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Author(s)	Mohamed Redzuan Salleh
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The Islamic State Debate in Malaysia: Time for a Moratorium?

By Mohamed Redzuan Salleh

Synopsis

*At the recently-concluded *Tenang* by-election in Malaysia's Johore state, the debate on the Islamic state issue has again surfaced, triggered by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). Is there no end to this never-ending polemic?*

Commentary

IN SEPTEMBER 2008, Malaysia's Barisan Nasional government (BN) launched its new political programme, 1Malaysia. This is a far cry from ketuanan Melayu (literally Malay supremacy) – a political concept associated with the BN's main party, UMNO. Earlier in February the same year, the opposition Pan-Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) unveiled its new manifesto under the slogan Negara Berkeadilan (Welfare State, but literally translated as A Nation of Care and Opportunity). This new manifesto eclipsed the controversial Islamic state blueprint it announced in 2003.

These new initiatives reflected the pressing need of the respective Malay-dominated parties to inject a breath of fresh air into their respective political orientations. They, however, did not seem to take the political debates much further from the core contestation: politics remain largely played out along communal lines. The Islamic state issue is not far below the surface, despite PAS' new policy of putting it on the backburner. Has the time come for a moratorium on the Islamic state debate to make way for more pressing concerns of the people, such as combating corruption and greater democratisation?

Behind the moratorium question

The rationale behind the moratorium question goes back to the bold proposition by Tariq Ramadan, the European Muslim intellectual-activist. In 2005, he issued "an international call for an immediate moratorium on corporal punishment, stoning and the death penalty". Essentially, it was a call for a moratorium on the core issue of the Islamic state so as to allow calm debate on it including the relevance of the Islamic state today. While his call has not received a warm response from the international Muslim community, it did send shockwaves when it was first announced.

The Malaysian Context

In Malaysia, both the Malay-dominated parties – UMNO and PAS -- claim they are applying the "doctrine" of Islamic state. PAS is claiming to be the true representative of the ideals of an Islamic state. UMNO has counter-

claimed that Malaysia is already an Islamic state. UMNO's assertion has, however, been made precarious by the problems of governance in the country under its leadership, especially corruption, as highlighted by the purists of the Islamic state argument. For PAS, its position has been made shaky by its alliance with the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) – a party that is consistently against the notion of Islamic state.

PAS and DAP, along with the People's Justice Party (PKR) of Anwar Ibrahim, have formed the opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat (PR). Since the formation of PR, PAS and DAP have successfully downplayed their ideological differences over the question of Islamic state. Lately, however, the debate has resurfaced, again.

The Star on 10 January 2011 quoted the PAS president as saying that "PAS won't bow down to any pressure from any quarter", implying that the party president Hadi Awang meant that PAS would move ahead with the Islamic state agenda. But the PAS leader has denied having made that remark. This episode apparently resurfaced during the Pakatan Rakyat Convention in December 2010 when DAP's Karpal Singh again brought up the Islamic state issue.. The official blog of the PAS president reiterated his stand against the report by The Star; it mentioned that PAS viewed the question brought up in the convention as a positive sign. It showed, PAS said, that the coalition wanted to better understand the Islam that PAS is calling for.

This resurfacing of the long-standing issue of the Islamic state however does not augur well for the opposition coalition given that elections may be called anytime soon. This is especially so given its divisive effect on PAS and DAP. While Anwar Ibrahim himself is not known to have made a clear public stand on this, the Pakatan chief is said not to favour the Islamic state narrative, as mentioned by Abdelwahab El-Affendi in *Who Needs an Islamic State?*

Way Forward?

It seems that amidst the re-configuration of Malaysian politics continues, the Islamic state debate has been overplayed. Perhaps, it is not wrong to say that the initiatives put forward by BN (1Malaysia), PAS (Negara Berkebajikan) and Tariq Ramadan are all based on expediency -- political or otherwise. But they all may claim their positions to be rooted in the Islamic jurisprudential principle of *maslahah mursalah* or the common good.

In some Muslim-majority countries, the Islamic state debate has already been shelved – temporarily, if not permanently. The BN is perhaps under no pressure to do so. As for PAS, it would most likely argue that the Islamic state is a matter of principle, which is why the party still uses the controversial phrase "Islamic state" in its constitution.

PAS in reality has already, albeit unofficially, been applying a silent moratorium on hudud or the Islamic penal code, which includes amputation for theft, for example. It appears to have also imposed some sort of semi-moratorium on the Islamic state agenda. Perhaps it is time to focus on what the PAS thinker Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad said: "The more important agenda now is reinstating democracy and good governance".

Should the Malay-dominated parties then, in the name of "new politics", halt the open debate, and seriously consider a moratorium, on their Islamic state agenda? They could take the debate offline, and mutually resolve it through intellectual engagement. In so doing, they will strip the debate of its political heat, allowing for a more informed position.

Mohamed Redzuan Salleh is a Senior Analyst at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.