The Dakwah Phenomenon: Islamic Oppositional Discourses in Malaysia

SHARIFAH ZALEHA SYED HASSAN

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that it is not enough to gauge the saliency of the dakwah phenomenon mainly in terms of the internal political and economic changes taking place in Malaysia in the 1970s and 1980s. What also needs to be considered are the character and nature of the oppositional discourses mounted by the Islamic movements responsible for stimulating Islamic revivalism in the country. An analysis of the publications and speeches of the leaders of the banned Al Arqam movement and the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia or ABIM) reveals that their arguments for religious and social reforms is made persuasive by their use of deductive logic to show that Western derived ideologies were destructive because they robbed the people of their human qualities. Though differently presented, the arguments of Al Arqam and ABIM are similar in that they have personal and psychological appeals to the still culturally unconsolidated urban based Malay middle class. The Islamic concepts that both movements sought to elaborate too appeared as symbols of order and justice which the Malay masses could relate too quite easily.

Key words: dakwah, Islamic movements, middle class, secularism.

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, the use of Islam as a language for political discussion first became evident in the country's struggle for independence in late 1940s. During that time, Malay political leaders talked about the greatness of Islam and the need for Malays to rally around the religion in relation to the presence of the British. Although they differed in terms of political goals and agenda, UMNO and the Islamically inspired Malay leftist organisations such as Hizbul Muslimin and the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP) were instrumental in making Islam a language in terms of which to discuss Malay political unity. After Malaysia became independent, the use of an Islamic vocabulary in political discussion was more confined to the PMIP than UMNO. The latter, being dependent on Western investors for economic growth and military support and keen to contain communal politics to safeguard Malay interests, merely assured that Islam

was made the official religion of Malaysia and a religious bureaucracy be established in each state to help administer Islamic Family Law. As such, Islamic principles were not made the central concerns of the Malaysian government as its opponent, the PMIP, desired.

In early 1970s, a new interpretation of what Islamic symbols should mean to the Malays arose as the nation struggled to industrialise and became exposed to Islamic fundamentalist currents that swept countries such as Pakistan, Algeria, Tunisia, Indonesia and Egypt. During that time, the economic life of the Malays had altered quite dramatically. Owing to rapid economic development, thousands of them had migrated to towns, lived in urban surroundings, benefited from formal education at religious and secular schools locally and abroad and undertook white collar jobs. It was in Malaysia's major cities such as Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, and among the urban-based Malay middle class that groups bent on reviving the people's interest in Islam arose. Since political independence was an established reality when they emerged, the resurgents were less interested in the issue of Malay political unity as with the deleterious consequences of urbanisation and capitalist-based development trends for Malay identity. They therefore, saw in Islam an ideological framework as well as a language in terms of which to discuss social problems that arose as Malaysia faced the industrialisation challenge. There was therefore in Malaysia in the 1970s and 1980s, a new interpretation of how the imperatives of being Muslims should be understood, argued and presented to the masses. This interpretation was associated with several Islamic movements which under the clout of *dakwah* ideology espoused different understanding and use of Islam in the everyday life of the people. The word *dakwah* actually means "to invite" people to Islam. It, however sounded so foreboding in the 1970s because when articulated by the resurgents, it connoted a challenge against the state's apparent lack of interest and initiative to accord a greater role to Islam in society.

Scholars who had analysed Islamic revivalism in Malaysia took as their point of departure the role of Islam as a marker of Malay ethnic identity and a force that Malay elite relied upon to mobilise political support. They therefore, suggested that the phenomenon was closely linked to the trend of internal political and economic changes in the first two decades after Malaysia achieved independence which produced, among other things, inequities, ethnic polarisation, a spiritual abyss among the Malays and political instability. These problems, they argued led the Malays to seek solace in Islam to express their identity crisis (Nagata 1984; Funston 1981; Chandra 1987) or political disaffection (Kessler, 1980). The factors that these scholars have identified might have influenced Islamic revivalism in Malaysia, but need *not necessarily account* for the reason why their arguments for reforms were so persuasive. The resurgents as is well known, did not replace the existing politico-economic system or the religious leadership of orthodox *ulama*, who conti-

nued to exercise some influence in Malaysia. Neither did they engage in sophisticated theological debate with the *ulama* to argue the need for a reformed Islam. Yet, the resurgents sounded so threatening and had been quite successful in arousing the state's as well as the people's interest in Islam. Bearing this in mind, it is obvious that understanding the saliency of the *dakwah* phenomenon solely in terms of internal political and economic changes taking place within Malaysia in the first two decades after the country achieved independence and the external influences to which it was exposed, is not enough. A deeper analysis of the discourses mounted by the resurgents, therefore, is also essential.

It is precisely to answer this question that this paper is conceived. Its central concern is the nature and character of the discourses of two *dakwah* organisations, the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia or Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) and the Jemaah Darul Arqam or Al Arqam, for short, which was banned in 1994. Both movements were active in 1970s and 1980s in helping re-orientate Muslims to particular interpretations of Islam. Although ABIM and Al Arqam were similar in their concern to see Islam being given a greater role to play in the lives of individual Muslims and Malaysian society, they were different in terms of the practical solutions that they offered to help Muslims re-organise themselves so as to approximate the newly stated Islamic ideals. Further, since ABIM and Al Arqam drew from Islamic reformist and messianic trends respectively, they also appropriated Islamic symbols, concepts and rationale differently to argue for reforms. Despite the differences, both ABIM and Al Arqam contributed significantly to rekindling the state's and people's interest in Islam. This paper hopes to explain how this is so by identifying the major concerns of the two organisations in relation to the trend of politico-economic development in the first two decades after Malaysia achieved her independence and examining the contents of their discourses, the issues discussed and the styles used in an effort to explain why and how *dakwah* groups were so influential during that time.

PRE-DAKWAH SOCIO-ECONOMIC MILIEU

It is a well known fact that Islamic resurgence in post-independence Malaysia was initially an urban phenomenon and involved urban-based middle-class Malays. Signs of rising Islamic consciousness reflected in adherence to the Islamic dress code, dietary rules, Arabic literacy, avoidance of food items forbidden by religion, and segregation of the sexes were first detected in the urban, not rural, areas of Malaysia. Further, the resurgents were Malays, mostly from rural background and with limited formal training in Islamic religious sciences. To understand why the Malays in the urban setting took to Islam,

it is important that we examine how they were impacted by the rapid eco-
nomic and political changes that swept the country in the 1970s and 1980s.

Industrialisation and urbanisation in Malaysia were the results of British
encroachment in the nineteenth century. However, even after the British left
it, independent Malaysia still followed the pattern of industrial production
that was set into motion by the colonial administrators whereby, commodities
such as rubber, tin, oil palm and timber were exported, consumer goods were
imported and factories were created to expand the manufacturing sector.
Development projects were generally aimed at rectifying the gross inequities
in terms of income and services between the Malays, most of whom lived in
the rural areas, and the Chinese who were found in the more developed urban
areas. Towards this end, agriculture was diversified, resettlement schemes were
launched, modern industries were created and services were made available
to the people through the creation and development of existing and new urban
centres. These changes stimulated the migration of people, mostly Malays,
from rural to urban areas and brought about five percent rate of growth in
Malaysia's economy, which compared to the other developing countries was
impressive (Funston 1980: 19). However, it soon became apparent that the
economic development in the 1960s was rather lopsided. Not only were there
inherent setbacks in the country's capitalism-based development projects, but
being firmly locked into the world capitalist system and quite dependent on
foreign investment, Malaysia's economy was easily affected by what took
place at the international level. In the 1960s, there was a stagnation of foreign
investment into the country because of fears of political instability. As a result,
unemployment rate in Malaysia rose and poverty was widespread, especially
in the rural areas. As a matter of fact, the incidence of poverty during that
time was highest among the Malays. In short, the trend and pattern of economic
development in 1960s and 1970s was not successful in reducing the economic
gap between rural and urban areas. Instead, class differences between urban
and rural dwellers and among urban dwellers became evident, while competi-
tiveness and acquisitiveness characterised social life in the urban areas.

In the political realm, independent Malaysia was not that politically stable
having to face the problems of communist insurgency, communal politics and
racial disunity. The Malaysian Constitution no doubt contained several
provisions which unambiguously favoured the Malays but this did not gua-
rantee them political dominance. In fact, there was an apprehension among
the Malays that Malaysia would one day fall into the hands of the Chinese.
The fear was not that unfounded because the style of leadership of Malaysia's
first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al Haj, was conducive to
the promotion of non-Malay interests at the expense of the Malays'. In relation
to this, Funston notes that, the Alliance, which comprised of the United Malays
National Organisation (UMNO), the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and
the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) often,

... functioned essentially as an ad *hoc* arrangement, whereby non-Malay interests, particularly those of the wealthier classes, were well protected being in close, personal relationship which a number of influential non-Malays had with the Tunku. (1980: 17)

The opposition parties, in particular the People's Progressive Party (PPP), the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Malay-based Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP or PAS) also played up communal issues thereby, making it difficult for the various ethnic groups to be united.

The consequences of the economic and political trends outlined above were keenly felt by those Malays who flocked to Kuala Lumpur and its satellite town, Petaling Jaya, in search of jobs and education. In these towns, where they worked and resided, many of these Malays had to co-exist with people whom they were suspicious of, the Chinese and Indians, grapple with the problems of getting comfortable and affordable houses and internalise values of timeliness, competitiveness, acquisitiveness and individualism that were hitherto alien in the rural setting. Displaced from their rural base, the urban-based Malays could no longer rely on kinship bonds to regulate their social and religious life. In Kuala Lumpur at that time, Islam was minimally represented by a few mosques, the annual Quran reading competition (*musabaqah al-Quran* later renamed *Tilawah al-Quran*), and an understaffed religious bureaucracy. The city, which had cut for itself an image of being the most Western, modern and secular centre in Malaysia, therefore demanded that the Malays strategised accordingly, so they could come to terms with the demands of urban living, their non-Malay neighbours, with themselves and with their indigenous heritage. While a majority accepted the new situation without question, there were segments of the Kuala Lumpur Malay population who wanted to offer new perspectives of society and development through the medium of Islamic philosophy. These people initially formed loosely-structured groups which met regularly to discuss Islamic teachings, doctrines and history. A few of these groups later developed into religious movements, popularly referred to as *gerakan-gerakan dakwah*, that were committed to remoulding individuals and society according to particular interpretations of Islam. Al-Arqam and ABIM were two of these *dakwah* groups.

EXAMINING TWO DISCOURSES

JEMAAH DARUL ARQAM

The al-Arqam movement originated in 1968 as a small *jemaah* which met regularly in a house in Datuk Keramat, a Malay enclave in Kuala Lumpur, under the leadership of Ashaari Muhammad, to discuss Islamic teachings and history. Before it was banned by the Malaysian government in August 1994, the movement had been known for its numerous publication of clearly written

and well illustrated books, pamphlets, magazines such as *al-Munir*, *al-Mukminah* and *Nasihah*, novels, short stories, poems and greeting cards as well as the production of cassettes and video tapes of the speeches of some of its leaders. The characteristics of the al-Arqam movement were evident not in a single publication, but in the books that were produced between 1975 and 1993. Many of the books published between 1975 and 1983 focused on the importance of purifying and strengthening one's faith, while some of those produced after 1984, discussed the economic and religious principles underlying the ideal Islamic society, the weaknesses of existing religious leaders, and the appearance of the final renewer (*saiyudul mujaddin*) and the Hidden Imam. To illustrate the arguments of the al-Arqam movement, I examine a number of their publications, including the public lectures of Ashaari Muhammad, novels and short stories written by the movements' female members, poems and books by the al-Arqam leader written in Malay and English.

The al-Arqam publications did explicitly and implicitly illuminate the group's reform plans. The movement's literature taken as a whole was intended to define the Islamic ideal which was the creation of an egalitarian and just society as well as the method to actualise it. The latter involved re-reading the Quran and *hadith* and making a re-assessment of the lifestyle of the Prophet Muhammad and the classical *ulama*. The issue according to the al-Arqam leader was to make Malays realise that the purpose of society was to foster obedience to Allah. This task was essential considering that many Malays had deviated from the Islamic teachings, ideals and prescriptions in form as well as content. The signs indicating this trend were everywhere as many Malays had taken to accusing Allah of being unfair and unjust, claiming that the Shari'a was obsolete, downgrading the Prophet, sanctioning forbidden or *haram* acts and practices such as fornication, gambling and taking interests and illegalising Islamic institutions such as polygamy (Ashaari Muhammad 1992: 40-41). This state of affairs should be checked because of its harmful effects on the social life and identity of the Malays as Muslims. The al-Arqam literature as such sought to inform the people about Islamic history, how to purify one's faith of unIslamic habits, nourish one's inner self with faith or *iman* and other-worldly concerns and the importance of re-establishing the Islamic society that existed during the Prophet's time. Briefly, al-Arqam suggested that faith and not wealth or status was crucial in determining one's happiness. People who allowed themselves to be guided by reason (*akal*) and desires (*nafsu*), no doubt, could acquire immense wealth and high statuses in society, but they would not experience real bliss. Al-Arqam gave assurances that it was those people who strove to understand their inner self and constantly nourish the soul with spiritual matters would go to paradise.

In their thought, attention was also given to the de-Islamization process that was triggered by encounter with the West through colonialism. The al-

Arqam publications pointed out that Malays had adopted Western ideologies, traditions, habits and dress codes. As a result, they could not totally and unconditionally submit to Allah. Of particular concern to the al-Arqam movement when arguing against Westernization was the question of the emancipation of women. This phenomenon in their thinking was an essentially a feature of Western culture. The movement's views on this matter were expressed by its female members through short stories (*cerpen*) and novels. Although they differed in terms of plots, these stories were similar in that they all highlighted the experiences of Westernised Malay women who mingled freely with members of the opposite sex and did not observe the Islamic dress code. These characters finally repented after a chance encounter with a resurgent of the al-Arqam persuasion and abandoned their secular lifestyle for the Islamic one found in an al-Arqam commune. Here, the al-Arqam clearly suggested that women were preyed on and were themselves guilty of committing sins such as lewdness, adultery and promiscuity. In the al-Arqam scheme of things, women would be protected against moral degradation that accompanied Westernization through the bond of marriage. This whole notion of "protection" together with the belief that women's physical appearance (*aurat*) could stimulate men's desires accounted for the al-Arqam insisting its female members to put on gowns and veiling their faces.

Also significant in al-Arqam's arguments for reforms was their evaluation of the consequences of modernisation for the existing religious leadership. According to Ashaari Muhammad, secularism had caused the existing Islamic institutions to lose their appeal and rendered religious sciences unproductive. Most of Malaysia's *ulama* too had become worldly-wise in that they glorified their positions. In the book entitled *Ulama Dalam Pandangan Islam*, the al-Arqam leader took exceptions to the religious bureaucrats in Malaysia whose this-worldly orientation and dependence on the state had rendered *ulama* as well as religious schools ineffective in disseminating Islam to the masses (Ashaari 1992: 13-106). The challenge according to the writer was to put an end to the influence of these *ulama suk* or the worldly-oriented *ulama* and institutionalised instead *ulama akhirat*, who were not only otherworldly oriented but also selfless, righteous, free of state control, enlightened, responsible, prudent and discerning. It is obvious from its discourse on the characteristic features of *ulama* that, to the al-Arqam movement, the *ulama* status was not to be based on one's educational achievement or position in the official hierarchy, but something that was accessible to all those who were willing to struggle as the Prophet and classical *ulama* did for the Islamic cause (Ashaari 1992: 230; 234).

It was in relation to their exposition of the nature and role of *ulama* in contemporary society that the al-Arqam addressed the inter-related issues of the place of mysticism in the organisation and the coming of Imam Mahdi or the Hidden Imam. It must be pointed out here, that Ashaari Muhammad had

socialised his followers into thinking that Muslim saints (*wali Allah*) were the conduits for divine blessings and that they needed to perform the *zikir* which was peculiar to a local Sufi order or *tariqat* known as Aurad Muhammadiyah. It was in the controversial book *Aurad Muhammadiyyah Pegangan al-Arqam* published in 1986 and banned in 1988, that he made explicit the teachings of that *tariqat* and its messianic messages. Briefly, Ashaari Muhammad suggested that the founder of the *tariqat*, one Indonesian born Syeikh Muhammad Suhaimi bin Abdullah, had achieved the *wali* status and therefore, deserved to be invoked alongside the four righteous caliphs in the *zikir* as Muhammad al-Mahdi Khulafai Rasulallah. Not only that, he also said that Syeikh Suhaimi was not dead, but would one day re-appear as Imam Mahdi to help restore Islamic social order in this country and the surrounding region. Although the movement was forced to play down its messianic messages for several years because of the criticisms that the book invited from the religious authority, in early 1990 Ashaari resumed discussion on Imam Mahdi. The discussion was found in a book *Jadual Allah Untuk Umat Islam* published in 1992 in conjunction with the Silver Jubilee of the al-Arqam movement. The book began with a reiteration of the low moral standards and widespread malpractices and corruption in Malaysia. This, according to the author, was the state of confusion that was forewarned in the Quran. Since only members of the al-Arqam movement observed Islam faithfully, Ashaari then claimed that the calendrical renewer (*mujadid*) would come from amongst them. Invoking certain *hadith*, Ashaari then pointed out that the appearance of a renewer every one hundred years was inevitable. The 15th Islamic century too would have a renewer and the last one was to come from the al-Arqam movement, thus completing Islamic resurgence.

The al-Arqam movement also paid considerable attention to the nature and organisation of the alternative social system that it sought to establish. This system was referred to as *masyarakat salafusolleh*. Initial discussion about the nature of this society revealed a consideration of the moral implications of the changes that al-Arqam advocated. Thus the ideal society was described as one in which *ukhwah* or mutual love prevailed, women were virtuous and obedient, equality was the norm and decision making was based on consensus and the principle of *musyawarah*. As the movement grew in size and membership, in its thought about the ideal society, al-Arqam began to question the economic implications and morality of existing rural development projects that were based on the *laissez faire* system. This is evident in the following excerpt taken from a book which was originally a Ph. D. thesis submitted to Oxford University by one former member of the al-Arqam group:

Western-rooted approaches to rural development in Malaysia, as in many other Third World countries, resulted in the penetration and frequently alien concepts and practices in nation, social and economic development. Directly or indirectly, they altered the world-view of the locals and their life styles. The impact was especially great on the

Malays who were and remain the predominant groups of residents in the rural areas of Malaysia. Poverty has been, and to a considerable extent is, regarded as the main characteristic of these rural areas. (Muhammad Syukri 1992: 48)

So, as a reaction to this approach to rural development, al-Arqam argued for and institutionalised what it called the "villigization programme". This programme basically entailed the establishment of al-Arqam's own self-managed and self-contained villages throughout the rural areas in Malaysia (Ashaari: 93).

THE MUSLIM YOUTH MOVEMENT OF MALAYSIA

The Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM) was officially established in 1972 to help charter a new course for post-student activities along Islamic lines. Although still in existence, the movement is no longer a force to be reckoned with as when it was led by Anwar Ibrahim, then Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister. Anwar Ibrahim became the second president of ABIM in 1974. He held the post for eight years until 1982 before leaving the organisation to join UMNO. ABIM's proposals and agenda for reforms were evident in Anwar's speeches that were delivered at ABIM's annual assembly or *muktamar*, articles in the periodical called "Perspective", seminar papers written by its members, and the curriculum of its kindergartens, schools and training institutes. For purposes of discussion, I shall base my observations of ABIM's oppositional discourse on some of the speeches of Anwar Ibrahim and wherever necessary will supplement the arguments put forward in those speeches with comments and elaborations taken from working papers and interviews that addressed the same issues.

ABIM attempted to redefine both the Islamic ideal and method, which by means of re-reading the Quran and evaluating the contributions of contemporary Muslim thinkers, would eventually induce a "spiritual revolution". The issue was to ensure that Muslims participated in the "rising tide of Islam" (Anwar 1975: 19). As such, the leaders of the movement pro-vided its members and the masses intellectual arguments concerning Islam as a way of life or *ad din*, reflections of prominent thinkers and activists such as Sayyid Qutb, Maududi, Hasan Al Banna, Malek Ben Abi, Muhammad Natsir, Cesar Adib Majul and Syed Naguib Al-attas on past and current events in the Muslim world, the struggle of Islamic movements in Egypt, Pakistan, Turkey, Iran, Indonesia and Tunisia as well as current social issues in Malaysia that had yet to be effectively resolved. ABIM basically wanted the people to have a broader understanding of Islam as well as develop a new generation of Muslim youths that was dynamic, critical and god-conscious and capable of instituting changes in society. This generation of youth was referred to as *generasi rabbani* (Anwar 1981: 10).

The Islamic society, ABIM suggested was characterised by disagreement, conflict and divisiveness. The West had taken advantage of the situation to de-Islamize Muslims by making them adopt foreign practices, institutions and ideologies. Through colonialism, the West distanced the people from Islam in the name of modernisation and emancipation (Anwar 1975: 6-11). This was not surprising considering that the West had always hated Islam ever since their defeat in the Crusades and therefore, would go to great lengths to suppress Muslims. The British, Anwar pointed out, had long left the country. However, this did not mean that they no longer had any influence over the lives of the Muslims. As a matter of fact, the British had left behind Westernised intellectuals who not only regarded religion as a personal matter, but were also keen to modernise Islam, to adapt it to science and technology, without considering the spiritual aspect of development. As for the secularists, Anwar had this to say:

Pada mereka soal kebenaran, soal prinsip hidup boleh diubah-suai dan digadai menurut keadaan. Gulungan ini juga rata-rata berpendapat (mungkin berdasarkan pengalaman peribadi yang tidak dapat mengawal syahwat dan tuntunan nafsu), bahawa "permissiveness", kemaksiatan seperti rasuah, perjudian, dan pelacuran adalah satu kemestian dalam hidup dan mustahil akan dapat dihapuskan. (1975: 17)

(Translation: To these people, truth and principles could be adjusted and even sacrificed depending on situation. This group generally believed (probably based on their personal experiences and inability to control their base interests and animal instincts) that permissiveness as well as immoral acts such as corruption, gambling and prostitution, were a must in life and that it was impossible to eliminate them).

Aside from that, secularism which accompanied colonialism, had also produced ideologies such as capitalism, Marxism, socialism, racism and nationalism which were anti-thetical to Islamic philosophy for various reasons. Capitalism, for example, restricted the concept of existence to this world and encouraged materialism. Marxism denied the relevance of God, revelation and the values that emanated from Him. Zionism, racism and nationalism had the tendency to anchor people to ethnic groupings, thereby making it difficult for them to transcend particularistic ties to achieve unity.

Anwar then suggested that Muslims be made to recognise the *jahiliyah* syndrome that pervaded the Islamic society and as reflected in the dominance of Western-derived perspectives of history and development, the keenness on the part of certain *ulama* to be apologetic to the West, the easiness with which the Shari'a was rejected as in the case of Turkey under Kamal Attaturk, the readiness to fuse Islam, communism and nationalism as attempted by President Sukarno of Indonesia and a host of other incidences. Elsewhere in the world, he further argued, efforts were already underway to inculcate a consciousness among people, in particular among youths, concerning the need to Islamize modernity, to challenge the state and to strive to put an end to secu-

lar influences as demonstrated by Islamic movements such as the Ikhwan al Muslimin, Nursi movement and the Jamaati Islami.

Unlike the al-Arqam movement whose thought was drawn to the structure and organisation of a counter-system and counter-culture, ABIM paid much attention to the shaping of individual Muslims, who were essentially scholars and intellectuals highly committed to the Islamic cause. Siddique Fadhil, the third president of ABIM, described the ideal Muslims that the movement sought to produce as *insan akademis yang bertaqwa*. Briefly, such a person was someone who would not hesitate to accept the absolute truth as revealed in the Quran, would not uphold modes of thinking left behind by the colonial powers or forced upon him by a higher authority, disciplined, critical, and able to sustain his commitment to struggle for the Islamic cause. As a member of the organisation, such a person should be able to forge *ukhwah* with the other members and compete with others to do good deeds. More importantly, the ideal Muslim, according to ABIM, should strive to develop a new perspective of history, economics, society and other related matters to help the country overcome some of the pressing issues such as racial disunity and poverty (Anwar, 1975: 26). It was with respect to the development of the ideal Muslim that ABIM discussed the relevance of *tarbiyah* or education and *dakwah* or missionising as the means by which a self-conscious Islamic identity could be forged and activated (Anwar 1979: 27).

The question of women's participation in society also entered into ABIM's discourse and was addressed mainly by the women section or HELWA of the organisation. The movement's standpoint on women and society were evident in a single writing like the one that I shall examine. The writing is a working paper by Dr. Amriah Buang entitled "Wanita di antara krisis peranan dan krisis identiti" (1987). The writer began by pointing out that increased participation of Malay women in the economic and political spheres was itself not a problem. The problem, she said, stemmed from the fact that neither the state nor the people bothered to consider how the diverse and conflicting roles that women were playing could affect their self-definition. Since Islam was an integral aspect of Malay culture, it was imperative that Malays thought seriously how the religion could help in the identity formulation of Malay women.

Amriah then contrasted the positions taken by the secularists and the fundamentalist-conservatives on the matter. The secularists dismissed the effort to redefine women's identity in Islamic terms since whether or not a Malay woman wished to be identified with Islam was a personal matter. What was important to this group was how Malay women could access to positions of wealth and power through work and education. On the other extreme was the fundamentalist-conservative group which required women to focus only on domestic matters. Both stands, Amriah argued, had their shortcomings but agreed with the fundamentalist-conservative on making Islam a key variable in the identity construction of Malay women. Being a fundamentalist-

progressive group, Amriah suggested that women be regarded as the moral equal of men and like men were Allah's trustee on earth. Therefore, women like men should be ready to assume an active role in society depending on the situation. In Malaysia now it was imperative that women too participated in the Islamic struggle to annihilate *jahiliyah* as the religion was facing challenges from within and without. Amriah then extolled that society not only acknowledged women's role in development, but also constantly review the effects of development on their well being and image as Muslim women. In this regard, Amriah was referring to the need on the part of the women themselves to observe those rules that had been laid down in the Quran concerning covering their *aurat* and how to interact with men.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ISLAMIC OPPOSITIONAL DISCOURSES

Based on the preceding discussion, it is quite obvious that basic to the al-Arqam's arguments was the conception of a counter-culture and counter-society that was distinct from the capitalist, socialist or communist systems. The strong revisionist tendency of the movement was further reflected in the creation of Islamic villages, the justification for which was found in terms of neo-Sufi philosophy and economic radicalism and not in orthodox Islamic teachings. ABIM had no agenda for an alternative theology as the al-Arqam. Basic to its proposal for reforms were, first the conception of an Islamic system (*nizam*) which could be brought to fruition through an integration of Islamic princip-les, laws and rules in the existing social system; and second, the importance of highlighting the dehumanising effects of Westernization and secularisation.

Even though they differed in terms of history, objectives and organisation, the al-Arqam movement and ABIM shared certain common features. Both organisations were led by people without the desired qualifications in the religious sciences to be regarded as *ulama*. Ashaari Muhammad, though exposed to traditional Islamic education, merely completed lower secondary education in religious studies at Madhad Hishamuddin in Kelang. Anwar Ibrahim was trained in Malay Studies at the University of Malaya and did not undergo proper *madhad* education. Thus, their leadership deviated from the classical pattern. Also being exposed to the situation of post-independence Malaysia, the rapid rate of industrialisation, racial disharmony and the creation of an urban industrial society, the leaders of al-Arqam and ABIM entertained similar concern about the effectiveness of the state as the controller of Islamic solidarity and of political parties as instruments of popular discontent. As such, it comes as no surprise to find both organisations basing their reform agenda on the same premise, which was a criticism of secularism, its genesis, trend, consequences and future in Malaysia. That the al-Arqam movement and ABIM

had been able to garner large support from the urban-based Malay middle class clearly showed that there was in the 1970s a popular demand for alternative viewpoints on how Islam could help shape society. How al-Arqam and ABIM had been so persuasive will become apparent in the following discussion which will highlight the characteristics of their discourses.

First, it concerns the issues al-Arqam and ABIM chose to highlight. Although both movements were concerned with events taking place in other parts of the Muslim world, such as the wars, oppression, political disunity, neo-colonialism in Afghanistan and Bosnia-Herzegovina, both organisations were more intent on engaging Malaysians in a dialogue over issues that were familiar to them. These included poverty, emancipation of women, corruption, over dependence on the West, gambling and acquisitive lifestyle. During that time, these problems and phenomenon were covered in the local newspapers, books and lectures. In short, the issues were visible, grounded in the realities of Malaysian social life and subject of popular discussion among the Malaysian intelligentsia and some segments of the ordinary populace. More importantly, the issues were also capable of arousing intense feelings and charged reactions of the people.

The intensity of feelings surrounding the discussion on the role of *ulama* in modern times was quite obvious when the leader of the al-Arqam movement asserted that the *ulama* institution in Islam was very important in the attempt at restoring the glories of Islam in the present times. In simple but forceful Malay, Ashaari wrote "*Institusi ulama cukup penting dalam usaha untuk mengembalikan kegemilangan Islam di akhir zaman ini*" (1992: i). A similar feeling was apparent in Anwar Ibrahim's statement which chided *ulama* who merely issued *fatwa*. He said, "*Dalam menghadapi ancaman ini, amatlah tidak memadai bahkan satu naiveté bagi Muslimin (ulamanya) hanya mampu mengeluarkan fatwa ...*" (1975: 12). Again, the words chosen were simple but the implications of the indifference and worldly-wise attitude of certain *ulama* for the progress of the *ummah* were clear. Similarly, by insisting Malay women to cover their heads or adorn the *purdah* and linking it up to the distinctiveness of Islam as a religion concerned with morality and spirituality, al-Arqam's and ABIM's argumentation helped outline in no uncertain way Muslim culture against something that was foreign.

A second characteristic of their oppositional discourses was their use of deductive logic. In this, both al-Arqam and ABIM used reason to show that Islam contained eternal and universal truths that were favourable for human existence. Western culture and civilisation stood in drastic contrast to Islam because it sought to make people less human and more animal. In their argumentation, both *dakwah* organisations elaborated on the nature of man, of his reasoning faculty (*akal*) and his natural instincts or base interests (*nafsu*), of the soul (*roh*) and of divine qualities in him that qualify him to be made Allahs trustees on earth. Al-Arqam and ABIM then looked for evidence from

Western culture or the lifestyle of the secular and Westernised individuals which indicated that they allowed themselves to sink to the status of animals. Of the latter or "colonised intellectuals" as ABIM called them, Anwar Ibrahim once said that they were people *"tanpa ruh uddin and ruh ul jihad"* or people without souls and the desire to fight for the Islamic cause. This was because the Western – derived ideologies that they subscribed to had robbed them of the human qualities. Another feature of Western culture that was highlighted was the crisis of values that Anwar said many Westerners were experiencing and that left them quite confused. He said:
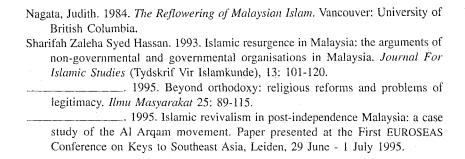
Barat kebingungan, merebut kejayaan benda tanpa matlamat suci dan oleh itu, mereka parah dan meraung kesakitan dan pasti akan meledak pecah lagi. (1975: 8)

The argument that the Islamic way of life was conducive to human life was an exceptionally strong one that both al-Arqam and ABIM kept coming back to in their discourses. The emphasis on manifest animality occasioned by secularisation and empathy with the West lent an emotive edge to their appeals for Malays to purify their thoughts of Western-derived ideologies and to return to Islam for what could be more degrading and degenerating for a Muslim than to be considered an animal, a follower of Satan. Thus adhering to secular practices, Western habits of not covering the female body, eating *haram* food, indulging in permissive sex, acquiring too much wealth, igno-ring prayers and other religious duties were activities that could lead to self-destruction and moral degradation. Therefore, reforms extolling self-sufficiency, critical thinking, respect and protection of women, active involvement in *dakwah*, creating Islamic villages, reassessment of the Islamic education system, enforcement of rules against gambling, adoption of the Islamic dress code and a host of other things became justified.

A third characteristic of the oppositional discourses was that it was reinforced by quotations from the Quran, *hadith*, scriptural texts and books. This feature was present in almost all the arguments presented by Al Arqam and ABIM regardless of whether they were making major or minor points. For example, to emphasise the importance of selflessness in all human endeavour, Ashaari Muhammad drew upon the story of Aisyah, the Prophet's wife who was willing to give away part or all the food she had on that day, which was a date. The story was then followed by a quotation of a relevant *hadith* enjoining alms giving (1983: 99). Similarly when discussing tolerance between the various races, Anwar Ibrahim drew upon a *hadith* which attested to the common origin of man from Adam and Eve and then citing from the Quran, a verse which discouraged people from hating and distrusting one another and acting in an unjust way to another human being. This technique used by the resurgents was exceptionally effective as it showed that they were knowledgeable of the sacred texts. Besides, it also lent credibility to their reform proposals as they were shown to be consistent with Quranic messages.

A fourth and final characteristic of al-Arqam's and ABIM's discourses was that they were arguments based on status not class. Both organisations did not make specific appeals to the economic interests of the Malays in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya. Although failure on the part of the government to address Malay poverty and the position of Malays as the economically less privileged group in the country relative to the Chinese, the use of the language of egalitarianism, democracy and social justice by al-Arqam and ABIM was intended more to denounce the West as a politico-cultural entity and the secular groups than to mobilise support against the rich people. Insofar as ABIM's discourse was concerned, there was virtually no element in it to show that the movement wished to alter existing economic relations in Malaysia. The al-Arqam did express open antagonism against the state when it turned cultic in 1980s. However, on closer scrutiny, its discourse on the coming of the renewer and the Hidden Imam was actually motivated less by an awareness of the economic disparities between the rich and the poor Muslims in Malaysia as by the growing tension between traditional and modern religious leadership (Sharifah Zaleha 1995). So it would no be far fetched to say that al-Arqam and ABIM merely used the rhetorics of class to appeal to true Muslims, not to a particular class of Muslims or Malays, to help them counter the West and the secularised individuals. Besides, both organisations were unconcerned with the latter's occupational and educational background and their implications for social stratification in Malaysia.

In relation to this, it is worthwhile to point out that membership in al-Arqam and ABIM was confined to middle class, urban and literate Malays. In the 1970s, the Malay middle class in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya was not yet consolidated culturally. Between 1968 and 1980, the state had not yet developed strong apparatuses in the two cities to impress upon the people that it was the definer of Islamic identity. Islamic networks in Selangor and the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur too were not well developed as in the northern Malay states. When the resurgents emerged, the Malaysian government was at first hostile towards them. It, however, did not suppress them and responded by establishing the Islamic Affairs Division in the Prime Minister's Department and the Dakwah Foundation of Malaysia in 1974 to help, among other things, co-ordinate missionising activities of the various agencies and individuals in Selangor and the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. Since an extensive Islamic network had yet to be established in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya in the 1970s, many people were drawn to ABIM and al-Arqam as sources of the teachings of proper Islamic social conduct. Being the two most influential *dakwah* organisations at that time, al-Arqam and ABIM together helped set the terms of the Islamic debate for the Muslims in the country. The debate focussed on religious and morality issues rather than class differences. In it, a discussion about poverty and corruption, for instance, was inevitably linked to that on moral degradation associated with

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Prof. Dr. Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan
Timbalan Dekan, Fakulti Sains Kemasyarakatan dan Kemanusiaan
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
43600 UKM Bangi
Selangor Darul Ehsan
Malaysia
e-mail: td 1 fskk@pkrisc.cc.ukm.my