

# The Position and Contribution of The Ulama within The Islah Movement in Pre-Independence Malaya

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## Abstract

The ulama, scholars, or intelligentsias involved in the reformation movement (Islah movement) in Malaya were better known as the Kaum Muda. The emergence of the Islah movement in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Malaya had challenged the status quo of the existing religious and ruling systems. The reformists were met with scepticism from certain members of the community due to their controversial approach on a few issues such as fiqh. Members of the Kaum Muda did not conform to the Shafi'i madhhab, which is followed by most Muslims in Malaya and the Malay Archipelago. Thus, this study presents a qualitative-based method through data collection and past studies. Finding research look the emergence and subsequent expansion of the reformation movement had given rise to major conflict between the two ideologies in Malaya which are the Kaum Tua and Kaum Muda. Amidst controversy, the contributions of these two groups were stifled and never properly acknowledged. Therefore, this article aims to discuss the role of the Islah movement towards the Malayan society by analysing its contributions towards the long-term development of the community in Malaya.

**Keywords:** Islah Movement, Kaum Tua, Kaum Muda, Islah in Malaysia

## Introduction

In Islamic history, the concept of islah is imperative in developing Islamic civilisations. Islah can be said to be the effort of rectifying one situation into one that is right, accurate and suitable. It refers to the process of reparation and restoration towards something that is *fasad* (damaged). Historically, a doctrine can remain relevant for a long time if it satisfies four main factors. Firstly, the doctrine utilises valid logic and line of reasoning; secondly, it appeals to the masses; thirdly, it can be applied to relevant cases and scenarios; and fourthly, it possesses a mechanism to accept reformation by renewing old ideas without neglecting important core ideas and tradition (Faruqi, 2000). These four characteristics are present within the major Islamic madhab, which explains its present-day relevance (Minhaji, 2006). Islah-oriented Malayan scholars appealed to those who were influenced by 'Abduh's way of thinking, such as Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin, Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, Haji Abbas Taha, and other early

20<sup>th</sup> century scholars. Although it is generally accepted that the ideology emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the exact date of its emergence in Malaya cannot be pinpointed. Nonetheless, the year of 1906 is an important year for the *Islah* movement as it marked the initial publication of the magazine *al-Imam* in Singapore. The *Islah* movement in Malaya emerged as an internal response towards the underdeveloped political, social, and economic state of the Muslims in the country. The movement occurred during a period of Western colonialism where the economy of the Malays were at a decline, especially when compared to the socioeconomic status of immigrants in Malaya. The country was also experiencing an immigration influx. Thus, the pioneers of *Islah* in Malaya believed that reformation efforts were vital in getting the community back on track. In carrying out reformation, emphasis was given on the restoration of true and correct Islamic teachings within society as well as an overall attitude reform to enable the community to escape poverty and experience an intellectual revolution (Zakariya, 2019).

The *Islah* movement began in Egypt and was pioneered by (Al-Afghani, 1839-1897; Abduh, 1849-1905; Tahir, 1995). In Egypt, the ideas and way of thinking of al-Afghani and Abduh had cultivated the spirit of *Islah* (reformation) among the people to fight against the Western colonialists occupying their country. Furthermore, the ideas of al-Afghani and Abduh had also influenced students who had furthered their studies in Egypt, namely at the Al-Azhar University. Among these students, some were from Malaya, and the country at the time was a colony of the British. The determination of members of the *Islah* movement in Egypt became a source of inspiration for the Malays to rise against British imperialists. This determination was widespread in Malaya as Middle Eastern educated figures such as Sheikh Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin, Sheikh Muhammad Salim al-Kalali, Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, Syed Muhammad Aqil, and Haji Abbas Taha brought forth the perspective of *Islah* (Abdullah, 1988). Their return as Muslim intellectuals and *ulama* marked an advancement in the intellectual growth of the Malays and an era of Islamic revival.

### **The Involvement OF Ulama and Kaum Muda in The Islah Movement**

The *Islah*-oriented *ulama*'s efforts of spreading *da'wah* and awareness through magazines, newspapers and pamphlets was to call for the people to rise against the colonisers. They had even exposed the forms of tyranny and oppression perpetrated by the British through the publications. The initial publication of magazines that carried forth the message of change and reformation began in 1906 with the magazine *al-Imam*. The said magazine is an important piece of history that played a crucial role in the country's history of obtaining independence (Sulaiman and Jamsari, 2006). The main figures behind *al-Imam* were the pupils of Sheikh Ahmad al-Fathoni, which included Syed Syeikh al-Hadi, Sheikh Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin and Syeikh Abbas Muhammad Taha. This was the main purpose of *al-Imam*: "to remind those who have gone astray, and tend to those who are in the dark, and guide those who are lost, and inspire others to do good". The main focus of the newspaper was to invite fellow Muslims to return to adhere to the teachings of the Quran and the Sunnah.

According to Roff (1967); Roff (1967), "It (*al-Imam*) was deeply and directly influenced by al-Manar Salafiyya movement in Cairo (on whose journal of that name it was modelled, and whose contents it often reproduced), and its links with Middle East are further reflected in its promotion of the first modern-style Islamic school". Roff's statement is a testament to the influence of 'Abduh of Egypt towards the Islamic reformists in Malaya. The *Islah* movement challenged the existing religious customs, rituals, and institutions because the reformists were also aiming to purify Islam in Malaya from elements of *khurafat*, superstition, *bid'ah*,

and *taqlid* (Jamil, 1997). Both pioneers had brought on ideas of reform that were based on Western modernisation but included Islamic elements (Jasmi, 2007).

In Malaya, the colonisers had labelled Syed Syeikh al-Hadi, Sheikh Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin, Syeikh Abbas Muhammad Taha, Ustaz Abu Bakar al-Baqir, and Dr. Burhanuddin Helmi as extremists for their radical ideologies in calling for the local community to oppose Western occupation and administration. As a consequence, these notable figures were grouped with the *ulama* of the Islah movement and the Kaum Muda. Generally, Malays were unable to accept their concept of Islah as they felt that a resistance would cause the detriment of the Malay community. This point of view was supported by the traditionalist *ulama*, also known as the Kaum Tua.

Members of the Islah movement or the Kaum Muda understood the importance of their mission and the responsibility that they bear in educating and leading the Malays to the true path of Islamic teachings. The Islah movement was active in eliminating elements of shirk, *khurafat*, and *bid'ah* within the community. Once again, the group was at odds with the Kaum Tua who were already comfortable with the lifestyle and practices of the Malays, that they were unwilling to change even though some of these practices were considered to be either shirk, *khurafat*, and *bid'ah*. To summarise, the Kaum Muda sought reformation but the Kaum Tua were much more comfortable with existing practices.

Thus, it is not surprising to know that history of Islamic intellectualism was started by the Kaum Muda under the leadership of (Jalaluddin, 1869-1956; Ibrahim et al, 1993; Al-Hadi 1867-1934; Samat, 1992; Al-Hady, 1999). The group and their movement had led to significant growth from a sociocultural, political, and economic standpoint for the Malays (Ismail, 2005). From the 1900s to the 1940s, the Malay community bore witness to an intense conflict on the role of Islam when faced with modernisation brought by the British (Bakar, 1994).

### **The Major Role of The Ulama in The Islah Movement**

The three major contributions of the Islah-oriented ulama are the building of the madrasah which is a better structured Islamic education system that succeeds the pondok system, the publication of several magazines and the establishment of Islamic associations and clubs across the country. The Islah movement became a starting point of raising awareness among muslims to achieve independence, an idea that fully solidified around the time of World War II. The pioneers of the Islah movement were the ulama who utilised their influence as leaders and role-models to plant the idea of Islah in the minds of their supporters. The ulama's cause were not only religiously incentivised, but political power came into play as well as the ulama were of the opinion that elements of religion should be present in politics and administration. The ulama and the Islah movement were aware of the factors that impede the Malays' development and way of thinking. These factors are: Low comprehension levels on the true teachings of Islam as stated within the Quran and Hadith (Mahmud, 2003).

1. Religious teachers and imams who neglect their roles and do not deliver the true teachings of Islam nor showcase proper leadership to the community.
2. Malay culture and customs that are heavily influenced by Hinduism.
3. Malay culture and customs that are heavily influenced by Hinduism.
4. The British and immigrant group's domination of the country's economy.
5. The characteristics of the Malays who were easily satisfied with life.

The above factors resulted in a more aggressive approach from the Islah movement with the aims of achieving change within the Malay community's level of awareness and education. The ulama of the Islah movement had begun building and developing a modernised version

of the madrasah to replace the previous sekolah pondok system. The objective of the madrasah was to revamp the Islamic education institution within the country whilst also promoting awareness on the unbalanced growth. Ergo, the Islah-oriented ulama or the Kaum Muda had begun offering new perspectives that contradicted with the traditionalist ulama or the Kaum Tua.

The perspectives of the Islah-oriented ulama were met with backlash from the commonfolk whom were used to the ways the traditionalist ulama to the point where the Islah-oriented ulama were accused of distorting the true teachings of Islam. This conflict can be further illustrated through the khutbah incident where the Islah-oriented ulama had raised their concerns whilst the khatib was delivering his sermon (Adam, 2000). The boldness of the ulama of the Islah movement to contradict the viewpoint of the traditionalists had caused anger among the latter party. The colonisers and the Malay elite disagreed with the ulama of the Islah movement because the ulama were making the Malays aware of the dangers of separating religion from political and state matters. The clash of minds in dealing with interpreting religious practice in the Malay community had led to an era of turmoil between the Islah-oriented and traditionalist ulama. The traditionalist ulama had a much better standing with the local community due to their integrity and long-standing influence. As a consequence, the path of the Islah movement ulama proved to be much more difficult.

In short, the movement that began in the 1920s and 1930s led by the ulama and the Kaum Muda eventually succeeded in evoking the determination to oppose the British colonialist. A majority of the ulama of the Islah movement were educated in the Middle East, and these ulama came home with the self-determination to fight against the Western colonisers. Their efforts in evoking Islamic movements that were politically incentivised were successful such as in the founding of Hizbul Muslimin in Gunong Semanggol, Perak. The founder of political party Hizbul Muslimin was Ustaz Abu Bakar al-Baqir who was a follower of the Islah movement ulama. At the time, the madrasah Maahad Ihya Assyarif became the centre point for the ulama of the Islah movement. This madrasah was successful in producing several radical political figures, some of whom were Tuan Haji Ahmad Fuad bin Hassan, Ustaz Othman Hamzah, and Ustaz Baharuddin Latif (Sulong, 1987).

The status of the educators at the madrasah improved because of the presence of overseas educators, especially those from Sumatera. When the Malay World was colonised by the likes of the British, the ulama played a major role in the resistance movement against Western powers. The madrasah and sekolah pondok became the headquarters and bilik gerakan for planning the resistance efforts against the Western imperialists. This resulted in the colonisers committing active acts of oppressing, silencing, and arresting against the Islamic resistance fighters. Through the introduction of the Societies Act 1920, and subsequently the Emergency Act 1948, the colonisers were able to crack down on the establishment and activities of the Islamic societies. The colonisers were also then able to take action in arresting and imprisoning the resistance fighters to curb their ongoing activities. Moreover, the British had instructed the Islamic Religious Council and Adat Istiadat Melayu by virtue of the Malay rulers to curb any da'wah or jihad activities. Although all the threats did very little to tamp down their spirits. Any discussion on the Malays will always involve a discussion on the religion of Islam because Malays and Islam have become synonymous with one another. Hence, when Western colonisers attempted to separate worldly matters from the spiritual and hereafter, whilst additionally drawing distinctions between politics and religious matters, the Malay Muslims rose to fight against these changes.

Similarly, Malay students who studied in the Middle East between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century possessed strong initiatives to spread awareness among their kind. This can be seen through their active involvement in clubs and societies alongside their involvement in the publication of newspapers and self-published reading materials to spread their ideas and raise awareness within the Malays. Hence, graduates of al-Azhar University as well as those who studied in Mecca played a major role in spreading awareness within the Malay community prior to World War II. Aside from the university's role as a centre for education, it can be said that it also played a part in the development of Malay intellectualism.

There are a few factors that led to the intelligentsia movement among the Malay students. The first factor entails the existence of publication centres that publish titles in Arabic and Malay for the use of the Malay community in Hejaz and the Malay World (Othman, 2006). Publication centres played an important role as the books that were published exposed the students to various types of knowledge. Another vital factor is the students' exposure to an intellectual environment in Egypt and Mecca affected the growth of their mindsets (Othman, 2006).

These effects can be observed through their response towards the issues reported in the news at the time such as *Tunas Melayu*, *Neracha*, *Idaran Zaman*, *Bahtera*, and *Malaya*. Students studying in the Middle East were not only regular readers and subscribers to the newspapers, but they also contributed their ideas and insightful views to the publication. Therefore, newspapers and magazines reporting on contemporary issues in the Malay World positively affected the mindset of the students.

### **The Contribution of The Islah Movement towards the Growth of Islamic Studies**

Reformation of the nation's Islamic education system was conducted on a large scale in line with the rise of the Islamic movement in the early 1970s. In Malaysia, the formation of the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM) that continued the efforts of students from the National Union of Malaysian Muslim Students (PKPIM) and the al-Rahmaniah group had provided a new dimension to the country's Islamic education. The utilisation of the *tarbiyah* method which is an approach that combines secular and Islamic knowledge was able to increase the number of Islamic institutions in different forms. ABIM introduced the nation to the method through its very own private school, Yayasan Anda in the year 1971. Private schools were set up to address the issue of school dropouts among Muslim students and their lack of opportunity in furthering their education to the tertiary level. These schools adopted the Islamic hierarchal approach à la *Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimeen* (Muslim Brotherhood) by having the students participate in activities such as *usrah*, *tamrin* and *qiyamullail*. The objective and role that Yayasan Anda had intrigued a few researchers from the west, with the likes of Judith Nagata (1984) describing the school as an education system that puts Islam at the forefront of its syllabus. Nagata (1984) also added that the school was crucial in aligning itself with the country's mainstream education system, and stated that the school was capable of producing students that are well equipped in modern or secular education and religious studies.

ABIM was also involved in modernising *sekolah pondok* and *sekolah rakyat*. Maahad al-Ummah, a *sekolah pondok* located in Chemor, Perak was modernised by ABIM. The organisation was also active in implementing the *tarbiyah* method in several institutions ranging from pre-schools to higher education institutes. A number of educational institutions were open for members of the ABIM organisation and the general public. This began with the establishment of Taman Asuhan Kanak-Kanak (TASKI) in 1979, which was followed by the

establishment of Sekolah Rendah Islam (SRI), Sekolah Menengah Islam (SMI), Institut Pengajian ilmu-ilmu Islam (IPII), and Institut Perguruan ABIM (IPA). In short, ABIM can be said to be the pioneer of modern Islamic education among its peers from the Islamic movement. The founding of several education institutes is a manifestation of the organisation's goal of creating an alternative education system that is Islamic in nature. Intellectual culture is considered as the central aspect propagating Islamism. IPII, established in 1991, played a key role in implementing the idea of 'Islamisation of knowledge'. This idea centres upon the concept of providing the Islamic perspective to each and every subject studied. As an example, aside from the normative religious-based courses such as Quranic Studies, Hadith, and Arabic Language, IPII also offers a multitude of hybrid Islamic-secular courses such as Comparative Law, Islamic Social Studies, and Islamic Political Thought. The institute has also expanded to include twinning programmes with local and international universities (Nasir, 1999).

Moreover, ABIM was also indirectly involved with the nation's Islamisation process. A national education policy was made by members of the ABIM movement and it dominates certain educational institutions in Malaysia. ABIM's involvement in expanding and implementing the National Education Policy which was launched in 1987. This has produced several ABIM scholars such as Idriz Jauzy, Muhammad Nur Manuty and Wan Mohd Nor in providing views on the Islamization of national education policy. The ideas brought by them are in line with the ideas of Anwar Ibrahim who believes that the process of Islamization will be successfully implemented if a new education system is successfully formed based on principles, methods, structure and content taken from Islamic teachings (Nasir, 2010).

ABIM's efforts to channel its methods and approaches to public education institutions were unsuccessful when its former president Anwar Ibrahim was sacked from his position as the Deputy Prime Minister in 1998. The Islamic organisation even lost its hold on the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) that was once known as ABIM Islamic University. However, this did not stop the organisation from continuing to champion its educational approach to other government entities and non-governmental organisations (NGO). Activists of ABIM were active in contributing their ideas for learning institutions particularly Parti Pakatan, which had a high influence on Selangor in 2008. Several reforms were accomplished, including upgrading the status of the Islamic College of Selangor Darul Ehsan (KISDAR) from a college to a university with the change of name to International Islamic University College Selangor (KUIS). Upgrading KUIS has allowed for Islamic movements to partake in tertiary institutions. Prior to this, public tertiary institutions were only managed by the government, leaving no room for the opposition government to be involved. An instance of activism from ABIM in KUIS is the *Serantau Memperingati 100 Tahun Pahlawan Nasional Bapak Mohamad Natsir* seminar held in March 2009. The seminar was on Mohamad Natsir, a prominent figure in da'wah and education based in Indonesia whose influence was noteworthy to ABIM's cause. Aside from ABIM, the Movement for an Informed Society Malaysia (WADAH) has also held a seminar in cooperation with KUIS. The seminar was officiated by Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who is believed to be the catalyst for the increase of the involvement of Islamic movements in higher education (Nasir, 2010).

The emphasis on *tarbiyah* and education as advocated by ABIM was eventually followed by Jamaah Islah Malaysia (JIM), a social da'wah organisation whose founding members were from the Islamic Representative Council (IRC) (Anwar, 1990). Through programs conducted under JIM, the IRC was able to publicly showcase their image of *tarbiyah* and their ideals on Islah. This is in line with the Islah's background which is supported by professionals and

corporate figures (Anwar, 1990). JIM became much more known within the general public through programs such as Institut al-Quran and Da'wah Training Institute IWC-JIM. The organisation has also opened the Al-Amin Islamic primary and secondary schools, as well as Jaiputra College, in Kota Bharu, Kelantan.

JIM was able to receive public recognition through the establishment of Sekolah Al-Amin. The school's philosophy prioritises the tawhid in raising individuals who are noble and faithful with high morale and are able to contribute to society and the nation as guided upon the Quran and the Sunnah. On the other hand, the school's mission is to build a generation of Muttaqin who are able to appreciate and fight for Islam. Thus, subjects such as Islamic studies and Arabic Language were given priority. On the other hand, the curriculum is adapted from a few Islamic schools in Kelantan and Terengganu that align with the curriculum set out by the Ministry of Education. Institutes of education under JIM focus on not only spirituality, but also academics, living skills, and modern technology (Yusop, 1993).

JIM continued to expand its education institution by establishing a network of Islamic schools nationwide consisting of 30 schools at the primary and secondary level. In addition, JIM aimed for its members to be (?) at the tertiary level by establishing an organisation called Kelab Rakan Siswa Islah Malaysia (KARISMA) on 2 May 1999. KARISMA was founded on the basis of giving da'wah and carrying out Islah. The organisation's tendency to use informal language while spreading da'wah has popularised the organisation. The informal approach also gears towards a method of reform that leans away from educational activities that are more formal in nature, instead it focuses on a more practical and responsive approach and fits the needs of the community. Therefore, JIM is quite progressive by offering social treatment institutions such as Raudhatul Sakinah, which was established in 1998. It serves as a shelter and guidance centre for adolescents who are social victims. This endeavour can assist teenagers to increase their self-confidence and ability to become useful individuals to religion and society ("Raudhatul Sakinah, Raudhatulsakinah.Com.My, 2/9/2020" 2020).

Overall, the programs and initiatives conducted by JIM and its contemporaries are similar to the ones carried out by ABIM. Although JIM was not able to bypass ABIM's popularity, it still succeeded in making itself known through the successful Sekolah al-Amin that has several branches in the urban areas. The organisation's professional image was able to appeal to the highly educated folk, hence why a number of students at Sekolah al-Amin come from affluent and educated backgrounds. JIM's contribution in developing the Islamic education system further adds to the rise of integrated education that combines concepts pioneered by the ulama and local intellectuals.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the discussion, it is undeniable that the influence originating from the Middle East has brought about significant social change through the ulama of the Islah movement who developed the country's Islamic education. Education from the Middle East was also the trigger for political awareness among the Malays. The Pan-Islamism movement<sup>1</sup> that became popular in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was one of the earliest political influences for the Malayan community. The movement resulted in the establishment of several Islamic organisations and parties of which the core of these parties were to spread awareness on Islam and Islamism as done by Abu Bakar al-Baqir (1907-1974) of the *Hisbul*

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<sup>1</sup> It means an uprising or fanatical movement of Muslims that spread in some parts of the Muslim world in the last quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century following the effects on the aggression of Western powers on the territories inhabited by Muslims.

*Muslimin* group circa 1948 (Kadir, 2010). However, the British deemed the group to be dangerous by linking it to the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). Thus, *Hisbul Muslimin* was banned and outlawed. Although, it is important to note that the British banned the group out of fear that it might receive major support from the people, which could lead to the formation of an Islamic nation.

### Contribution

The controversial *Islah* movement's stance especially their rejection of *taqlid* attitude towards *Shafi'i* mazhab has marginalized them from the mainstream Muslim community. Moreover, their bravery in criticizing the feudal leaders including the sultans, rulers, *ulama* caused their standpoint to be viewed as a major threat to status quo. Despite the *Islah* community had a small number of followers, they made significant changes in the society, especially in pioneering nationalism awareness and improving the religious education system by putting forward the integration model in the middle of *Pondok* educational system and the mainstream (secular) education. In fact, their contribution to the Malay community is highly significant despite the arduous challenges. Albeit their weaknesses and drawbacks, they still make a big contribution in shaping the development of religious, educational, and political spells in the country

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