content of this essay was later integrated into a book by the same authors entitled *Malaysian Politics under Mahathir*, published by Routledge in 1999, but like many other authors working on Mahathir's engagement with Islam, they depended almost totally on English sources for both their essay and the book. Conversely, most Malay-language essays and books on Mahathir's Islam belong to what might be described as an expanded version of the op-ed genre and tend to rely solely on Malay-language sources.

Dr. Schottmann—with an excellent command of his native German as well as English, Malay-Indonesian, and classical Arabic—has been able to access and use materials on Mahathir and other relevant “Islamic sources” for his analysis that writers before him were not able to do. As a result, his book presents a quality of analysis that has an admirable level of breadth and depth, arguably surpassing even the ones written prior to this on Islam as well as on other aspects of Mahathir’s rule and ideology.

It was a common observation in the 1990s that Mahathir’s so-called Islamic approach led to the intensification of “Islamization” of the national administration and the country as a whole. Based on a sensitive and informed global reading of the ideas of the twentieth-century Muslim modernists, Dr. Schottmann advanced an interpretation and argument that it was Islam in Malaysia that Mahathir modernized, not the other way around. This was accomplished through what he called Mahathir’s “theology of progress,” which provided a wide range of solutions and corrective measures that eventually were implemented.

There is much more that this book offers that deepens our knowledge not only about Mahathir’s pragmatic Islamic orientation but also the many other socio-cultural, economic, and political challenges which he had to face and resolve, especially during the critical years of the Asian Financial Crisis and the major political fallout with his erstwhile deputy.

Dr. Schottmann’s book is a must-read not only for those interested in Malaysian studies but also those who are fascinated by Mahathir, who, in the eyes of many—Muslim taxi drivers in Europe included—is a successful and truly modern Muslim democrat of international stature, indeed a statesman.

Datuk Dr. Shamsul A. B.
Distinguished Professor
Founding Director, Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA)
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)
Bangi, March 2014

PREFACE

Lee Kuan Yew, the long-term leader of postcolonial Singapore and a man with whom the subject of this study shared a relationship comprised in equal parts of respect and dislike, famously joked that even from his sickbed, even from beyond the grave, he would get up and right things for Singapore if he felt something was going wrong. Malaysians didn't even have to wait for a ghostly apparition of their country's longest-ruling prime minister to wade back into Kuala Lumpur's increasingly murky politics, which happened almost immediately after his official retirement. Mahathir Mohamed played a central role in the early demise of his hapless immediate successor Abdullah Badawi and helped install Najib Razak as Malaysia's sixth prime minister—only to emerge subsequently as Najib's most ferocious critic within the ruling party, calling for Najib's removal from office amid creeping authoritarianism and growing evidence of corruption on a scale previously unimaginable even in Malaysia. The nonagenarian's return to politics culminated in the extraordinary May 2018 election victory of Pakatan Harapan, a highly diverse coalition comprised of fellow dissidents from his former political party UMNO, his erstwhile foes from the Chinese-dominated DAP, a splinter party of Malaysia's large Islamic party PAS, and the Anwar Ibrahim-led PKR. Although the longer term viability of Pakatan Harapan remains to be seen, the alliance succeeded in ending fifty-three years of UMNO's dominance over Malaysian politics and captured the imagination of a majority of Malaysians eager for real change.

Mahathir's Malaysia has been a part of my life across three decades. It was the mid-1990s when I first became interested in the bespectacled middle-aged man with the black *songkok* (traditional Malay-Muslim hat) and thin-rimmed glasses, pursed lips half smiling from a portrait hung in the entrance hall of my residential college at the International Islamic University Malaysia. I began to read the available material on Malaysian politics and very soon started stumbling across descriptions of a religious versus secular divide in these scholarly discussions, something that I had difficulty reconciling with what I saw around me in the suffusion of Islam and religious practices even among people who

might think of themselves as secular or not particularly observant. A decade later, I decided to study at greater depth his engagement with religion, which was something previous authors had not been particularly interested in. My decision to write a book on Mahathir as a Muslim thinker—or perhaps better, Muslim statesman—elicited a range of different responses from friends and colleagues. One of my favorites was the sarcastic comment of one my one former college mates, a law graduate from Kelantan, that such a book would probably end up being very short.

Mahathir left office in 2003 as one of the country's most polarizing political figures and returned in 2018 as the apparently universally-admired, putative restorer of Malaysia's democracy. Well before his election victory in 2018, Mahathir had become one of the country's most popular politicians riding a growing wave of nostalgia. As Mahathir established himself as the leading figure of the growing anti-Najib movement, even apologizing for his previous errors, much of the divisiveness of the 1990s and early 2000s was temporarily forgotten amid the euphoria over prospects for a new Malaysia. Public opinion appears to be swinging toward a highly favorable view of Mahathir as the unlikely midwife of democratic reform. However, there are still many Malaysians who hold him responsible for the country's political and economic malaise, and it is important to remember that the emergence of the kleptocratic Najib regime was in large part made possible by the erosion of institutions during Mahathir's first premiership. The writing and analysis on Malaysian politics in the 1980s and 1990s, which tended to be polemical and tendentious rather than reflective or dispassionate, contributed little to constructive debate.

In view of the material to be presented in this study, I believe that a case can be made that neither his supporters nor his detractors have got it right. Mahathir clearly had many flaws as a leader, but it seems to make little sense to seek answers to the question as to whether he was a good or a bad leader. Realistically, any honest answer would invariably involve so much nuance and qualification to be of little use. On the whole, as this book seeks to argue, there was probably an equal measure of “good” and “bad,” if one may use such moral terms, in Mahathir's leadership. But the fact that it was his vision for change that has transformed Malaysia so lastingly underscores the importance of exploring this legacy at greater depth and, in particular, his as of yet still understudied engagement with what Islam is—and more importantly, what it should do.

This book represents the culmination of several years of research based at the Monash Asia Institute at Monash University; the Centre for Dialogue at La Trobe University; the Asia Institute at the University of Tasmania; the Arts, Education and Law Group at Griffith University; and extended periods of research in Ma-

aysia. In the course of my study, I have been helped by many people. I am most heavily indebted to Professor Marika Vicziany, Professor Greg Barton, and Dr. Julian Millie, because these three, each in their own way, significantly shaped my thinking about the present subject material, in particular through their encouragement to read about India and Indonesia. At La Trobe University, Professor Joseph Camilleri has provided outstanding support and mentorship for this and all of my other projects over the years: a true scholar and gentleman. Colleagues at La Trobe University as well as outside have also been extremely supportive in helping me complete this book, including Professor Alberto Gomes and Dr. Michális S. Michael from the Centre for Dialogue; Distinguished Professor Datuk Shamsul A. B. and Dr. Khaldun Malek from the Institute for Ethnic Studies at the National University of Malaysia; Professor Abdul Rahman and Dr. Ahmad Zaharuddin Sani Sabri from the Institut Pemikiran; Dr. Mahathir at Universiti Utara Malaysia; as well as Professor Wan Mohamad Nor from the Centre for Advanced Studies on Islam and Civilisation at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

My fieldwork in Malaysia was greatly facilitated by Datuk Badariah Arshad and Cik Zarina Abu Bakar from the Perdana Leadership Foundation in Putrajaya; Tun Dr. Siti Hasmah's personal assistant Cik Rohani; Dr. Syed Ali Tawfik al-Attas and Cik Azla from the Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia; Dr. Syed Farid Alatas from the Department of Malay Studies at the National University in Singapore; and Tan Sri Dato' Dr. Abdul Hamid Othman and Hajjah Azizah at the Department of Religious Affairs in the Prime Minister's Department. Special mention must also go to Dato' Wira Dr. Sharif, who spent many hours with me discussing Kedah history and visiting sights around his beloved hometown of Alor Setar. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir for her forthcoming nature and support. I found homes away from home in the houses of Tomi Soetjipto and Zyen and Julian Hopkins. I would like to thank them and the countless other Malaysians for their generous hospitality.

I would also like to express my gratitude for the funding that was made available for this project, including a Travel Fellowship from the Australia-Netherlands Research Collaboration to conduct research at Leiden University in the Netherlands, support from the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore to travel to Southeast Asia, and the generous grant from the Majlis Profesor Negara. The Monash Asia Institute, the Monash Research Graduate School, and La Trobe University have also been extremely generous in funding repeat research visits to Malaysia and Singapore. I would also like to thank my editor, Pamela Kelley, and her team at the University of Hawai'i Press for their wonderful support in getting this project off the ground. I am equally grateful for the comments of the two anonymous reviewers, which helped strengthen the argument and prose of this effort.

Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank my wife, Nursyahida, who put up with long hours and sleepless nights and heard much more about Malaysian politics of the 1980s and 1990s than she cared for. It seems to be customary for authors to thank their patient partners, but it is only through Shai's love, patience, unswerving support, and constant encouragement that I was able to see this project to its completion. My major regret is that my father is not around to see this book. Through his decision to uproot his young family to Hong Kong and then Singapore in 1971, he helped first kindle and then encourage my interest in the history and society of the Malay world. I dedicate this book to him as well as to my children, Amira, Imran, and Adnan: children of Asia, Europe, and Australia, and very much the inquiring minds Opa Joe would be proud of.

ORTHOGRAPHY AND NAMING CONVENTIONS

As there exists no universally accepted system to transliterate Arabic, the romanization of Arabic terms, with which Malaysians are brought into regular contact because of Islam, poses a number of distinct challenges. The convention adopted here is that words found in the *Oxford English Dictionary* will be spelled as they appear there (thus *umma*, *madrassa*, and *jihad*). With the exception of using ‘ to signify the letter ‘*ain* and ’ to represent *hamza*, diacritics are not used. The sign for *hamza* itself is used only when it occurs within a word, not when it occurs at the end. Arabic words that are not commonly used in English but that have entered the Malay lexicon (for instance, *ustaz*, *fardu ain*, and *ayat*) will be italicized and spelled as they appear in the *Kamus Dewan*, published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. All translated passages, unless otherwise indicated, are the work of the individual authors.

A clarification on onomastics may also be in order here. I have chosen to cite and list Malaysian authors and sources by “family” name where applicable or by their given (first) name rather than their second name, except where it is known that the individual author prefers listing by the patronymic. Although I have endeavored to maintain consistency across the chapters, notes, and references, I ask that the reader indulge minor variations.



The Mahathir Years

When it is properly understood, and its true precepts are followed, Islam offers a path to enlightenment, to harmony, to stable and responsible government, to progress and to prosperity. . . . We believe that the way we adhere to the essential or fundamental teachings and practice of Islam in Malaysia has contributed to our success as a nation.

—Mahathir Mohamad (2002)¹

The closing decades of the twentieth century saw immense cultural, political, and economic changes leading to the emergence and massive expansion of entirely new social classes, the demographic transformation of cities and countries, the emergence of new conceptions of identity, and human mobility on an unprecedented scale. Scientific breakthroughs and advances in communications technology have dramatically altered—and for the most part improved—our lives and our communities. But these developments have also contributed to profound shifts in society, the precise implications of which we cannot yet comprehend. The speed with which these changes have been taking place has been breathtaking around the world, but the degree to which Southeast Asian societies have been transformed since the 1970s is, quite simply, staggering.

In the span of a single generation, once predominantly rural societies and agricultural economies such as Malaysia became predominantly urban and industrial. Unlike their parents' generation, a majority of Malaysians today live in towns and cities, and the service sector generates more than 60 percent of the gross domestic product. In dollar terms, average household incomes increased eightfold in the thirty years between 1980 and 2010, participation in secondary and tertiary education expanded greatly, and there has been much progress in health indicators such as infant mortality, maternal health, literacy rates, and life expectancy.

Malaysia makes for an ideal case study of this change. The comparatively small Southeast Asian country of some thirty million has tremendous cultural,

religious, and ethnic diversity. Wedged culturally and politically between its much larger neighbors, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, it witnessed one of the most notable socioeconomic transformations of the late twentieth century. As the glitzy malls around the capital Kuala Lumpur shout to the outside world, Malaysia has made tremendous strides toward the desired status as a developed country.

But problems persist. Amid the endurance of real poverty even in the shadows of gleaming office towers and—much worse—hidden from sight in remote rural communities and plantations, plural Malaysia is seen by some as more divided and polarized today than at any stage of its twentieth-century history. Ethnically segregated schooling has become the norm for an entire generation of Malaysian school students, while the halal-conscious Malay lower middle class fastidiously avoids the Chinese-run *kopi tiam* (coffee shops), extending segregation from the school bench to the dining table. Although a Malaysian identity of some form has emerged over the past sixty years, there appear to be fewer and fewer opportunities for Malaysians—made up of just under 60 percent Malays and other so-called *bumiputeras*, or indigenous people, 24 percent Chinese, 7 percent Indians, and 7 percent other ethnic minorities—to mingle at work and play.

Most worryingly, perhaps, the Malaysian economy has been steadily losing its dynamism over the past decade, and the country appears already caught in the middle-income trap, as its erstwhile languishing and long much poorer neighbors such as Indonesia or Vietnam have begun to surge. It would be a simplification to attribute the many problems besetting present-day Malaysia solely to the leadership of a single man. The reverse, of course, also holds true, and the country's notable transformations cannot be described as the life's work of one person alone, as many of Mahathir's more ardent admirers like to do. There has never been a single driver of Malaysian politics—not even during what are often called the Mahathir years between 1981 and 2003, when despite his preeminence Mahathir was only one among many *dramatis personae* on the stage of Malaysian politics. His dominance, however, allowed him to become one of the most important architects of Malaysia's post-independence history. In the course of his two decades in the prime minister's office, Mahathir is often said to have “changed not just the face but also the soul of Malaysia.”²

When he became the country's fourth prime minister on July 16, 1981, few Malaysians would have anticipated the quick pace of the far-reaching transformations he was calling for. Yet many observers at the time sensed that a new era in Malaysian politics had begun under a leader so different in biography, personality, temperament, and ambition from any of his predecessors. More than a decade after formal retirement, the debate over his legacy continues. Depending on whom one is speaking to, he was a visionary leader who set Malaysia on the path

to prosperity and progress—or a parvenu with a massive chip on his shoulder, whose personalized style of politics facilitated corruption in previously unseen proportions. Perhaps it was the mercilessly fast pace of the changes that Mahathir insisted were necessary to transform the country; perhaps it was the forcefulness of his personality and his inability to brook dissent to his vision of a new Malaysia. But even today, many years after he stepped down, Malaysians are still coming to terms with their Mahathir years.

This larger-than-life figure continues to cast long shadows over an increasingly divided country. While Mahathir polarized Malaysians during his twenty-two-year-long prime ministership, the ostensibly retired leader divides public opinion like no other political figure in the country. In 2013, he emerged from some polls as Malaysia's most popular politician, while other Malaysians revile the man they hold personally responsible for the proliferation of astonishing levels of corruption among Kuala Lumpur's political elite, for the viciousness and increasing racialization of political discourse, for a slowing economy bereft of vision, and for the growing incidents of urban violence and insecurity.

Most critically, in the wake of new realities of Chinese-Malaysian voters deserting the long-ruling Barisan Nasional coalition and casting their lot with the opposition Pakatan alliance, which included the Islamic party PAS, Mahathir was posited by critics as a relic of an outdated communitarian mode of thought, out of touch with changing conditions on the ground. In the run-up to the 2013 general election, some pundits even called for Mahathir to be charged with treason over his alleged role in granting identity cards to Indonesian and Filipino migrants in Sabah in the long-standing practice of exchanging citizenship for votes. And yet in Malaysia's momentous fourteenth election in 2018, Mahathir managed to once again reinvent and reposition himself as the most plausible hope for democratization amidst the rose-tinted nostalgia for the days before the scandal-ridden Najib government.

Without doubt, Mahathir continues to shape his complex political legacy in and out of retirement as Malaysia's fourth and now seventh prime minister. The fact that it took a notionally retired, 92-year-old former politician to unseat a ruling party and system of government he had shaped like few others points toward Mahathir's undoubted centrality to Malaysian politics, as well as the dire state of the land.

The Good Old Days

For many Malaysians in their forties, fifties, and sixties, the so-called Mahathir decades of the 1980s and 1990s will always be the golden years. Many seem to

have internalized the idea that the country's best days are behind it. In a society where the wives of senior politicians pay heed (and good money) when a popular Persian-American tarot reader flies in from southern California, where Islamic symbols of state power mix with much older black magic rituals, more than a few attach some belief in the so-called Rahman theory. Reflecting both Malay world conceptions of power inhering or manifesting in inanimate objects and the numerological preoccupations of Sufistic Islam, the name of Malaysia's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, is often thought to *membawa makna yang tersirat* (contain a concealed meaning). I first encountered this idea in coffee shop conversations in the mid-1990s, when the proper name "Rahman"—in itself also one of Allah's ninety names and therefore imbued with additional significance—was described as being composed of the starting letters of the names of all men ever to be Malaysia's prime minister.

According to this more than slightly obscurantist reading of Malaysia's political history, the Mahathir years, the middle of the Rahman order, would always be the noon zenith before its inexorable decline and ultimate destruction under a leader whose name would start with the letter *N*. What happens after *N* must necessarily be the subject of another inquiry, but throughout this book I concern myself with the Mahathir years and their lasting effect. On the one hand, there are indubitable successes of transforming the country from agricultural backwater reliant on the export of rubber and tin into a regional powerhouse, a manufacturing hub, and one of the world's largest trading nations. On the other hand, while Malaysia has long left behind Ghana, a country to which it was often compared when both became independent in 1957, it has clearly not been able to build on the gains of the 1980s and 1990s.

Although economic growth has continued this century, the last two decades or so have been notably less dynamic and inspiring. The scale of corruption associated with the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) sovereign wealth fund is truly staggering, while lurid tales of political murder have become mainstays. The Malaysian economy has plateaued even as Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam, with their much larger domestic markets, have emerged as increasingly attractive destinations for foreign investment. A case in point might be the much-vaunted national car policy, centrally driven by Mahathir himself and never entirely disbanded by his successors, with Prime Minister Najib only lashing out against Proton in a bid to punish the increasingly recalcitrant Mahathir. Instead of establishing Malaysia as Southeast Asia's car-manufacturing center, protectionism even under Najib's guise of gradual liberalization continues to create immense inefficiencies in what could otherwise have been a very lucrative industrial sector.

The Mahathir years, local shorthand for the two decades between 1981 and 2003, also coincided with a substantial erosion of the country's democratic political culture. This arguably made for some planning efficiencies by cutting out potentially meddlesome opposition to the "mega projects" that were so characteristic of the era. But the authoritarianism of the 1980s and 1990s as well as its enduring echoes in post-Mahathir Malaysia has also left young Malaysians singularly ill-prepared for the imaginative and critical thinking required to thrive in the knowledge-driven economy (k-economy).

A similarly mixed picture emerges for Mahathir's long-standing commitment to raise the living standards of the country's Malay majority, which remains one of Malaysia's most disadvantaged ethnic communities in spite of the country's five-decade-long, large-scale affirmative action program known as the New Economic Policy (NEP). The NEP has gone some way toward a more equitable distribution of wealth between Malaysians of different ethnic backgrounds, in particular between the *bumiputera* (princes of the soil) majority indigenous to the Malay Archipelago and non-*bumiputera* minority communities descended largely from Indian and Chinese migrants. Many economists, however, now argue that the NEP and its successor policies have become obstacles to achieving greater social justice, that they have created unprecedented intracommunal divisions, and that they are actually stunting Malaysia's economic growth. Substantial revisions are required, possibly along the lines suggested by Anwar Ibrahim, of reformulating the NEP into a genuine pro-poor development policy that would improve the material conditions of poor Malays as much as of poor Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, and the non-Malay *bumiputera* communities of Sabah and Sarawak.

But perhaps the most contentious legacy of the Mahathir government lies in the growing social and political profile of Islam in Malaysia, paralleling similar processes under way in other parts of Muslim Southeast Asia and indeed the wider Muslim world. There have been some efforts under the Najib government that may be seen as reaching out to the country's non-Muslim minority, in particular after the Barisan Nasional's disastrous 2013 performance. But there has been no rescission of his predecessor Mahathir's 2001 declaration that the multi-religious and multicultural Southeast Asian country is not a secular but an Islamic state, with all that this entails.³ A number of observers now argue that Islam, long seen as a force for unity among the ethnically, culturally, socioeconomically, and geographically disparate Malays, has become a source of division, both within the Muslim community and between Muslims and non-Muslims. Over the past ten years, Malaysia has attracted worrying headlines internationally through firebombings and desecration of places of worship,⁴ a drawn-out

and ongoing court dispute over whether Catholics could use the word “Allah” to refer to God in Malay-language publications,⁵ the legal odyssey of a former Muslim who wished to strike Islam from her official documents,⁶ or several particularly distasteful body-snatching incidents, where corpses of deceased converts to Islam were literally snatched from their grieving non-Muslim kin.⁷ Even within Malaysia’s Muslim majority, fissures and divides are clearly emerging, resulting largely from divergent understandings of the role that religion should play in society and in particular from disagreements over the growing policing of the private sphere by state-appointed or at least state-sanctioned religious actors.

Mahathir did not introduce Islam *de novo* into Malaysia’s political landscape, but even cursory comparisons of the beginning and the end of his premiership underscore the transformative effects of his *dasar penerapan nilai-nilai Islam dalam pentadbiran*, or the official policy of “infusing government with Islamic values” launched in early 1983. While there are many Muslim and non-Muslim critics of these policies, this Islamization of educational curricula, the banking system, public broadcasting content, and government protocol were arguably also among some of Mahathir’s most popular policy decisions, earning begrudging kudos even from his most ardent critics in the Islamic opposition. *Dasar penerapan nilai-nilai Islam*, it might be argued, reflected the Malay zeitgeist like none of Mahathir’s other populist initiatives.

Like the Mahathir premiership more generally, the legacy of his engagement with the religion defies easy categorization. But unlike the vision of state-led, export-oriented industrialization,⁸ the curtailment of democracy under his increasingly presidential style of leadership,⁹ or Kuala Lumpur’s dramatic foreign policy realignments since the late 1970s,¹⁰ the role that Mahathir assigned to religion in his vision for Malaysia’s accelerated development and sociocultural modernization remains underexplored. This study seeks to identify core themes in Mahathir’s representations of Islam and to examine the change and evolution of his ideas. The objective is to make out some of the biographical, spiritual, intellectual, and theological impulses that underpinned Mahathir’s insistence that, “properly understood,” Islam was not an obstacle to growth and progress. What is missing from the growing body of political analyses of Malaysia in the 1980s and 1990s are detailed analyses of what Mahathir himself had to say about religion and its function in a modern and modernizing society. As early as 1948, Mahathir is on record calling for a concerted effort to renew Islamic thought (*pembaharuan*) in order to help facilitate socioeconomic development among the Malay community of the peninsula and enable them to “catch up” with non-Malays.¹¹ It is precisely this sustained engagement with the sociopolitical imper-

ative of Islam that earned this ostensibly secular leader the admiration of many among the faithful in Malaysia and beyond.

Islam may well be the least studied aspect of Mahathir's politics. For instance, Khoo Boo Teik, in his *Paradoxes of Mahathirism: An Intellectual Biography of Mahathir Mohamad*, discusses the significance of Islam to what he describes as Mahathirism in a single, discrete chapter. Barry Wain, whose book *Malaysian Maverick: Mahathir Mohamad in Turbulent Times* was effectively banned in Malaysia for several years, likewise assigns only one rather short chapter to discussions of Mahathir's encounter with Islam. The other significant studies on the presence of Islam in Mahathir's political rhetoric are all article length, including notable contributions by Meredith Weiss, Patricia Martinez, and Ooi Kee Beng.¹² Ismail Ibrahim's *Pemikiran Dr Mahathir tentang Islam* introduces readers to some general themes in Mahathir's "thoughts on Islam." But the author, who was also the founding director of the government-linked Institute for Islamic Understanding, relies only on a select number of speeches from the late 1990s. He does not provide an analysis of the evolution of Mahathir's public religious discourse or of the sources, influences, and motivations that informed his particular emphasis on this or the other aspect of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. A further drawback is that the book ignores some of the very problematic aspects of Mahathir's thought, including its racialized undertones or his prickly relationships with the 'ulama, the learned scholars of Islam.

What makes Mahathir interesting as a figure in the political history of the late twentieth-century Muslim world is certainly not philosophical rigor or scholarly learning. He also cannot, as one must readily admit, be considered a particularly original thinker. His religious discourse was marked by the fusion and blending of different, disparate, and sometimes plainly contradictory strands of Islamic thought. But it was Mahathir's willingness to engage seriously with Islam and to countenance a more prominent place for the religion at the highest levels of the postcolonial polity, the economy, and the system of international finance that set him apart from many of his contemporaries in the prime ministers' or presidential offices of the Muslim world. Mahathir had little by way of formal training in religious sciences and cannot be thought of as a conventional bearer of sacred knowledge in Malay-Muslim society. Yet his name resonated with many at home and many more abroad as a leader willing to think seriously about Islam's role in the modern world, willing to question the West's hegemonic claim to a singular modernity, and willing to contemplate alternative models of development.

This book seeks to provide a comprehensive account of the representations an ostensibly secular leader from the 1980s and 1990s made of the proper place

of religion in the modern world. It seeks to identify core themes and trace the change and evolution of his public statements against some of the larger intellectual developments, socioeconomic transformations, and geopolitical processes within which his engagement with Islam must be located. None of this is to imply that one can take Mahathir the politician to have been driven by a religious or spiritual motivation: there are actually weighty arguments against coming to such a conclusion. As is clear to most observers, Islam often provided critical stabilization and additional cultural legitimization to his increasingly authoritarian rule. In seeking to encompass and understand his public religious discourse, one must remain mindful of the political contexts and the larger sociohistorical processes that accompanied this ethnonationalist politician's very public embrace of Islam after the middle to late 1970s.

But relying on explanations that focus on external political factors driving his discourse alone limits our ability to plumb the depths of his intellectual encounters with his faith. Mahathir clearly pursued political objectives in setting himself up as the exponent and spokesperson of a pragmatic and worldly Islam. However, there is more to this than mere expediency. Mahathir was not so much the initiator or originator of calls to Islamize banking, education, and the legal system as their single most significant sponsor among Muslim political leaders of the period. He was viewed by many in the 1980s as the most sympathetic of Muslim leaders to such causes as the Islamization of knowledge¹³ and the other challenges to the West's hegemony over the theories and models of modernization and development. Many of his ardent supporters would be bitterly disappointed over the course of his premiership, and his credentials as an Islamic leader were severely tarnished by the time he finally stepped down in 2003. But his promise to establish in Malaysia the world's first truly modern Muslim state was greeted with much enthusiasm when he entered office in 1981—not just in Malaysia but around the world. This underscores the extent to which it is possible and legitimate to conceive of Mahathir as a significant figure in the Muslim world's postcolonial political history.¹⁴

Localizing Universalisms

“Doctor M,” as he is still often called, saw himself first and foremost as a nationalist. “I am a Malaysian nationalist,” he told me when I asked him to describe his political worldview. His elementary ideological-political predisposition is probably best encompassed by Anthony Milner's term, “*bangsa-minded*.”¹⁵ Mahathir was driven, above all else, by the quest to restore the dignity and sovereignty of the Malay nation, the *bangsa Melayu*, in their now independent homelands after

more than five hundred years of meddling by foreigners in the *tanah Melayu*, the Malay lands. To most *bangsa*-minded, being Malay was synonymous with being Muslim, and like many of them, Mahathir gravitated toward the conservative, ethnonationalist United Malays National Organization. UMNO, it was felt, was able to harness the unifying force of Islam without the flirtation with leftist ideologies or the perceived diminution of race at the hands of its more religiously inclined breakaway faction, the predecessors of Malaysia's Islamic Party PAS (Parti Islam Semalaysia/All-Malaysian Islamic Party).¹⁶ However, when Mahathir exhibited as prime minister a willingness to contemplate a far more prominent public role for Islam than any of his predecessors, he was able to counter, to some extent at least, PAS's argument that the UMNO leadership was insufficiently committed to upholding the teachings and precepts of the faith.

This study takes Mahathir seriously as the leader of a late twentieth-century Muslim-majority country, engaged in a conversation (with coreligionists as much as with non-Muslims) about the intellectual heritage of Islamic civilization, about the religion's ethical precepts, its laws, its views of the place of humankind in creation, and indeed its merits in the modern world. This allows us to obtain an account of his premiership as well as his personality from the increasingly salient but until now neglected perspective of Islam. A number of insightful accounts of the Mahathir years have been published over the past decade.¹⁷ There is still, nonetheless, a marked reluctance in this material to approach Mahathir as an agent of late twentieth-century Islamic thought. Instead, much of the extant scholarship emphasizes the role of the man who used to be his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, or that of his successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. But in view of Mahathir's centrality in the shaping of Malaysia's public discourse on Islam in the 1980s and 1990s, it would seem reasonable to take seriously what he said about the religion. The objective is not to return to essentialist arguments about the allegedly immutable nature of Islam but to understand the role of religion in the modernizing discourse of one of Asia's most significant but also polarizing and controversial twentieth-century leaders. Tracing the path by which he arrived at his views can help provide a more nuanced understanding of transformative effects of Mahathir's two decades in power.

It is inadequate to argue that Mahathir, often described one dimensionally and without much nuance as a secularist, was simply forced to respond to the rising popularity of the Islamic party PAS, and that he sought to do so through a game of one-upmanship. Joseph Liow's *Piety and Politics in Malaysia* goes some way toward explaining the multilayered complexity of Mahathir's religious turn. Indeed, the far more relevant question to ask is why initiatives such as "Islamizing" educational curricula or the setting up of ambassadorial-level relations with

the Palestinian Liberation Organization received such enthusiastic support in the first place. There is much insight in Chandra Muzaffar's and Judith Nagata's accounts of Malaysian Muslim politics in the 1980s, including their observations that Islamization helped underscore Malay claims to political primacy in the multicultural polity.¹⁸ But even these studies seem to ignore the particularly Islamic sensitivities that underlie these demands. Why were there these demands for more Islam, and why were many Muslims in Malaysia asking for notably similar things as their brethren in countries as diverse as Indonesia, Egypt, and Turkey? The bulk of the existing scholarship points to such factors as political repression or socioeconomic inequalities, yet persuasive accounts for the specifically *Islamic* character of Muslim world politics remain few and far between.

Islam in postcolonial Malaya/Malaysia¹⁹ has long had an ethnopolitical dimension, the result of the country's demographic peculiarities. But long-standing demands for halal banking, for a school curriculum that makes more reference to Asian and Islamic history than the history of the British Empire, for the construction of more places of worship, and for a government that does not serve alcohol at its official functions sprang deeply from Muslim sensitivities. As many of these demands had parallels in other Muslim countries as well, Islamization policies should not be reduced to cynical attempts at outmaneuvering domestic political opponents. Malaysia's Islamic turn under the Mahathir government cannot be explained away entirely as religiously colored manifestations of Malay ethnonationalism. These policies responded to something emanating from postcolonial Malay-Muslim society in Malaysia, including the wish for the a priori Malay state to be more reflective of the values, beliefs, practices, and aesthetics of its majority population. These demands were amplified by a range of factors, such as growing levels of participation in secondary and tertiary education or widespread resentment over Israel's continued occupation of Palestinian lands. But there was more to Malaysia's Islamization than cynical manipulation of popular sentiment, and there was more to Mahathir's engagement with the precepts of Islam than mere instrumentalism.

This study seeks to contribute to the growing body of studies of contemporary Muslim politics. In attempting to reconstruct an interior view of Mahathir, a figure from what is sometimes still described as the periphery of the Islamic world, this book traces the political-historical milieu from which his ideas emerged and against which they must be read. But there are also much more practical considerations. Unlike most of the figures associated with the late twentieth-century revitalization of Islamic thought, Mahathir was first and foremost a politician. What strategies did he have to pursue in order to establish his credentials to speak about the desired relationship between Islam and society, an

area of knowledge conventionally considered the preserve of the religiously educated and other bearers of sacred knowledge? How did factionalism in the ruling UMNO limit or affect his ability to state his views? How did the UMNO's non-Malay coalition partners respond to his version of Islamization? How did Mahathir's concepts differ from those espoused by other UMNO leaders, or even those of the Islamist opposition assembled in PAS and the multiethnic but predominantly Malay-Muslim PKR (Parti Keadilan Rakyat/People's Justice Party)? What role did the significant Chinese, Indian, and non-Muslim *bumiputera* communities, representing more than a third of Malaysia's population, play in the formulation of Mahathir's views on Islam and politics?

It is this study's major aim to uncover the archaeology of Mahathir's ideas and to then link them with parallel processes elsewhere in the Muslim world, including Indonesia, the Middle East, Pakistan, and Turkey, but also diaspora communities in the West.²⁰ It does so by tracing the theological, jurisprudential, and historical validation he sought for his arguments. Did he privilege particular *fahaman* or *aliran pemikiran* (i.e., understandings or leanings) within Islam, and if yes, why did he choose to do so? How did these *fahaman* manifest themselves in his public or private statements? What other influences are detectable in Mahathir's pronouncements on Islam? For example, how was the early twentieth-century modernist movement reflected in his representations of "properly understood" Islam? What about any intellectual and imaginative impact from the so-called Islamic revival that is often described as having swept Malaysia and many other parts of the Muslim world after the 1970s? What about the emerging discourse often—rather problematically—described as post-Islamism?²¹ How were these influences modulated into Malaysia, and by what processes did they become domesticated or Malaysianized in Mahathir's public rhetoric?

Though a major motif of Mahathir's political discourse, Islam was not dominant, and just under half of his significant speeches mention the religion at all. It was the primary subject of just over 5 percent of all of his speeches. Does that mean, however, it is possible to conclude that Islam was unimportant to his vision for Malaysia's modernization? There are three reasons against arriving at such a viewpoint. First, Islam and its role in modern Malaysia clearly exercised Mahathir in persistent ways, and an almost missionary zeal of inculcating a "proper understanding" of Islam among the Malays was a constant of his political rhetoric across many decades. Second, there was an organic relationship between his overarching politico-ideological concern for the Malays' socioeconomic modernization and what he perceived to be the transformative powers of Islam. Third, the fault lines that have opened up in Malaysian society (both within the Muslim community and between Muslims and non-Muslims) have been driven

by disagreements as to the rightful political role of Islam. Mahathir played a central role in the evolution of these debates, and the representations he made of religion as Malaysia's most influential political leader can therefore scarcely be ignored.

Exploring Mahathir from the perspective of his grappling with the question of what role Islam could and should play in modern Malaysia is unlikely to resolve the inconsistencies, contradictions, and paradoxes that have exasperated more than a few of his biographers. But it can provide fresh insights into Malaysia's Mahathir era and its enduring and highly divisive legacy from a different and fresh perspective. In providing an account of the twenty-two-year-long Mahathir rule through his own views and statements on Islam, this book goes beyond the more familiar approaches that stress authoritarian control, communalist politics, or economic development policies. Its analysis relies in equal measure on Mahathir's own statements and published writings and the actual impact of the policies that his government implemented. On account of the many indications that his government's Islamic policy was centrally inspired by his understanding of *sesuai* and *berpatutan* (suitable or appropriate) interpretations of Islam, it is worthwhile to analyze the connections between the evolving public character of Malaysia's state religion and Mahathir's encounter with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

Islam and the Movement of History

Well into the 1970s and 1980s, prophecies as to the imminent death of religion were commonplace. The movement of history seemed to point toward a global convergence on the secular, capitalist, liberal democratic model. Any difficulties in applying this model to the newly independent states of Asia and Africa were explained as stemming from the persistence of premodern culture in these places. Social commentators were virtually at one in arguing that the rise of the modern state in the Third World, coupled with material progress, would eventually give rise to more recognizably modern forms of politics there as well. Scientific rationalism and advances in technology would help transform even such stubbornly religious backwaters as the Iberian Peninsula or Eastern Europe. Though not peculiar to the formal study of societies, such singular conceptions of modernity led to widespread assumptions that economic progress would help replicate the sociocultural formations and political conditions it had produced in countries that had been the first to industrialize. As was assumed to have happened in Western Europe (erroneously, as it turns out), religious beliefs and

practices would gradually fade under the combined pressures of urbanization, bureaucratization, and the market.

Long-held assumptions of Western social science that a privatization of religion was a defining quality of—or perhaps even an essential precondition for—modernity are now the subject of serious questioning. Many of these assumptions have been shown to be manifestations of the particular circumstances and conditions peculiar to post-Enlightenment Western European Christendom. Over the past ten to twenty years, scholars representing a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds have pointed to a revitalization of religion in the second half of the twentieth century.²² The emergence of new religious thinkers and activists in the Muslim world is particularly well documented,²³ but even the traditionally educated ‘ulama or religious scholars, long thought to be redundant and anachronistic, have experienced a notable revival over the past three to four decades.²⁴

The evidence for an ongoing and wider revitalization of religion (even if this should not be understood as a return to the old in any way) is compelling. It has been marshaled from many different regions and for many different faiths, ranging from the growing influence of evangelical Protestantism over US politics to the rise of Hindutva in India. Even Europe, home to some particularly stringent variants of political secularism, has not been immune. The extraordinary post-Soviet resurgence of Russian orthodoxy is perhaps the most commonly cited example pointing to a resurgence of Christianity, but other notable indicators include the more than a million largely youthful pilgrims who attended Pope Benedict XVI’s closing mass at the 2005 World Youth Day in Cologne, or the unprecedented popularity of New Age spirituality in once solidly Catholic Italy. The Eastern European countryside increasingly bears the tell-tale signs of Pentecostal church architecture—soaring glass fronts, triangular roofs, and all—and there is clear evidence pointing to a growing religiosity among non-Christian Europeans, such as the Muslim minorities of Britain, France, and the Benelux states.²⁵

Mahathir’s engagement with Islam must be read against the historical context of this wider late twentieth-century resurgence of religion in general and the post-1970s Islamic revival in particular. Although initially often seen as a rejection of modernization, as an irrational or antimodern movement, the multiple voices associated with the resurgence of Islam have, in fact, sought to articulate distinctly *modern* critiques of Western-dominated modernity, proposing a range of “Islamic” alternatives to the theories and practices of modernization and development. Mahathir’s engagement with Islam coincided with this period of intellectual reinvigoration. The years of his premiership saw, in some ways, the realization of a number of the reform programs that had been envisaged by the

“A must-read not only for those interested in Malaysian studies but also those who are fascinated by Mahathir, who, in the eyes of many—Muslim taxi drivers in Europe included—is a successful and truly modern Muslim democrat of international stature, indeed a statesman.” —From the Foreword by Datuk Dr. Shamsul A. B.

“This vivid, engaging book makes an important contribution to the literature on Islam and politics in Southeast Asia and represents a significant addition to the scholarship on Islam and political thought in general. And now that Mahathir is back in power, his take on religion is more timely than ever.” —Timothy P. Daniels, author of *Living Sharia: Law and Practice in Malaysia* (2017)

MAHATHIR MOHAMAD'S LEGACY as Malaysia's longest serving prime minister (1981–2003) is deeply controversial. His engagement with Islam, the religion of just over half Malaysia's population, has often been dismissed as partisan maneuvering. Yet his willingness to countenance a more prominent place for Islam in government and society is what distinguished him from other modernist politicians, and his instinct to set Malaysian politics against the backdrop of the wider Muslim world was politically astute.

Author Sven Schottmann argues that Mahathir's transformative effect on Malaysia can only be fully appreciated if we also take him seriously as one of the postcolonial Muslim world's most significant political thought leaders. Schottmann sees Mahathir's representations of Islam as a relatively coherent discourse that can legitimately be described as “Mahathir's Islam.” This discourse contains Mahathir's assessment of the economic, political, and sociocultural problems facing the contemporary Muslim world and the range of solutions and corrective measures that he proposed Muslims should adopt. His ideas contributed to Malaysia's worsening state of interethnic relations, yet his insistence that every Muslim had the right to speak for Islam may have, paradoxically, prepared the ground for a future democratization of Malaysian politics.

Mahathir's Islam is based on rigorous analysis of Mahathir's speeches, interviews, and writings, which the author is able to link to parallel processes elsewhere in the Muslim world—Indonesia, the Middle East, Pakistan, Turkey, and diaspora communities in the West. Mahathir's Islamic discourse, Schottmann suggests, must be read against the wider late twentieth-century resurgence of religion in general, and the post-1970s Islamic revival in particular. Balanced in approach and engagingly written, this book will be of interest to scholars and students of political science, religious studies, and others interested in Malaysia, Southeast Asia, and Mahathir himself.

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University of Hawai'i Press
Honolulu, Hawai'i

ISBN 978-0-8248-4674-9



www.uhpress.hawaii.edu

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