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Towards a History of Malaysian Ulama

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ABSTRACT

The ulama have always played an important role in the realm of the political and socio-economic development in the Muslim world. However, scholars tend to underestimate their importance in this area. As a result, it was only after the 1970s that sufficient appreciation has been shown for their role in the Muslim society in various scholastic works. It is also in recent years that interest has been shown in the study of ulama in South and Southeast Asia. In the case of the Malaysian ulama, works on them have been limited to biographical accounts of the ulama in the country. While some works on ulama did attempt to assess their religio-political role, these works tended to be limited to the discourse about the Kaum Tua and Kaum Muda ulama. However, little has been written about the religio-political role of ulama in the Malaysian society during the 1940s to the 1980s. In this regard, this paper attempts to reduce this gap. This key argument of the paper is that historically, the ulama have maintained a symbiotic relationship with various political authorities. From the early Islamic history to the Japanese Occupation, ulama have usually worked with any power willing to secure their authority and influence. This paper will also show that even when the ulama oppose the government (exemplified by the opposition of PAS' ulama to the UMNO led Malaysian government), this opposition tends to stem from differences in politics rather than religious ideologies.

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Towards a History of Malaysian Ulama

As scholars of Islamic law and the *Hadith*—exegetes of the Qur'an and religious guides—ulama have shaped dominant religious discourses in Muslim societies throughout most of Islamic history. Despite their important role in Muslim societies, debates continue to spark among Muslims over the basic definition of ulama. The term 'ulama' is mentioned only twice in the Qur'an. In addition, the Qur'anic term referring to ulama does not limit its usage only to those with religious education but includes anyone who is knowledgeable. Modern scholars such as Muhammad Kamal Hassan argue that an *alim* is someone who has *iman*, meaning who possesses useful knowledge, does good deeds, and has a good character.¹ However, for most of Muslim history, an *alim* refers to only those who are knowledgeable in the religious sciences, and more specifically, to those who are familiar with Islamic jurisprudence. Another important determinant of an *alim* is the recognition that a person receives within the fraternity of ulama as well as that from the Muslim community.²

Ulama are distinguished by virtue of their learning and scholarship, but there is no formal procedure for their ordination or investiture. Ulama are not thought to embody the Divine Will nor treated as the exclusive representatives of God's law. The authority that a particular jurist might enjoy flows from his formal and informal education as well as his social and scholastic popularity. In classical Islamic theory, jurists are supposed to play an advisory and consultative role, and to assume judicial positions in the administration of justice.³

The ulama also play an important role in the realm of political and socio-economic development in the Muslim world. However, scholars tend to underestimate their importance in this area. As a result, it was only after the 1970s that sufficient appreciation has been shown for their role in the Muslim society in various scholastic works. It is also in recent years that interest has been shown in the study of ulama in

¹ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Brentwood, Md: Amana Corp, 1989). See Surah Al-Shuraa, 26:197 and Fatir 35:28; Imam Al Zarnuji, *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim Tariq al-Ta'allum*, (Beirut: *Dar-Ihyā al-Turāth al Arabī*, 1990) p. 10; Muhammad Kamal Hassan, "Penghayatan Islam Dalam Mempelajari dan Mengembangkan Ilmu," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, No 3, (Sept 1985): 14.

² Al Zarnuji, *Ta'alim*, p. 12.

³ Muhammad Kamali Abdul Majid, "Ulama Dan Perubahan Social Dalam Islam," *Jurnal Usuluddin*, 10, (July 1999): 87.

South and Southeast Asia.⁴ In the case of the Malaysian ulama, such literature has been limited to biographical accounts of the ulama in the country.⁵ While some works on ulama did attempt to assess their religio-political role, these tend to be limited to the discourse about the Kaum Tua and Kaum Muda ulama.⁶ Little has been written about the religio-political role of ulama in the Malaysian society during the 1940s to the 1980s. In this regard, this paper attempts to reduce this gap. The key argument of the paper is that historically ulama have maintained a symbiotic relationship with various political authorities. From the early Islamic history to the Japanese Occupation, ulama have usually worked with any power willing to secure their authority and influence. This paper also attempts to show that even when the ulama oppose the government, this opposition usually stems from differences in politics rather than in religious ideologies.

Ulama and Their Role in the Muslim World

The ulama draw their authority from several sources. Many ulama reserve the right to interpret and comment on the Qur'an and *Hadith* in a process called *ijtihad*. The Qur'an and *Hadith* provide guidelines on many issues concerning Islam. As such, there is a need for a process of juristic reasoning employed to determine the permissibility of an action, *ijtihad*, when the Qur'an, *Hadith* and earlier scholars have not ruled on the matter.⁷ The product of this *ijtihad*, *Fiqh*, is the set of laws that govern the everyday life of Muslims. The *Shariah* is not sterile and dormant but is constantly evolving to suit the needs and challenges of modern life, as such, the *ijtihad* of ulama can differ and change over time. *Ijtihad* are often expressed in ulama's commentaries on the Qur'an and *Hadith*. To the ulama, *Shariah* and other

⁴ Arnold H Green, "Political Activities and Views of Ulama in the Liberal Age: The Case of Tunisia As A Exceptional Case," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 7, 2, (Apr 1976): 209; Nikkie Keddie (ed), *Scholars, Saints and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972); Peter Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian world: Transmission and responses* (London, Hurst And Co, 2001).

⁵ Mohd Rumaizuddin Ghazali, *Tokoh Islam Kontemporari* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Tradisi Ilmu, 2005), Mokhtar Petah, Sheikh Abdullah Fahim: Penentu Tarikh Kemerdekaan Negara 31 Ogos '57 (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, 1997), Alijah Gordon (ed), *The Real Cry of Syed Shaykh al-Hady* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1999), Ismail Mat (ed), *Ulama Silam dalam Kenangan* (Bangi, Selangor : Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1992).

⁶ William Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism* (Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1967) Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya: Contesting Nationalism and the Expansion of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁷ A. H. Suhrawardy, *Islam for Modern Times*, (Lahore: Ferozsons Pte Ltd, 1995), p. 8.

Islamic institutions such as mosques and *madrasahs* are part of Islamic tradition. At the same time they draw their authority from these traditions. Thus, it is of little surprise that ulama are the most fervent defenders and advocates of these traditions. They often hinge their existence on the preservation and enhancement of these traditions. Over time, the ulama have tried to enhance their authority by introducing new ideas of what accounts for Islamic tradition. For instance, while the *Shariah* traditionally encompasses issues related to Muslim personal lives, such as in the rituals, inheritance and marriage, some ulama have in recent times strengthened the less important aspects of *Shariah*, such as Islamic criminal law, so as to ensure that their authority is maintained.

Ulama and Political Power In Islamic History

In a popular *Hadith*, Prophet Muhammad was quoted as saying that “religious scholars are the heirs of the prophets.”⁸ With the ending of the *Khulafa’ Rashidin*, the Muslim community was seen to be moving away from the world of the Prophet and was in danger of losing its *raison d’être*.⁹ Many Muslims thus looked upon the ulama as protectors of the word of God, the Qur’an and the teachings of the Prophet.¹⁰ A firm and extensive knowledge of the religious sciences in particular provided the ulama with a crucial area of expertise and thus authority. Their piety also enhanced their standing within the Muslim community. The fact that many early ulama were companions of the Prophet also provided a continuing reverence for the institution of ulama.

The Ulama’s position on political power also varied throughout Islamic history. Al-Ghazali in his *Nasihat al-muluk* wrote that the Sultan was ‘God’s Shadow on Earth’, and was the Lord’s delegate over his creatures and must therefore be held

⁸ The hadith is related in the following sources. Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, *Al-Musnad*, (Beirut: *al-Maktab al-Islami*, 1985), p.5 and Ibn Abd al-Barr, *Jami Bayan al-Ilm*, (Beirut: Dar al Kutub al Islamiyya, 1970), p.77.

⁹ Khulafa Rashidin refers to the period of rule from 632 to 661 by the first four Caliphs, Abu Bakar, Umar, Othman and Ali who were seen as devout rulers who had been close to the Prophet. Hugh Kennedy, *The Court of the Caliphs: The Rise and fall of Islam’s Greatest Dynasty*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004); Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library 2001), p. 37.

¹⁰ Chandra Muzaffar, Reformation of Shari’a or Contesting the Historical Role of the Ulama in Noraini Osman’s (ed), *Shari’a Law and the Modern Nation-State: A Malaysian Symposium* (Kuala Lumpur: Sisters in Islam Forum Berhad, 1994), p. 23.

with esteem.¹¹ Al-Ghazali also stigmatized any revolt, even if it was against an oppressive and evil monarch. For Al-Ghazali, Muslims can only reform their hearts and thus be good Muslims if there was social peace and harmony in the outside world.¹² Thus, war and violence should be avoided at all cost even if it meant that this silence must be paid with an autocratic rule. This view could be motivated by the fact that he himself was a courtier appointed by the Nizam al-Mulk to be a teacher of the *Shafie* jurisprudence in the Madrasah Nizamiyah of Baghdad.

However other ulama, such as Ibn Tamiyyah, had argued that there was a need for a government based on the *Shariah* and the ideal Islamic state was to be run solely under the ulama's guidance.¹³ Ibn Tamiyyah advocated this perspective in the post-Mongol world in which Muslims suffered tremendously due to atrocities carried out by Mongols on Muslims. He believed that the rulers had failed in their duty to protect the Muslim populace and that only the ulama could secure the political future of the Muslims. His political activism thus embodied a new concept of state and society in which ulama rather than the Caliphs became the principal actors. He also urged for the ulama to reject any official positions and turn down royal gifts.¹⁴ However, Ibn Taymiyyah's ideas were peripheral to mainstream Islam and he was not successful in influencing other ulama or the general Muslim populace.

In most Muslim societies, the ulama have often maintained a close and symbiotic relationship with the government. Ulama preached the legitimacy of the established regime and looked upon the state as indispensable to Islam. Besides advocating for the loyalty of Muslims to the Caliph, Al-Ghazali went one step further to impress the Caliph by declaring that only an Abassid could be a Caliph.¹⁵ This was a clear stance of preaching and promoting the legitimacy of both the Caliph and his family. At the same time, Al-Ghazali also wrote a treatise in response to a request by the Caliph Al-Mustazhir to refute the teachings of the Ismaili sect. This sect was opposed to the rule of the Abbasids and was trying to overthrow the Caliphate. This

¹¹ Al-Ghazali was an Islamic jurist, theologian and mystical thinker. He was born in Iran in 1058. His ideas on Sufism and Politics influence many jurists and Muslims throughout the Muslim World. F.R. Bagley, *Ghazali's Book of Counsel for King* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 72.

¹² Massimo Campanini, "Al-Ghazali" in Seyyed Hossein Nasr (ed), *Encyclopedia of Islamic Philosophy* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2002), p. 260.

¹³ Ibnu Tamiyyah (1263-1328) is an alim of Damascus of the Hanbali Mazhab. He is often seen to be the first ideologue of literal Islam, which was subsequently advocated by the Wahhabi and Salafi movements. Ibnu Tamiyyah, *Kitab Al-Siyasa Al-Sharia*, (Cairo: Ilmu Il Kitab, 1951), pp. 9-10.

¹⁴ Ira Lapidus, *History of Islamic Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 149.

¹⁵ Leonard Binder, "Al-Ghazali's Theory of Government", *Muslim World*, 45, (1955): 236.

pointed to his willingness to collaborate with the government.¹⁶ Muslims rulers also supported the various institutions related to ulama, as they formed local administrative and social elites whose authority was based upon religion.¹⁷ Often, this meant that the ulama were powerful and rich, as could be seen from the example of the Farangi Mahal, which produced families of ulama to serve in the government under the Mughal Emperors.¹⁸

Ulama and Islamization in the Malay World

The role of ulama in the process of Islamization in the Malay World contributed to their authority and influence in the region. The Islamization of the Malay World has given birth to a multitude of different theories that focused on the origin of those who led the conversion process.¹⁹ A common thread that runs through all these theories is that Islam spread into the region as Muslim traders moved along established maritime trade routes.²⁰ These traders often doubled up as ulama and were responsible for teaching Islam and establishing *suraus* and mosques as in the case of Melaka. In other cases, the traders sponsored ulama from the Middle East or India to come to teach and propagate Islam in the region.²¹

¹⁶ Other examples of close relations between ulama and rulers are the case of Shaikh Abdur Rashid and Emperor Akbar of the Mughal Empire. P Hardy, "Unity and Variety in Indo-Islamic and Persio-Islamic Civilization; Some Ethical and Political Ideas of Diya al-Din Barani of Delhi, of al-Ghazali and Nasir al-Din Tusi Compared", *Iran*, 16, (1978), pp. 127-145; Sayyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *History of Sufism in India Vol 2: From the Sixteenth Century to Modern Century*, (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1991), p. 367.

¹⁷ Kennedy, *Courts of Caliph*, p. 364.

¹⁸ Mehmet Erpsili, *The Ottoman Ulama* (Manchester: FSTC Limited, 2004); Francis Robinson, *The Ulama of Farangi Mahal and Islamic Culture in South Asia* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

¹⁹ T.W Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: The History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith*, (New York: MS Press, 1974) and S.Q Fatimi, *Islam Comes to Malaysia*, (Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1963) had supported the theory of Indian origin to Islam. Others such as Syed Naquib Al-Attas had supported the Arab theory. See Syed Naquib Al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesia Archipelago*, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1969). Others such as Cesar Majul Adib, advocate for a Chinese origin. See Cesar Majul Adib, *Muslims in the Philippines*, (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1999). It is possible that all these theories are true, as the Islamization process could have occurred differently in different parts of Southeast Asia.

²⁰ H.J. de Graaf and Th. G. Th. Pigeaud, *Chinese Muslims in Java in the 15th and 16th Centuries : the Malay Annals of Semarang and Cerbon* translated and provided with comments by H.J. de Graaf and Th. G. Th. Pigeaud ; edited by M.C. Ricklefs (Melbourne: Monash University, 1984) and Barbara Watson Andaya and Yoneo Ishii, "Religious Development in Southeast Asia, c 1500-1800," in Nicholas Tarling, *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, Vol 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 514.

²¹ Mohd Jamil Mukmin, *Melaka Pusat Penyebaran Islam di Nusantara* (Malacca: Institute Kajian Sejarah dan Patriotisme Malaysia, 2004), p. 81.

The spiritual and value system of the ulama made it easy for the ulama to interact with the local populace. The accommodation between Islam, the earlier animists and Hindu-Buddhist elements in Malay culture was also facilitated by Sufi mystics, who preached the doctrine that God is transcendental, that He manifests his power in all things, animate and inanimate, that the devout believer can know God through mystical communion and, can transmit that knowledge to others.

Before the coming of Islam, Malays perceived their political condition in terms of the divine kingship, that is, they considered themselves to be living in a community oriented around a raja who was not only the focus of political life but also the endowment of religious and psychological significance.²² The king as the head of the kingdom was protected by a supernatural force conferred upon him by the virtue of his kingship. This force surrounded him with an aura of sanctity or sacredness as well as bestowed on him supreme temporal authority.²³ The coming of Islam led to the *kerajaan* to become the focus of political life. Islam did not alter the notion, instead, his divinity was further enhanced by the addition of various prayers being recited by the ruler during ceremonies.²⁴ This gave the ruler an added sacredness as he could now assure his subject that God will bless them for their loyalty to his leadership.

In dealing with rulers in the region, many ulama adopted the Al-Ghazalian approach. An examination of seventeenth century treatises on statecraft developed by Southeast Asian ulama such as, *Taj-Us-Salatin* and *Bustanun Salatin*, reveal strong Al-Ghazalian traits. In *Taj-Us-Salatin*, the author Al-Bukhari, who wrote it for the court of Aceh, argued that it was the duty of the people to be loyal to the king.²⁵ The text also deplored the use of violence or revolution to overthrow a ruler. In another text on kingship, Nuruddin Ar-Raniri urged people to be loyal to the king and not to

²² J.G. de Casparis and I.W. Mabbett, "Religious and Popular Beliefs of Southeast Asia, c.1500" in Nicholas Tsarling's *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia Vol 1: From Early Times to c.1500* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1993). For more on *kerajaan*, see Anthony Milner, *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonialism* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1982).

²³ Ariffin Omar, *Bangsa Melayu: Malay Concepts of Democracy and Community 1945-1950* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 2. For more on *kerajaan*, see Anthony Milner, *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonialism* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1982).

²⁴ Milner, *Kerajaan*, p. 108.

²⁵ Jumsari Jusuf, *Taj-Us-Salatin*, (Jakarta: Departmen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Proyek Penerbitan Buku Bacaan dan Sastra Indonesia dan Daerah, 1979), pp. 37-8.

commit treason, which he described as an act against God.²⁶ Early ulama were careful to ensure that a symbiotic relationship developed between the king and the ulama by making sure that the ruler's authority superseded their own authority in the public realm. However, the ulama continued to exercise control over religious matters. In addition, the ulama acted as religious teachers to the king. The *Sejarah Melayu* reported that Sultan Mansur Syah studied with Maulana Abu Bakar and Sultan Mahmud Syah studied with Kadi Yusuf. Excerpts from the *Sejarah Melayu* also show examples of how the ulama were revered by the Malay kings.²⁷ By the eighteenth century, this symbiotic relationship was manifested in the many cities of the archipelago where the principal mosque often abutted the palace.²⁸

By the nineteenth century, ulama were playing more important roles within state structures and were instrumental in the formulation of laws in many Malay states. For example, the nineteenth-century Mufti of Kedah, Shaykh Abd-al Jalil, who was responsible for formulating Islamic regulations for the sultan and his officials.²⁹ In many instances, they were also given position of power and enjoyed economic privileges of the elite class. The growing importance of ulama corresponded with the arrival of colonialism in the region. As such it was not surprising that the ulama were in the forefront of many conflicts that took place between the rulers and the British and or the Dutch.

Ulama and British Colonial Authority

As early as 1791, the Sultan of Kedah, supported by ulama within the palace, declared a *jihad* against the British after losing Penang to them. In 1821, Shaykh Jalil declared another *jihad* when the Thais invaded Kedah.³⁰ Also, in Terengganu, Haji Abdul

²⁶ T. Iskandar, *Nuruddin Ar-Raniri's Bustanu's Salatin* (Kuala Lumpur, Dewan Pustaka, 1966), p. 46

²⁷ W. C. Shellabear (ed), *Sejarah Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti, 1978), p. 240. This could be seen from the conduct of Sultan Mahmud in which he referred to himself as "fakir Mahmud." Fakir refers to an extremely poor person. Ibid.

²⁸ Luis Filipe Ferreira Reis Thomaz, "The Malay Sultanate of Melaka," in Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power and Belief* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 82. Other linkages through marriage also enhance relations between ulama and ruler. Judith Nagata, "Islamic Revival and the Problem of Legitimacy Among Rural Religious Elites in Malaysia, *Man*, 17, 1, (Mar 1982), pp. 42-57. However there are also examples from the *Sejarah Melayu* in which the king criticize ulama for their conservatism but such criticism is less pronounced.

²⁹ Muhammad Hassan Arshad, *Al-Tarikh Salasilah Negeri Kedah* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1968), p. 117.

³⁰ Auni Abdullah, *Islam Dalam Sejarah Politik dan Pemerintahan di Alam Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Nurin Enterprise, 1991), p. 95.

Rahman, a local *alim*, led a rebellion in defense of the ruler and against the British, rallying Muslims behind the cry of a holy war to remove the infidel European power.³¹ Although the British successfully quelled these instances of unrest, this reflected an active role that the ulama played in leading resistance against colonial authority.

Despite such examples of rebellion, the British did not interfere in religious affairs, ostensibly leaving it within the purview of ulama.³² This approach was formalized in the Pangkor Treaty of 1874 signed by Sultan Abdullah of Perak, which led to the systematic division between religion and state in the Malay Peninsula.³³ In practice, the British did initiate changes within the Malay states to regulate matters relating to religion. This was due to the complexities that had arisen due to incompatibilities between the implementation of Islamic laws and the state structure that the British had established. Moreover, intervention in Islamic affairs was also prompted by prejudices that some British officers had against Islam.³⁴

After the Pangkor Treaty, the ulama found that they could entrench themselves and consolidate their influence by working with the British. This change in attitude was due to the setting up of various institutions such as the mosques, *pondok*, state religious councils and religious courts, which were under their purview. In addition, the British, learning from the reform of *madrasahs* in India, avoided the temptation to reform these institutions in the Malay Peninsula.³⁵ This reduced a possible source of conflict as an important component of ulama authority was left unchallenged. Various institutions were also formed to codify and implement Islamic laws. In 1915 an Islamic Religious Council (*Majlis*) led by an ulama council, which was a sub-body within the institution was formed. The *Majlis* was responsible for the appointment of

³¹ Abdullah Zakaria Ghazali, "Agama dan Kebangkitan Anti-British di Tanah Melayu," in Khoo Khay Kim(ed), *Tamadun Islam di Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Sejarah Malaysia, 1980), p. 62.

³² Efforts made to clamp on the ulama had resulted in ulama led rebellion in these places; refer to Lapidus, *Islamic Societies*, Part 3.

³³ Robert McAmis, *Malay Muslims: The History and Challenge of Resurgent Islam in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: William Eerdsman, 2001), p. 38.

³⁴ Syed Khairuddin Aljunied, *Raffles and Religion: A Study of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles' Discourse on Religions amongst Malays* (Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, 2004). The British were also supportive of the activities of Christian missionaries in trying to convert Malays to Christianity. Nabir Abdullah, "Imperialisme Budaya: Peranan Mubaligh Kristian Di Tanah Melayu Dan Singapura Sebelum Merdeka," in Cheah Boon Kheng and Abu Talib Ahmad (eds) *Kolonialisme di Malaysia dan Negara-Negara Lain*, (Petaling Jaya: Fajah Bakti, 1990).

³⁵ British attempts to reform *madrasahs* had led to widespread agitation against the British led by ulama; Yoginder Sikand, *Bastions Of the Believers: Madrasas and Islamic Education in India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2005).

religious officials and *kadis*.³⁶ *Kadis* had the power to punish offenders who broke Islamic laws such as not paying the *zakat*. The implementation of Qur'anic education in English and Malay schools also helped provide jobs for village ulama and increased their influence within secular schools.³⁷ It was also important to acknowledge that British policy did attempt to hamper the development of Islam and Islamic law. For instance, while *kadis* were given official power under the new laws, they limited the maximum penalty that could be imposed. Likewise, Islamic Courts were made secondary to civil courts.³⁸

British legislative activities and policies led to the unintended consequences of endowing increasing authority and power to ulama in Malaya. Although the position of the *Shariah* was supreme in many Malay states, the laws were never cast in stone and were flexible in their implementation. The British insistence on a uniform legal system resulted in a more legalistic interpretation of the *Shariah* resulting in an increased dependence on the ulama to interpret the laws.³⁹ Another indirect consequence of the British intervention in the politics of the Malay states was the rulers' loss of power, as they were left with only religious and customary matters within their authority. This led to a renewed focus on the part of the rulers to strengthen Malay society by elevating the position of the *Shariah* to a higher level.⁴⁰ An example of this is the attempt of some sultans to make the drinking of intoxicants illegal among Muslims. In general, while some British policies did limit the influence of Islam, they did little to alter the authority of the ulama.

The period of colonial rule also showed that the ulama were willing to work with any government that did not challenge their legitimacy or authority. The initial resistance was due to their trepidation that the British would undermine their authority. Ulama who decided to work within the system saw this as an opportunity to consolidate their authority within the new institutions created by the British, such as in the state religious councils and Islamic education departments in secular schools.

³⁶ Mutalib, *Islam*, p. 17.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 242.

³⁸ Ahmad Ibrahim, *Developments in Marriage Laws in Singapore since 1959* (Singapore: Malayan Law Journal, 1979). It must be noted however that the secondary nature of Islamic law did not just happen during colonial era but occurred in some of the Malay states whereby adat (local) laws were superior to *Shariah* laws.

³⁹ Moshe Yegar, *Islam and Islamic Institutions in British Malaya: Policies and Implementation* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979), p. 121.

⁴⁰ John Funston, *Malay Politics in Malaysia: A Study of the United Malays National Organisation and Party Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Press, 1981), p. 166.

While the British tried to remain neutral with regard to Islam in Malay society, many of the policies that they initiated led to an unintended effect of strengthening ulama's position and authority. However, the greatest challenge for the ulama came not from the British but from a group of ulama who had a different interpretation of Islam.

Battle for the Authority of Islam

Conflicts amongst ulama in the Malay World were often been referred to as the Kaum Tua—Kaum Muda conflict. William Roff argued that the conflict was between the traditional elites of the society, which included the ulama within the establishment as well as the ulama in the rural areas, and the more modernist group of ulama⁴¹. A closer scrutiny of the Kaum Muda reveals that they were traditional in their belief as well. The Kaum Muda stated that it was obligatory for Muslims to believe in the Qur'an and the *Hadith*, but not the classical texts written by the medieval ulama.⁴² This indicated that they believed that there was a need to return to the traditional sources of Islam.

The key difference between the two groups laid in their interpretation of tradition. One distinguishing feature of the Kaum Tua was their Sufi orientation. As Sufis, they were tolerant of local practices in the Malay World such as the celebrations of *kenduri*, *zikir* and *mauled*. The Kaum Tua believed that these practices had become part of the Islamic tradition.⁴³ They also believed that the truth expressed in the teachings of Islamic scholars such as Al-Ghazali and the imams of the *madzhab* did not need to be disputed since it was not altered by the change in time and conditions.⁴⁴ For these ulama, the re-examination of the Qur'an and *Hadith* was not only unnecessary but also dangerous since this could lead to misinterpretation and error. The Kaum Muda advocated the need to cleanse the teaching of Islam from what they believed to be innovations brought about by the influence of Sufism, which they

⁴¹ Roff, *Origins*, p. 85.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 78.

⁴³ Abu Bakar Hamzah, *Al-Imam: Its Role in Malay Society 1906-1908* (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, 1991), p. 37.

⁴⁴ Howard M Federspiel, *Persatuan Islam: Islamic Reform in Twentieth Century Indonesia* (Ithica: Southeast Asia Program, 1970), p. 46.

abhorred.⁴⁵ They looked at authentic tradition in terms of only the Qur'an and the Hadith.⁴⁶

The Kaum Tua-Kaum Muda conflict could also be seen as a battle for the authority of Islam within the Malay states. On many occasions, the Kaum Muda tried to wrest control of several institutions from the Kaum Tua. Key leaders of the Kaum Muda took up positions as religious officials. For instance, Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin took up the position of Mufti of Perak and Haji Abbas that of a *kadi* in Singapore.⁴⁷ Their involvement in state religious institutions was in line with their attempts to change the system from within. However, when the opposition against them was too strong, they would leave these institutions.

The formation of separate *madrasahs* by the Kaum Muda ulama with their own curriculum was another attempt to challenge the authority of the Kaum Tua ulama. For example, the Iqbal Islamic School in Singapore was launched in 1908 as an attempt to promote the revival of knowledge through a new system of education.⁴⁸ The Kaum Muda also formed other *madrasahs* such as the Madrasah al-Hadi in Melaka and Madrasah al-Mashoor in Penang. It was clear that the Kaum Muda hoped that these *madrasahs* would serve as a new reference point to all other *madrasahs* and would subsequently replace the old system of education within the Malay states.

The conflict between these two groups of ulama dominated much of the religious discussions in the early twentieth century. By the mid-twentieth century, the discussions and debates had subsided and the Kaum Muda had failed in their attempt to challenge established authority. However, in the long term, the Kaum Mudas' impact on Malay society was felt in both the religious and political spheres. Kaum Muda activism planted the seeds for the growth of a Malay-Muslim intelligentsia who has tried to analyze and diagnose the circumstances that arose among Malays due to colonialism. This led to the rising awareness among Malays of the importance of education.⁴⁹ While the Kaum Muda themselves were less politically active, their successors utilized the revivalist spirit to form political organizations such as Hizbul Muslimin (HM), Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM) and the *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS).

⁴⁵ Hamzah, *Al-Imam*, p. 43.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 51.

⁴⁷ Roff, *Origins*, p. 75

⁴⁸ Hamzah, *Al-Imam*, p. 45.

⁴⁹ Rosnaini Hashim, *Educational Dualism in Malaysia: Implications for Theory and Practice* (Kuala Lumpur; The Other Press, 2004), p. 34.

Ulama during the Japanese Occupation and Early Independence Movement

The Japanese Occupation changed the political position of the ulama tremendously. It resulted in the Kaum Tua and Kaum Muda sharing a common political outlook. The Japanese organized the Pan-Malayan Religious Council as part of their attempts to control the Kaum Tua ulama in Malay states and bring them under Japanese patronage. They were also utilized to spread Japanese propaganda in the mosques.⁵⁰ Japanese propaganda against the colonial powers as being enemies of Islam did influence many of the ulama, who then saw that their authority was likely to be better protected in an independent country or one that was controlled by the Japanese.⁵¹

The Kaum Muda ulama were not only collaborators but also among the staunchest supporters of the Japanese. As highlighted above, the Kaum Muda ulama formed the KMM to express their political position. They disseminated anti-British propaganda and propagated the idea of *Melayu Raya*.⁵² While many observers noted the leftist tendencies of the PKMM leadership, the leadership of the group also comprised Kaum Muda ulama such as Abu Bakar Baqir. The PKMM leadership was also made up of many others who were educated in religion.⁵³ Islam remained an important political principle for these figures and many saw the concept of *Melayu Raya* as an attempt to unify Muslims in the region under the banner of Islam, and many Kaum Muda ulama saw independence as the only way for the ulama to maintain their position and authority.⁵⁴ The political outlook of both Kaum Muda and Kaum Tua ulama were largely shaped by their experiences during the period of the Japanese Occupation.

The period prior to independence marked a new beginning for ulama in Malaysia. Many of the Kaum Tua ulama had been in the forefront of many Malay political gatherings, which were held against the British “Malayan Union” proposal. They also took the lead in the formation of UMNO and many of the ulama took up

⁵⁰ Abu Talib Ahmad, *Malay-Muslims, Islam and the Rising Sun: 1941-1945*, (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2003), p. 25.

⁵¹ Interview with Hassan Shukri.

⁵² Kamaruzzaman Abdullah, *The Politics of Islam in Contemporary Malaysia* (Bangi: UKM Publishers, 2003), p. 43.

⁵³ Firdaus Abdullah, *Radical Malay Politics: Its Origins and Early Development*, (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk, 1985). On the background of these figures, see PAS Gombak, *Tokoh Gerakan Islam Malaysia* (Selangor: Focus Approach, 2005), p. 30.

⁵⁴ Interview with Fadli Ghani and Hassan Shukri.

positions within the new party where they were placed in the UMNO Religious Affairs Bureau.⁵⁵ This action was clearly taken to protect their position and authority within the society.

Meanwhile, some of the Kaum Muda ulama, particularly Dr Burhanuddin and Abu Bakar Baqir, organized themselves under the Malay Nationalist Party of Malaysia, *Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya* (PKMM) and formed the Supreme Religious Council, *Majlis Agama Tertinggi* (MATA), which was PKMM's religious wing, in March 1947.⁵⁶ Many Kaum Muda ulama joined the PKMM as they saw the struggle against the British as an Islamic duty and that the PKMM was the only credible organization that was leading this struggle. Maulana Abdullah Noh, a Kelantanese ulama, even went, as far as to say that PKMM's struggle against the British colonial authorities was part of a compulsory *jihad* against infidel oppressors.⁵⁷ Subsequently, this wing broke away from PKMM and became the Hizbul Muslimin (HM) party. The HM stated that its aim was ridding Malaya of British rule. They also utilized Islam as a vital instrument in order to create an Islamic state.⁵⁸ However, their definition of an Islamic state differed from that envisioned by most Muslim revivalists groups. The state here simply referred to a country in which Muslims have the political authority to rule.⁵⁹ At the same time, Islam remained a concept that was encapsulated within their notion of Malay nationalism that they envisioned.

By 1951, both Kaum Tua and Kaum Muda ulama decided to combine their resources as a result of various factors. HM was banned by the British colonial authorities as it was accused of carrying out communist activities. The British in

⁵⁵ The Bureau was set up in 1946 by UMNO under the leadership of Sheikh Abdullah Pahim, a prominent ulama and grandfather of the current Malaysian Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi; Alias Mohamed, *PAS Platform: Development and Change 1951-1986* (Shah Alam: Gateway, 1994), pp. 24-5.

⁵⁶ Burhanuddin Al-Helmy was a Malay nationalist and reformist. He was involved in various political movements against colonialism. He became the chairman of the KMM and subsequently was involved with the PKMM. He was instrumental in the formation of HM. For more on Burhanuddin, Ramlah Adam, *Burhanuddin Al-Helmy: Satu Kemelut Politik* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1996).

⁵⁷ Panel Pengkaji Sejarah, Pusat Penyelidikan PAS, *PAS Dalam Arus Perjuangan Merdeka* (Selangor: Angkatan, Edaran, 1999), p. 4.

⁵⁸ The break had occurred due to the disagreement of ulama in MATA with the secular socialist ideology of PKMM. For more on HM, See Nabir Abdullah, *Maahad El-Ehya Assyariff Gunung Semanggol 1934-1954* (Bangi: Jabatan Sejarah UKM, 1976) and Alias Mohamed, *PAS Platform*, p. 10.

⁵⁹ Mohd Fadli Ghani, "Dewan Pemuda PAS: Tokoh dan Perubahan," in Ridhuan M. Nor's *Menggenggam Bara: Menelusuri Perjuangan 50 Tahun Dewan Pemuda PAS Pusat Dan Kezaliman ISA*, (PAS, 2003), p. 3.

dealing with opposition to colonial rule had conveniently lumped both Islamist and socialist groups as leftist.⁶⁰ The Kaum Muda ulama found themselves greatly weakened and decided to use the UMNO Religious Bureau as a vehicle to achieve their objectives. The first sign of rapprochement between Kaum Muda and Kaum Tua ulama was at the First Ulama Convention sponsored by UMNO in 1951. HM leaders were invited to attend the conference by Haji Ahmad Fuad, a former student of the El-Ehya and a prominent Kaum Tua figure.⁶¹ Kaum Tua ulama were also worried that UMNO would be banned as it was then aggressively fighting for independence and thus found that there was a need to form a separate organization to prepare for this possibility. Despite differences in religious ideology, both groups of ulama held similar political views and agreed to form an “ulama union”. This union was to be independent of any political party or organization and it was eventually named the Islamic Party of Malaysia, *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS).⁶² The formation of a union however did not mark the ulama’s break from UMNO. The leadership of PAS were still active members of UMNO and many still saw UMNO as the key vehicle to achieving independence.

By 1953, development in Malay politics had a significant impact in pushing the ulama to function separately from other political parties. Problems within UMNO simmered, leading to a fracture within the ranks of UMNO leaders. The proposal of Dato’ Onn Jaafar, founder and first President of UMNO, to open up the party to non-Malays led to open dissention against his leadership. This had led to his resignation from the party culminating in the formation of a multi-racial party, the Independence of Malaya Party (IMP). This decision had a direct impact on PAS. Ahmad Fuad, the then President of PAS and a close associate of Dato’ Onn, tried to sway PAS leaders to attend the National Convention organized by IMP but members opted to attend the National Conference of UMNO.⁶³ The decision to support the National Conference led to the resignation of Ahmad Fuad as President of PAS and later joined the IMP.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ The notion of “leftist” here refers more to groups that opposed their rule rather than those who really subscribed to communist ideas. Interview with Hassan Shukri

⁶¹ Haji Fuad was educated in the Madrasah Al-Ehya, which was a prominent KM religious institution. However, he continued his education in Mecca where he studied with several Kaum Tua ulama who influence him to adopt the Kaum Tua ideology. Interview with Hassan Shukri

⁶² PAS Constitution 1951, Article 1. The party change its name to the Pan Malayan Islamic Party. See The Seventh PAS Annual Meeting on the 25, 26 and 27 December 1958, p. 1.

⁶³ PAS Annual Report, 1953-1954, p. 16.

⁶⁴ *ibid*, pp. 16-9. The two gatherings were important as it was seen by UMNO and IMP as a show of strength and support for their respective parties.

Together with Ahmad Fuad, several other ulama in PAS also left the party. Subsequently, Dr Abbas Elias, a medical doctor who had been the Deputy President of PAS, filled the position of Party President. The PAS leadership used the situation to reassert their position as an independent political party and strengthened their power base.

This decision was motivated by several factors. Firstly, the ulama within UMNO were not happy with the appointment of Tunku Abdul Rahman as the new leader of UMNO. They were contemptuous of his penchant for sport cars, dancing and alcohol. Secondly, they were opposed to UMNO's move to sanction activities such as lotteries and fun-fairs which they believed are un-Islamic. Thirdly, the PAS leadership felt that UMNO was compromising the interest of the Malays at the expense of the non-Malays and felt the need to protect Malay interests through electoral politics.⁶⁵ A complete break from UMNO was made in 1954 at the PAS annual meeting. This break was initiated by Amaluddin Darus, a prominent PAS member.⁶⁶ He urged ulama to ensure that PAS executive committee members were not allied to any other political parties. A resolution was passed disallowing PAS executive committee members from holding positions in other political parties.⁶⁷ This was a clear move to distance itself from UMNO and form a separate identity for itself.

Fusing Islam and Malay Nationalism

In 1955, PAS contested the general elections winning one lone seat. Despite this dismal performance, the party did not crumble. Dr Abbas Elias decided to step aside and he scouted for a new leader for the party. PAS leaders decided to approach Malay nationalist figures, Dr Burhanuddin and Zulkifli Mohamed to lead the party. They

⁶⁵ Noor, *Embedded*, p. 71; Othman Hamzah, "Riwayat Penubuhan PAS Dan Dewan Ulamak," in PAS Bureau Penerangan, *36 Tahun PAS Meniti Liku Perjuangan* (Kuala Lumpur, N.A., 1987), p. 3; Hassan Shukri, *Ke Arah Memahami Penubuhan, Pelembagaan, Pengurusan Dan Pentadbiran PAS* (Rantau Panjang, Selangor: Badan Perhubungan PAS Negeri Selangor, 2000), p. 8.

⁶⁶ Amaluddin Darus is a revolutionary figure in PAS being responsible for major changes that occurred in the party. He left the party in 1970 due to disagreement with the then leadership and subsequently rejoined the party in the late 1970s. He even wrote a book to express his disillusionment with PAS; see Amaluddin Darus, *Kenapa Saya Tinggalkan PAS*, (Kuala Lumpur: Harimau Press, 1977).

⁶⁷ PAS Third Annual General Meeting on the 12, 13 and 14 of August 1954, pp. 6-7. A further move was made in 1955 to completely dissociate from UMNO. PAS members were not allowed to hold membership with any other party.

believe that these figures could rejuvenate the party's image.⁶⁸ Both these leaders agreed to join PAS and Dr Burhanuddin was appointed party president and Zulkifli was appointed party deputy president during the fifth PAS Annual Meeting held in December 1956.⁶⁹

Under Dr Burhanuddin's leadership, the membership of PAS soared due to the influx of Malay nationalists. He also expanded the network of party branches by co-opting ulama at the village level into the party. These ulama were crucial in setting up branches of PAS throughout the country. By the end of 1959, PAS had successfully opened up branches in all states in the Malay Peninsula, including Johor, the heartland of Malay conservatism and the birthplace of UMNO.⁷⁰

To temper the image of PAS as a religious party, strict guidelines were laid out for all PAS members. They were not only told to entrench themselves within the local communities where they served, but also to show good examples of piety and to remain approachable and friendly. The program led to PAS making considerable inroads into UMNO's support base which translated to votes in the 1959 elections that led to PAS' control of the states of Kelantan and Terengganu.⁷¹ During this period most of PAS' top leaders were Malay nationalists rather than ulama. While one cannot discount the importance of the role played by the ulama especially in Kelantan and Terengganu, it must also be noted that they did not hold many key positions in the party. PAS also did not initiate any overtly Islamic policies. Rather, in line with its nationalist pursuits, PAS strove to ensure that more positions in the state government in Terengganu and Kelantan were filled by *bumiputras*.⁷²

Despite this initial success, the post-1959 era marked a continuous decline for PAS. Internal fractures between the different components of the party, especially between the Malay nationalists and ulama, led to the downfall of the Terengganu government. The arrest in 1965 of Dr Burhanuddin led to the appointment of Dato' Asri Muda as the Acting President of the party. He took over the presidency of the party upon the demise of Dr Burhanuddin in 1969. Asri's leadership saw PAS

⁶⁸In the post-mortem of the election, it was discovered that the Malay public had seen the party to be too orthodox and to be a party for the religious. Interview with Hassan Shukri.

⁶⁹PAS Fifth Annual Meeting held on the 23, 24 and 25 December 1956, p. 1.

⁷⁰Ibnu Hasyim, *PAS Kuasai Malaysia*, p. 1.

⁷¹Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (Hants: Palgrave, 2001), p. 267.

⁷²Minutes of Meeting PAS Communication Department on the 24 June 1959 in PAS Terengganu: Report on Elections and Formation of Terengganu State Government, p. 4.

adopting a more nationalistic stance. The political atmosphere of his leadership was one marred by the racial riots between Malays and Chinese, which occurred in the aftermath of the 1969 elections in which UMNO suffered a huge setback in the polls. It began with a victory procession held after the elections by the largely Chinese opposition, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Gerakan. This resulted in counter-processions held by UMNO Youth leaders leading to the May 13 racial riots. Asri decided that PAS should support UMNO to ensure that Malays were united against what he saw as a threat from the Chinese community.⁷³ This threat led to an emerging congruence between UMNO and PAS culminating in an alliance between the two parties in 1973.

Ulama in PAS were divided in their support for Asri's move, resulting in the loss of support from many PAS members including several prominent ulama, such as Amaluddin Darus. At the same time, however, the ulama in PAS Youth and PAS Ulama Council supported the move in the hope that they could Islamize the system from within. During the course of the alliance, these ulama successfully initiated several moves such as the banning of liquor at official government functions, the closing of the Parliament's bar and increasing the airtime for Islamic programs on radio and television.⁷⁴ Predictably, the alliance proved to be short-lived, and a rancorous separation ensued. The ulama in PAS felt that the government was not sincere in the implementation of Islam in the country. The ulama in PAS also questioned Asri's religious credentials when Abu Bakar Hamzah argued that Asri did not understand the Qur'an and thus was not qualified to lead the party.⁷⁵ Pressures from within PAS resulted in the dissolution of the alliance. The break-up led to an internal dissension between supporters of Asri and the ulama. The ulama began to prepare their moves to remove Asri from the helm of the PAS leadership and to take powers into their own hands.⁷⁶ This "coup" occurred during the 1982 PAS Annual Meeting. It resulted in the rise of the ulama faction in PAS. The rise of the ulama faction in PAS resulted in a major change in the ideology of PAS and the shape of Malaysian politics.

⁷³ Minutes of Meeting of PAS Working Committee on 20th July 1969, pp. 2-3.

⁷⁴ Hassan Adli, *Laporan Khas Kajian Menilai Penyertaan PAS dalam Kerajaan Hingga Kongres Ke-21*, Unpublished Document.

⁷⁵ Abu Bakar Hamzah, *Quo vadis PAS? Polemik Spontan di antara Abu Bakar Hamzah dan Ibnu Muslim* (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, 1989), p. 142.

⁷⁶ Minutes of PAS Youth Annual Meeting 1978, pp. 27-32.

Ulama Outside PAS Between 1940-1980

The importance of the ulama in PAS should not be overestimated in understanding the religio-political activism of ulama in Malaysia. Many ulama were not involved or linked to PAS in any way. As mentioned earlier, several ulama left PAS in 1953. Ahmad Fuad joined the IMP and several others, such as Ahmad Badawi and Ahmad Maliki, left the party to rejoin UMNO, where they did not play a major role in its political developments.⁷⁷ In describing the UMNO leadership, Anthony Milner has argued that the British encouraged the growth of the secular nationalist movement. The movement leaders propagated notions of the state and law, which challenged not only the kerajaan but also the idea of a society based on God's law.⁷⁸ Many ulama in UMNO joined the state religious departments and other religious institutions as advisors. There were a few ulama who were also appointed to government positions. They were Syed Jaafar Albar and Wan Abdul Kadir Ismail who were appointed deputy ministers in Tunku's cabinet.⁷⁹ Others like Hassan Yunus was appointed Chief Minister of Johor in 1957. However, these ulama were the exception rather than the norm. One could thus conclude that the UMNO Religious Bureau remained an unimportant bureau which did not have much political power or influence. Its role was to represent segments of ulama and add emphasis to the pledges put in the UMNO constitution to safeguard Islam in Malaysia.⁸⁰

Another important group of ulama were those that were without political affiliations. This group also formed the vast majority of the ulama in Malaya. They were working as religious teachers or religious officers at the state religious institutions before independence and continued in their positions even after independence. The period between the 1940s and the early 1950s saw the expansion of Islamic religious education. After independence, job prospects for ulama grew. While the number of students in religious schools had declined, new jobs awaited the ulama when the government introduced Islamic education as part of the national curriculum. All schools, including Christian-aided government schools, were required

⁷⁷ Baharuddin Abdul Latif, *Islam Memanggil: Rencana-Rencana Sekitar Perjuangan PAS 1951-1987* (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Abrar, 1994), p. v.

⁷⁸ A. C. Milner, "Rethinking Islamic Fundamentalism in Malaysia," in *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, 20, 2, (1986): 48-75.

⁷⁹ Hussain Yaakub, *UMNO Tidak Relevan*, p. 256.

⁸⁰ Gordon P. Means, "The Political Development of Malaysia," in *Comparative Politics*, 1, 2 (Jan 1969): 279.

to provide compulsory Islamic religious instruction to Muslims if there were more than fifteen Muslim students attending the school.⁸¹ Ulama from *madrasahs* were lured to work for the government as their career prospects and salaries were much better.

Institutions of higher learning of Islam were also established in Malaysia. In 1958, the Department for Islamic Studies in the Arts Faculty of the University of Malaya was created.⁸² This was an important step because for the first time Islamic Studies graduates could obtain a bachelor's degree in Malaysia. Graduates from this university were also able to gain acceptance in the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Egypt. The academics appointed in these institutions were likewise from within the fraternity of ulama. The expansion of Islamic religious education not only provided an important source of income for the ulama but also created a new role for them within the national education system as the custodians of Islam.

Islamic institutions and departments were expanded after independence. Between 1947 and 1971, the number of salaried employees of the state religious departments had more than doubled and spending on these departments had increased by 50 times during the same period.⁸³ In 1968, the Council of Kings formed the Malaysian National Committee for Islamic Affairs (MKI). This council was entrusted with many issues relating to Islam. It played a major role in ensuring that state policies were in line with the *Shariah*. MKI also enacted new initiatives to expand the role of Islam in Malaysia.⁸⁴ As part of their duties, the religious departments were given the authority to exercise greater control over mosques, which traditionally had been under the care of the local community.⁸⁵ Another important area which saw the expansion in the powers and authority of ulama was in the realm of law. Various Islamic laws were modified upon independence as in the case of *zakat*, which was made compulsory for all Muslims. New laws, such as those relating to *khalwat*, were formulated to prosecute Muslims who were in close proximity with members of the opposite sex. It must be noted that these laws were often not strictly enforced as could

⁸¹ Federation of Malaya, *The Report of the Education Review Committee* (Kuala Lumpur: n.p.1960), p. 47.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁸³ The numbers had increased from 424 to 982.

⁸⁴ JAKIM, *Sambutan 35 Tahun JAKIM* (Kuala Lumpur: Matang Cipta Sdn Bhd, 2003), p. 23. Some of its initiative includes formation of various institutions such as the Religious Teachers College.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

be seen by the small number of people prosecuted under these laws.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, this gave the ulama working for the *Shariah* courts jurisdiction over a wider scope of Islamic law.

Most ulama outside of PAS did not actively oppose UMNO since they felt that political powers should be in the hands of the Malays. UMNO successfully convinced the vast network of ulama, perhaps with the exception of ulama in Kelantan and Terengganu, to adopt its nationalistic goals or at the very least to stay out of political matters.⁸⁷ During this period, this policy was met with some success. The apolitical position of these ulama could be understood by the fact that ulama as a whole had an increasingly secure institutional base of their own in the government financed religious sector. Likewise, the authority of the ulama and the importance of institutions linked to the ulama such as the *Shariah* laws were also maintained. Despite the secular nature of the government, ulama of this generation felt that there was a need to maintain the hegemony of UMNO for the greater good of Islam and the Malay community, especially in light of what they perceived as threats from non-Muslim population.⁸⁸ Most importantly, many ulama still upheld the Al-Ghazalian approach to authority. While not all elements of Sufism were accepted by this time, since Kaum Muda thinkers influenced many ulama, they observed the maintenance of *akhlaq* and *adab*.⁸⁹ Thus, ulama were careful not to transgress the above, especially in dealing with authorities. They tended to adopt a softer and more accommodating approach in solving problems relating to Islam. This accommodation also meant that some of the ulama were not obsessed about the implementation of the *Shariah*.

It may seem rather contradictory that despite the more accommodating position of the ulama during this period, segments within them continued to oppose the UMNO government. There are two main reasons for this. Prior to the 1980s, PAS was a right-wing Malay nationalist party. Though it gave strong emphasis to Islam,

⁸⁶ Zakat is alms-giving which is part of the five pillars of Islam. Khalwat is being in close proximity with members of the opposite sex; Ahmad Ibrahim, *Islamic Law in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia, 2000), p. 323. As few as 350 *khalwat* cases were reported in 1970. David John Baker, "Local Muslim Organizations and National Politics in Malaysia" (Unpublished Thesis, Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley, 1973), p. 141.

⁸⁷ This is not to say that ulama never opposed the authorities. Ulama within the government institutions had opposed the government family planning policies. Many government ulama oppose the family planning schemes introduced by the government; Abu Bakar Hamzah, *Peranchang Keluarga* (Kota Bharu: Pustaka Aman, 1970) for more on this issue.

⁸⁸ David, *Muslim Organization*, p. 175.

⁸⁹ Abdul Rahman Abdullah, *Pemikiran Islam di Malaysia: Sejarah dan Aliran* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1998), p. 60.

Malay nationalism anchored its ideology.⁹⁰ PAS' critique of UMNO focused on the issue of Malay rights. PAS felt that UMNO had conceded too much to the demands of the non-Malays and sacrificed Malay rights by forming political alliances with the other races.⁹¹ Religion was a less important issue as far as all groups of the ulama were concerned. The ulama in PAS and UMNO felt that their party could best serve the interest of the Malays. While ulama outside these parties remained apolitical as they did not like the duties and exertions that came with political involvement.⁹² In addition, the ulama in PAS saw the need to oppose UMNO due to its overtly secular leadership. Drinking, womanizing and gambling- traits which were abhorred even by Malay cultural standards- were common amongst the leaders of UMNO. As far as ulama in PAS were concerned, they saw the need for the leadership to be reformed and thus involved themselves in politics.

This paper has highlighted the trajectory of ulama influence over politics in Malaysia. From the early Islamic history to the Japanese Occupation, ulama have usually worked with any power willing to secure their authority and their influence. At the same time, in the context of Malaya, their obsession with authority resulted in the Kaum Tua-Kaum Muda conflict. This conflict and the Japanese Occupation subsequently led to the birth of various ulama groups aiming to overthrow British rule, which had been a threat to their authority. The Kaum Muda utilised the PKMM and HM as a vehicle to achieve their objectives while the Kaum Tua utilised UMNO to do so. The fear of losing power also led them to form PAS as a vehicle to defend their authority. Ulama in PAS, UMNO and in the religious bureaucracy continued to strive to defend their authority within the structure of the state. From the above, several conclusions can be made. Prior to the 1980s, the ulama within Islamic tradition were willing to play secondary roles to the rulers as long as their authority was preserved. The paper also showed that even when ulama oppose the government as exemplified by the opposition of PAS' ulama to the UMNO led Malaysian government; their opposition tended to be over political issues rather than religious issues.

⁹⁰ Wan Abdul Rahman Wan Abdul Latif, *PAS 1951-1991: Cabaran Pemantapan dan Misi* (Kuala Lumpur, Jabatan Penerangan PAS, 1991), p. 16.

⁹¹ Kiran Kapur, *Malaysia Quest for a Politics of Consensus* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1983), p. 33; Mutalib, *Ethnicity*, p. 109.

⁹² Interview with Hassan Shukri.

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