

# ME101 Lecture 10: Religion and Political Islam in the Middle East and Its Impact on Our Region

**Speaker: Dr Norshahril bin Saat; Moderator: Ms Tettyana Jasli**

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## Abstract

In his talk, Dr Norshahril Saat discussed how ideas and developments associated with political Islam in the Middle East have influenced Southeast Asia. He chronicled a brief history of Islam in the region and described the emergence and impact of the global Islamic revivalist movement in the 1970s, a key development that continues to shape Muslim discourse and practice in Southeast Asia even today.

## Islam in Southeast Asia

Islam first came to the region mainly through Arab traders from the Hadhramaut region in Yemen and soon spread among the region. Islamic culture and values interacted with the pre-existing feudal society of the Malay world, and Malay rulers came to be regarded as custodians of Islam in their respective territories.

Importantly, the form of Islam transmitted to Southeast Asia was of Sufi orientation, noted for its somewhat ritualistic devotional practices and mystical traits. Even today the mainstream religious-cultural practices and values of Malay Muslims in the region bears a strong Sufi character. A testament to this is the famous shrine at the Haji Muhammad Salleh Mosque in Singapore, which contains the tomb of a famous Sufi saint.

Historically, this Sufi-oriented Islam intermingled with, rather than displaced, Malay culture. This allowed for the continued persistence of a distinct Malay cultural identity, which further flourished through the incorporation of linguistic, intellectual and aesthetic influences from Islamic and Middle Eastern culture.

Intellectual and political developments in the Middle East have historically had a bearing on Islam in Southeast Asia. In Egypt during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a reformist movement emerged that sought to modernise the religion and purify it from mysticism. Ideas emanating from this movement were carried along to Southeast Asia by local students returning from study in the Middle East. Yet the impact of this movement was generally minimal due to the strong influence of the Malay royal courts, which continued to uphold the dominant Sufi-type of Islam in the region.

## Islamic Revivalism

A turning point, however, came during the 1970s in the form of a global revivalist movement, which had a significant impact on Islam in Southeast Asia. The revival began with 20th-century events in the Middle East. A number of developments, including the establishment of Kemal Atatürk's secularist regime in Turkey and the Arab defeats in the Arab–Israeli conflicts, together contributed to widespread sentiments among Muslims of being dominated on a global scale. This discontent would be further intensified in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1990.

As such, Muslim groups around the world saw a return to religion as a recourse to Western domination and sought to counter Westernisation. Against this backdrop, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt gained much global appeal as many were interested in their ideas and methods of organising society and state according to Islamic principles. Likewise, the 1979 Iranian revolution was influential in providing a blueprint for political

Islam. Other currents of Islamic religious thought and orientations emanating from the Middle East, such as Salafism and Wahhabism, also became increasingly prominent, as their fundamentalist calls for the purification of religious culture and praxis resonated with Muslims globally.

The global influence of the revivalist movement trickled down into Southeast Asia and interacted with local developments and changes that were no less influential in shaping Islam in the region. Rapid economic development and urbanisation led to an influx of people from rural to urban areas. Revivalist Islamic ideas spread, especially among urban educated Muslims, and motivated them to reconsider local issues and processes in alternative ways.

Many went on to study in the Middle East and returned to set up local offshoots of organisations, such as Muslim Brotherhood, further incorporating diverse ideas and influences from other movements and orientations such as Wahhabism, Salafism, Vilayat-e Faqih, and various Sufi groups. A prominent example was Darul Arqam, a neo-Sufi group that promoted a communal lifestyle based on revivalist Sufi values as a counter to encroaching Westernisation. The group was later banned in Malaysia by the Mahathir government in 1994. Overall, the impact of the global revivalist movement in Southeast Asia was multidimensional, with complex — and oft-competing — ideological and political interactions between the various Muslim-oriented groups and movements in the region.

The general impact of the Islamic revival has been visible in general Southeast Asian society, as seen in changing trends within dress, language and religious attitudes within Muslim communities. Importantly, many of these changes have taken on a character unique to the region. For instance, the increasing rigour of halal product standards is an aspect that is particularly emphasised in Southeast Asia, rather than a phenomenon imported from the Middle East.

Notably, the revivalist movement has since created an environment that has been conducive for the rise of conservative Muslim groups and movements in Southeast Asia. While violent radical extremism involving direct Middle Eastern actors such as Islamic State (Isis) has usually been the focus of much of the recent study of Islam in the region, non-violent extremism in Southeast Asia is also an important issue that has received far less attention. In Malaysia and Indonesia, the rising clout of conservative groups has often led to detrimental societal consequences, such as the increasing politicisation of religion and greater intolerance of religious and ethnic minorities.

Many local groups influenced by the general Islamic revival have pushed for greater Islamisation within their societies through the selective adoption, adaptation and application of ideas from the Middle East to local situations and issues. In championing their ideologies and values, these groups have also acquired political power through legitimate democratic channels. The Malaysian Islamist party, PAS, for instance, underwent significant changes in the 1980s, and have since become a fixture in the Malaysian political landscape. They have also drawn from a range of ideological influences including the Muslim Brotherhood, Vilayat-e Faqih, Wahhabism and Salafism in conceptualising their idea of a Muslim state, and have pushed for the implementation of their ideas in Malaysian society. Such groups often focus on Islamising all aspects of social life, and pursue a greater role for religion in state administration, education, and foreign policy.

## Highlights from the Question & Answer Session

A number of participants were interested in the impact of revivalist Islam in Southeast Asia and also the possible consequences of an increasingly conservative Muslim population in Singapore.

Dr Norshahril reiterated that the focus on Islamic radical extremism has unfortunately diverted attention away from the prevalence of non-violent exclusivist religious views in the region. He noted that there is a wide spectrum of revivalist views and values, and that many ideas associated with revivalism can contribute to religious views and attitudes that are undeniably non-violent, but exclusivist in character nonetheless.

A common tenet of Islamic revivalist values is a clear segregation between what is Islamic and what is non-Islamic. This carries potential implications; for instance, it might lead some Muslims to denounce secular values as incompatible with Islam. A key concern is whether certain revivalist ideas, despite being non-violent, may lead to more forceful actions.

In Indonesia, for example, religious elites played a significant role in driving conservative Muslim outrage towards then-Jakarta Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (better known as Ahok) for alleged blasphemy against

Islam. Hence, Dr Norshahril suggested that, especially in Singapore, it was up to policymakers to monitor the growing revivalist trend and decide on the appropriate level of action to be taken against non-violent exclusivist ideas if they were deemed to have potentially detrimental consequences for society.

The relationship between Malaysia and Turkey, was also a point of interest given both countries' recent moves towards an increasingly state-directed Islamisation of society. Dr Norshahril noted that historically, Turkey has been somewhat sidelined within the Islamic world, given its loss of prominence since the fall of the Ottoman empire, and the subsequent rise of Saudi Arabia as a focal point in the Middle East.

In recent years, Turkey has been increasingly assertive in its foreign policy, hinting at a desire to reassume the prominent position it once enjoyed within the Muslim world. This has spurred the Erdoğan administration's interest in organising the Turkish society and economic according to more Islamic principles. As such, it is unsurprising that Turkey is drawing from a wide array of influences, including Malaysia, in designing its policies towards a greater Islamisation of society. This is seen, for instance, in Turkey's close relations with Malaysian politician Anwar Ibrahim, who was a key figure in increasing the role of religion in public education in Malaysia during the height of the revivalist era in 1980s.