Islam in Political Affairs: Islamic Thought, Intellectual Movements, and Government Policy in Indonesia and Malaysia

Description

Introduction

The intersection of Islam and politics has long been one of the most contested and dynamic aspects of Southeast Asian history. Nowhere is this more evident than in Indonesia and Malaysia, two countries where Islamic thought has played a decisive role in shaping political discourse, intellectual movements, and government policy. From the mid-twentieth century onward, Muslims in the region have wrestled with questions of political participation, the meaning of religious authority, and the influence of both Middle Eastern and Western intellectual traditions.

In Indonesia, the 1970s became a crucial turning point. This decade saw a remarkable diversification of Islamic thought, shaped by the authoritarian consolidation of Suharto's New Order and the intellectual responses it provoked. Some thinkers insisted that Islam must once again participate in formal party politics, while others argued for a liberal reimagining of Islam divorced from political vehicles. Still others chose to step away from politics altogether, channeling their energy into da'wah and community mobilization. These different responses created a vibrant, if fragmented, intellectual landscape that continues to influence Indonesian society today.

Malaysia, by contrast, followed a path where Islam became more closely aligned with government policy. The institutionalization of Islamic universities, the establishment of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), and the creation of ISTAC under Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas represent milestones in which the state actively shaped the trajectory of Islamic intellectual life. While this approach gave Malaysian Islam a strong institutional foundation, it also tied its development closely to the priorities of the state.

Across both countries, intellectual groups have emerged, transformed, and sometimes clashed. Traditional ulama trained in pesantren and Middle Eastern institutions now coexist with Western-educated scholars who bring methodologies from the social sciences and humanities. This has raised pressing questions about religious authority: who can speak for Islam in the modern age, and how

should Islamic knowledge be transmitted in an era of globalization?

The growing influence of the West has further complicated this picture. The United States, in particular, has become a new center of Islamic thought, producing scholars whose works circulate widely in Southeast Asia and whose students now hold leadership positions in universities and governments. This intellectual globalization has enriched local debates but has also created tensions between traditionalists and modernists, between those who look to Cairo and Mecca and those who look to Washington or London.

This essay explores these developments under five key themes: the political role of Islam, the rise of intellectual groups, the influence of the West, the types of Islamic thought that emerged in the Malay world, and the relationship between Islamic thought and government policy. By examining these dimensions, we can better understand how Islamic thought continues to shape the cultural and political trajectory of Indonesia and Malaysia, while also illuminating the challenges of negotiating faith in a globalized and rapidly changing world.

Islam in Political Affairs

In the Southeast Asian landscape, Islam has long been intertwined with political affairs and the shifting balance of state power. In Indonesia, the 1970s marked a decisive turning point in the trajectory of Islamic thought. This era was shaped by political repression, social transformation, and intellectual contestation. One of the key debates revolved around whether Muslims should once again re-enter the formal political arena after Soekarno, during the Old Order, had effectively frozen political Islam. The establishment of Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP) reflected the persistence of this aspiration. For many Muslim intellectuals and activists, the party served not only as a political vehicle but also as a statement of identity and survival in a state that was still consolidating under Suharto’s New Order regime (Bustamam-Ahmad, 2004).

At the same time, another school of thought emerged, challenging the very premise of political engagement. This was articulated most famously by Nurcholish Madjid, whose slogan “Islam yes, Islamic party no” reflected a profound intellectual and theological repositioning. Madjid argued that Islam should inspire a culture of openness, modernity, and democracy rather than be shackled to rigid political vehicles. In hindsight, his writings became the embryo of liberal Islamic thought in Indonesia, signaling a move away from dogmatic political Islam toward a broader civilizational engagement.

Parallel to these positions, a third tendency took shape, choosing to abandon the formal political sphere altogether. Instead, its focus turned to da‘wah, the propagation of Islamic values in society. The figure of Mohammad Natsir represents this current. His involvement in da‘wah organizations, particularly through Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (DDII), showed how Islamic activism could be transformed into a non-political but socially influential force. Natsir’s strategy illustrated that Islam could thrive not through parliament or party politics but through grassroots religious consciousness.

Taken together, these three orientations—the political party struggle, the liberal intellectual current, and the da‘wah movement—illustrate the diverse ways Muslims in Indonesia negotiated their faith within the constraints of an authoritarian state. The 1970s were therefore not only a period of repression but also one of remarkable intellectual creativity. Islamic thought became both a site of resistance and adaptation, as thinkers and activists debated the most effective ways to balance religious conviction

with political realities.

This Indonesian story also echoes a wider Southeast Asian pattern: Muslims continuously navigating between politics, state power, and the spiritual mandate of Islam. The choices made during this period still reverberate today, shaping how Islamic organizations, parties, and intellectuals understand their role in society.

The Intellectual Groups

The intellectual transformations of the 1970s and 1980s must be understood within a larger genealogy of Islamic scholarship in the Malay world. Howard Federspiel (1999:41) categorizes the intellectual models of the time into two main groups. The first group consisted of traditionally educated Muslims who developed outside the orbit of Western institutions. Their intellectual horizon was oriented toward the Middle East, with its traditions of jurisprudence, Qur'anic exegesis, and classical learning. They carried forward the pesantren heritage, grounding their authority in mastery of the yellow book and the enduring prestige of ulama.

The second group, however, had a different trajectory. Educated in modern schools and often exposed to Western universities, they internalized new methods of reasoning and analysis. Their orientation leaned toward modernization, rationalization, and engagement with Western intellectual paradigms. While still rooted in Islam, their frameworks were more eclectic, drawing upon sociology, political science, and philosophy to reinterpret the role of religion in modern society.

This divergence also led to a redefinition of who could be called an ulama. Traditionally, ulama were expected to emerge from pesantren or other centers of classical Islamic learning. They were respected as custodians of sacred knowledge, guardians of fiqh, and interpreters of the turath (heritage). Yet by the late twentieth century, many prominent Islamic intellectuals no longer had pesantren backgrounds. They were products of secular universities, sometimes abroad, yet they wielded significant influence in shaping Islamic discourse in Indonesia and Malaysia.

This shift meant that Islamic authority was increasingly mediated by academic credentials rather than traditional lineage. Seminars, conferences, and scholarly publications became the new arenas where Islamic legitimacy was contested. The study of the yellow book, once central in pesantren, began to shift into universities where Islamic studies were reframed as an academic discipline rather than solely a devotional pursuit.

The social consequence of this transition was profound. It blurred the lines between ulama and intellectual, between traditional scholar and modern academic. Questions about authenticity and authority became central. Who speaks for Islam? Who interprets the Qur'an and Hadith in a modern context? These questions remain pressing in today's debates, reflecting a deep structural change in the ecology of Islamic thought.

The Influence of the West

The growth of Islamic thought in Southeast Asia has also been shaped by the influence of the West. For centuries, the Middle East was the reference point for Islamic learning. Students traveled to Cairo,

Mecca, or Medina to deepen their knowledge. Yet beginning in the 1980s, another intellectual center emerged: the United States. Osman Bakar (2003) famously described America as “the second Mecca,” not in the sense of replacing the holy city but as a hub of intellectual and cultural diversity within Islam.

The impact of American and Western scholarship on Southeast Asian Islam has been visible in several ways. First, the sheer volume of academic works—books, articles, and translations—circulated widely in Indonesia and Malaysia. These works became key teaching materials in Islamic universities, reshaping syllabi and research agendas. Second, many Southeast Asian students pursued postgraduate studies in Western institutions, bringing back with them not only advanced degrees but also methodological frameworks that transformed how Islam was studied at home.

Third, the presence of Western scholars in the region, as lecturers, visiting professors, or keynote speakers, further embedded their influence. Their participation in local seminars and conferences gave Southeast Asian academics direct exposure to global debates. Beyond academia, their visibility in media and civil society made Western scholars part of the local intellectual landscape.

This was not merely a one-way process. Southeast Asian Muslim scholars also contributed to global networks, publishing in international journals and engaging in comparative debates. Yet the Western imprint remained strong, especially in fields such as Islamic law reform, political Islam, and interfaith relations. The relationship was not always smooth—questions of authenticity, authority, and epistemology persisted—but it undeniably expanded the horizons of Islamic thought.

Thus, the influence of the West introduced new frameworks, such as social sciences and critical theory, into Islamic discourse. It also facilitated the globalization of Islamic thought, linking Southeast Asia to debates occurring in Cairo, Tehran, Washington, and beyond. In many ways, this pluralization of reference points enriched the intellectual landscape, though it also generated tensions between traditionalists and modernists.

The Types of Islamic Thought

From these dynamics, several typologies of Islamic thought in the Malay world can be discerned. First, there are the internal dynamics of Muslims themselves, which force Islamic thought to evolve beyond the confines of traditionalism. As societies modernize, so too must their interpretations of religion. This constant negotiation reflects the vitality of Islam as a lived tradition rather than a static doctrine.

Second, the dissemination of Islamic thought is not limited to formal channels such as universities or pesantren. Informal spaces—community study groups, publishing houses, online platforms—have become equally influential. The democratization of knowledge means that ideas can spread widely without the endorsement of state or institutional gatekeepers.

Third, the influence of individual thinkers has grown immensely, particularly when they occupy strategic positions in state institutions, universities, or NGOs. A minister of religion, a university rector, or a charismatic preacher can exert disproportionate influence on public discourse, shaping how Islam is understood at both elite and grassroots levels.

Fourth, the scale of publication has expanded. Islamic thought is no longer confined to local or regional contexts. It circulates nationally and internationally, contributing to global debates on Islam and

modernity. The translation of works into English, Arabic, or Malay further amplifies their reach, allowing Southeast Asian Islamic thought to interact with global currents.

These typologies underscore that Islamic thought in the Malay world is not monolithic. It is dynamic, contested, and constantly evolving. It draws upon local traditions, engages with global ideas, and responds to political realities. Its richness lies precisely in this diversity.

Government Policy

Finally, the entanglement of Islam with government policy reveals important contrasts between Malaysia and Indonesia. In Malaysia, Islamic thought has been closely aligned with state policy. The government actively promotes certain interpretations of Islam, institutionalizing them through universities, state-funded research centers, and public campaigns. The establishment of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) under Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas illustrates this partnership between intellectual production and state power.

In Indonesia, the trajectory has been more complex. The transition from Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) to Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) represented a milestone, reflecting the integration of Islamic studies into broader academic frameworks. Since the 2000s, Islamic thought has been generated primarily from campuses, yet it has not always translated into coherent state policy. Instead, the relationship between Islam and government has oscillated, shaped by democratization, decentralization, and civil society activism.

However, symbolic and formalistic expressions of Islam remain visible. The rise of terrorism discourses in Southeast Asia, particularly after 9/11, placed Muslims under intense scrutiny. Governments in Indonesia, Malaysia, Southern Thailand, and Mindanao found themselves compelled to respond to security concerns while also addressing the religious roots of extremism. In many cases, the state prioritized security over deeper educational reform, leaving grassroots communities vulnerable to rigid and exclusionary interpretations of Islam.

This tension underscores a paradox: while governments seek to institutionalize moderate Islam through universities and official bodies, they struggle to contain hard-line movements that thrive outside state control. The result is a fragmented intellectual landscape where progressive, moderate, and radical currents coexist uneasily.

Ultimately, the future of Islamic thought in Southeast Asia will depend on how governments, intellectuals, and civil society negotiate this terrain. Will Islam remain a partner of state policy, or will it reassert itself as an autonomous force of critique and renewal? The answer lies in the ongoing contestation between tradition and modernity, authority and grassroots, state and society.