



# The roots of 21<sup>st</sup> century Malay anger: When young men and women come to the fore

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## Abstract

*This article seeks to explain briefly to the reader about far right nationalist movements in Malaysia. While this is not a recent occurrence, it spiked during the time of Pakatan Harapan, the Opposition bloc that won the 13th Malaysia General Elections. Seeing non Malay/Muslim faces in the new government frightened many, even those who were against the former Barisan Nasional government. The paper is based on my current research on Malay youth identity of both genders, who are pushing the Malay narrative to the fore, as they demand their rights as Malays; Covid 19 has shown that economic opportunities are getting more scarce. The people I am studying and have spoken to feel that they have low social capital, and their uneasiness at seeing minority communities 'thrive' in Malaysia. What is causing this fear? This article posits economic reasons.*

*Keywords: Malay, far right movement, nationalism*

## **The Anger and Heartbreak of Young Malay Men**

Sometime in June 2021, I wrote an article for *Stratsea*, a Singaporean web-based magazine dedicated to regional security and politics. The article, which is the first part of this essay, was based on my personal observations since 2018, and I will write excerpts from the published article here, *Returning To Our Roots: The Anger and Heartbreak of*

## *Young Malay Men.*[1]

In the article, I wrote about the Tanjak Boys (young men wearing the traditional Malay headgear), when the Malay mass took to the streets to protest the new Malaysian government's ratification of the UN convention known as International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). UMNO, PAS and other NGOs felt ICERD was

contrary to the constitution, especially Malay and Bumiputra special rights. This happened in 2018, fresh after Pakatan Harapan's win and Barisan Nasional's loss at the 14<sup>th</sup> General Elections. After the post election euphoria, many Malays felt disconcerted by the sight of so many non-Muslims in the Cabinet. Malaysiakini.com (as well as other Malaysian media) reported that "... nearly 60 percent of the Malays surveyed were not happy with the performance of the Pakatan Harapan government." [2] The study, conducted jointly by pollster Ilham Centre and think tank Penang Institute, interviewed 2,614 Malay respondents between Oct 24 and Dec 24, 2018, showed that more than 60 percent of the respondents believed that non-Muslims were now in control of the government and that DAP was calling the shots in Putrajaya. This was not a reactionary sentiment among the Malays; in fact many Malays from all backgrounds were fearful that their rights as Malays and Muslims would be vanquished under Pakatan Harapan's rule.

Now who are these young men that you can see on their Instagram accounts, such as Bangsa Bertauhid, Tanjakbersayid, MisiRakyat, to name a few?

In my *Stratsea* article I wrote, "... they were Malay nationalists, but not really supremacists. As entrepreneurs, they were self-sustaining in the name of race and religion, and independent from

the state, gave back to charity. Wrestling back this identity that had long been politicised and hijacked by the powers that be and political actors, it solidified and increased their social capital and confidence, and provided a personal and professional '*Hala tuju*' (direction)."

"This (trend) was a pushback against what the state has deemed Malay identity and the Arabisation of *Nusantara Islam*, especially Wahabism and Salafism. *Tanah Melayu* seems to be in a constant state of colonisation; we had white masters before and now we have been living through Salafisation/Wahabi-sation of our language, culture and faith. It would be unfair to accuse our Arab forefathers of destroying ourselves as *Islam Nusantara* was also influenced by the arrival of the Hadramawt traders. The Malay Narrative must be brought back to the fore."

Now why have these young men and women embraced this identity? This is an on-going topic in our work: every interview IMAN Research\*

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\* In 2016 leading up to 2018, IMAN Research (IMAN) began a nation wide study on how (Malay Muslim) youths viewed their identity as Muslims and young Malays and their sympathy towards ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.) *The Assalamualaikum Dunia!* project revealed issues of identity, lack of social capital and angst, and these findings spilled over into IMAN's next study in 2019, *Believing in Extremism: What Drives Our Youths*.

We asked Malay Muslims between the ages of 18 to 35 who came from four different locations in Peninsular Malaysia. They also had varying degrees of education and socio-economic status. We chose this demographic because they represented 66% of the total population in Malaysia then, and were politically astute (there was 83% youth turnout for the 13th General Elections). They were also technologically savvy: 47% of them had more than one mobile phone,

has conducted with young Malay-Malaysians, we are told that the lack of social capital has made the young revert to an identity they feel ‘protects’ them. In fact, our year long project in 2016, *Assalamualaikum Dunia!* saw us meeting Malay youths of both genders aged 18 to 35 years all over the country, asking them how they felt being Malay and Muslim. In the era of ISIS’s influence in Malaysia, many young Malay-Malaysians turned to Islam, as being “Malay was seen to be corrupt, lazy,” but in the past five years, not only were Malay youths resentful of the non Muslim communities economic successes, they were also not comfortable with successful Malays. “They probably had connections with powerful people/they come from money, hence it is easy for them to gain employment,” were some of the comments.

They also felt immense pressure to assimilate religiously and ethnically, through language and religion and were brought up under strict religious

doctrines which may be xenophobic in nature, hence the reassertion of Islam as the only identity they have. Many commented on negative perceptions of Malays, “(We) Malays are seen as lazy, corrupt and weak. We do not want to identify with that, that is why we see ourselves as Muslims first.”

There certainly was anger towards the state and what they felt was an grievance towards society. The Low Yat Plaza Riot,[3] in 2015 was one example of how they felt that they were at siege; the rise in the belief of conspiracy theories was evidence that they could no longer believe in the state and society. Right wing rhetoric was increasing as they felt embattled by society.

They also expressed the following: Having very low feelings of empowerment. They had a strong yearning for space to explore intra-Muslims issues, interact with “others”, and “struggled” with issues. Again, they were cynical towards politics and the political process and acknowledged the politicization of religion in Malaysia. Religion was integral yet it’s a complex relationship, especially when in doubt. They were curious about the non-Malays, as cross-culture interactions regardless of class and geography was very low.

Despite the anger they expressed, Malay-Muslim youths that we interviewed could discuss contentious issues articulately and civilly, while

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and heavy users of Facebook (13 million used the platform).

While Malaysian youths represented 62.8% of the total workforce, there was negative growth in mid-income jobs. Many were unemployed. Their income was 40-50% less of the national average. 28% did not complete secondary schooling and juvenile crime was high. At school, they did not mix with other races. At the time of our focus group discussions, 200 Malay Muslims had joined ISIS. This was a higher ratio than Indonesia. More than 120 individuals had been arrested since 2013 from either trying to join IS or returned from fighting. There were also many educated Malay-Muslim women who had sympathy towards Syria and jihadists. Many could not differentiate between Syria and ISIS.

they grasped the complexities of the world and reconcile it with their Malay-Muslim identities. While most had an ideal view of an Islamic state, this was not demonstrated into a revolutionary zeal à la ISIS propaganda. Most do not agree with the violence. At the same time, their relationship with social media was a Catch-22 situation: they had strong negative views about it, “sensationalising issues,” yet still relied on it as a source of information.

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I have been asked as to whether this phenomenon was masculine. No, there are women who are now at the forefront of far right nationalism, and when one compares them to the Tanjak Boys, one would say that they are more angry.

### **Women at the Forefront of Nationalist Anger**

In a previous brief I wrote for IMAN Research, *Enabling Extremism*

*In Malaysia: The Rise of Capitalist, Far-right Muslims and the Prelude to Lipstick Jihad*, I wrote and discussed about how Malay-Muslim women were increasingly being socialised into a hardline brand of Islam. They were mainly middle to upper middle income professionals, who viewed themselves as Muslims first, more so than Malay-Malaysian. While it is undeniable that we have had Malay-Muslim women joining militant activities and groups, most of the women we observed are God observant, and cannot be perceived as extremists or radicals.

I am now beginning my study of a group of women who are defenders of Malay and Muslim rights in Malaysia. One example would be a female professor who is a visible personality; highly educated, fluent in both English and Bahasa Malaysia, and eloquent. She is a member of a few far right organisations. She is being used here as an example of how powerful she and women aligned with her ideology are. It was reported on social media that she discovered that a popular Japanese bookstore chain was selling books promoting the LGBTQ lifestyle to young people, and persuaded the bookstore to stop selling the books. That a woman, and Malay-Muslim, was able to impact the sales of an international bookstore chain, is formidable.

She also campaigned for Malaysia’s human rights body’s study on the third gender to be scrapped. In less than 12

hours, the campaign garnered over 30,000 signatures. This woman is powerful. She is educated. She is part of the New Muslimah of the 21st Century demographic, and if not already part of the T20 demographic, aspires to be part of the group.

The professor, together with her colleagues, pushed and organised a webinar on Islamophobia in July 2021. While the speakers were predominantly men, she was one of the organisers, steering the agenda across. The launch of the report was not just welcomed by those aligned with their values, but a number of human rights observers\*\* and liberals who attended the event on Zoom, agreed to some of the findings that they proposed, such as how the English speaking media would not publish their right-wing sentiments, which ran against the spirit of freedom of the media, and democracy.

So are Malay Muslim women the weaker sex, as many in the Western world claim Muslim women are?

### ***Some notes to consider***

In terms of gender equality, Malaysia is doing relatively well, with women accounting for the majority of students in public universities, and with nearly 32.3 percent of decision-making positions in public service held by women. They make up the majority of the Malay middle class. The Edge

Markets reported in August 2020, that “... bumiputera households made up 53.5% of the 1.72 million households in Malaysia that had more than RM10,000 in monthly gross income in 2019.”

WundermanThompson Intelligence in their 2017 report, described “... *The Muslimah* (Muslim women) demographic has money, is social media savvy, wants to look good, but religion is very important to them. “Nearly all say they pray five times a day; 94% say Islam is “very” important to them, ranking higher than family (92%), happiness (91%), and peace or serenity (89%),” the survey found out. The resurgence of public piety has made more and more Muslims, both men and women, very aware of the need to balance being religious and looking modern. They are also very well versed with the Internet.

According to *The Role of Malay Women in the Malaysian Workforce and its Impact on the Consciousness of Ethics and Integrity*, by Khalidah Khalid Ali, Department of Management and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS, Malay women represent the majority of the nation’s population and play diverse roles in the Malaysian community as students, parents, educators and professionals in both the private and public sectors. Malay Muslim women and their sisters are not just full participants in the labour force, but also in politics and activism. To note, in the civil service, women in

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\*\* Some of IMAN’s staff and colleagues attended the virtual event, and conceded Islamophobia was a concern

decision making is above 30 percent. They now contribute economically to household income, and also have a say in the religious instruction and education of their spouses, families and friends.

As you can see, (Malay-Muslim) women are impactful to Malaysia's productivity and well-being. As I said in my aforementioned brief, "Malay Muslim women and their sisters are not just full participants in the labour force, but their presence is noted: there are many notable Muslim politicians like Nurul Izzah Anwar, and her mother, the former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, for example, and many sit on boards of corporates and lead government-linked companies. To note, in the civil service, women in decision making is above 30 percent. Malay women are very active in community work too. And that they now contribute economically to household income, they also have a say in the religious instruction and education of their spouses, families and friends." [4]

There is growing piety among (middle-class) female Muslims but there are different actors, factors and different manifestations/ results, which we must acknowledge. In general, they are becoming more conservative, and some turn extreme and radical (but this also not only due to religious factors, but also social, political and economic etc), and not every woman becomes an

extremist.

## **Nationalism and Populism are Global**

What we are seeing in Malaysia right now, is also being experienced throughout the world. Populism, simply put, is a political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups. Right-wing populism, also called national populism and right-wing nationalism, as defined by Far-Right Politics in Europe and National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy is a political ideology which combines right-wing politics and populist rhetoric and themes. The rhetoric often consists of anti-elitist and anti-intellectual sentiments, opposition to the Establishment, and speaking to the "common people". [5], [6] The terms populism and nationalism are interchangeable.

Foreign Policy reported in January this year that,

"From Brazil to the United States, Hungary to New Zealand, right-wing extremist ideas and groups are posing a grave threat to democratic societies. Within this context, the ongoing support U.S. President Donald Trump receives from parts of his base despite the drop in his approval numbers and the riot at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 reflects the continued evolution of a global threat. As New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Arden emphasized after a right-wing terrorist killed over 50 people at a pair of mosques in her country, "there is no question that ideas and language of division and

hate have existed for decades, but their form of distribution, the tools of organization—they are new.” If there is any hope of repairing those divides and advancing equality, rule of law, an inclusive civil society, and respect for human rights, the United States needs to work with other countries and multilateral organizations to build a coalition to combat the growth and spread of right-wing extremism.”

Trump’s America was an obvious example, but this was also repeated in Europe, and seemingly liberal countries in Scandinavian, France, Italy. Even The Balkans is experiencing unrest, despite having gone through harrowing years of conflict, as reported by the Balkan Insight, “Bosnian Far-Right Movement Weds Bosniak Nationalism, Neo-Nazism”, published in June this year. IPSOS, the global market research and public opinion specialist, had just released its latest report in July, “Broken-System Sentiment In 2021: Populism, Anti-Elitism And Nativism,”[7] and its findings cement the sentiments of citizens from 25 countries of which Malaysia is included:

On average, 56% agree their country’s society is broken and 57% agree that their country is in decline. To fully grasp the prevalence of social and political disaffection, IPSOS designed the “System Is Broken” Index, based on the level of agreement with five statements:

- “The economy is rigged to favor the rich and powerful” (averaging 71% agree in the 25 countries surveyed)

- “Traditional parties and politicians don’t care about people ‘like me’” (68%),
- “Local experts don’t understand the lives of people ‘like me’” (65%),
- The country “needs a strong leader to take the country back from the rich and powerful” (64%), and
- “To fix” the country, “we need a strong leader willing to break rules” (44%).

In fact, Malaysia is second highest in the Nativism Index, sharing these sentiments with other countries like Turkey:

- 57% say employers should favor natives over immigrants when jobs are scarce,
- 38% agree their country would be stronger if it stopped immigration (while 33% disagree), and
- 38% say immigrants take jobs away from their country’s “real” nationals (while 35% disagree)

### **What’s causing these movements in Malaysia?**

Since independence, Malaysia has experienced a few incidences of racial/ethnic tensions that led to violence. One of the biggest incidents was the racial riots on 13th May 1969, also known as the 13 May incident – a sectarian violence between Malays and Chinese community in Kuala Lumpur. More recent incidents were the 2001 Kampung Medan riots, a sectarian

violence between Malays and Indians community that started in Kampung Medan in Petaling Jaya; the Plaza Low Yat riot in 2015, where Malay Muslim youths demonstrated violently by destroying property and beating up members from Chinese community; and most recently in 2018, the Seafeld temple incident, where a case of land acquisition for redevelopment turned into racial Violence.

In addition to the existing racial tensions among Malays and other ethnic minorities, there is also the perception of rising conservatism and ethno-religious sentiment among Malay Muslims in the country. A survey conducted by Merdeka Centre in 2015 revealed that 60% of Malaysian Malay Muslims identified themselves as Muslims first. A 2013 Pew Survey on global Muslim attitudes found that 86% of Malaysian Muslims believed that Sharia should be the official law of the country. These findings concur with another Merdeka Centre survey on attitudes towards Hudud among Malaysian Muslims, where 71% of Malays polled said that they supported Hudud laws. However only 30% of those surveyed said that Malaysia was ready for its implementation. Meanwhile in response to another question in Pew's 2013 survey, 39% of Malaysian Muslims was of the view that violence can be justified against 'enemies of Islam'. A 2015 Pew survey 5 reported that 11% of

Malaysian Muslims have a favourable opinion of ISIS, while 25% claimed that they were unsure. In comparison, 79% of Indonesian Muslims have an unfavourable opinion of ISIS, and 18% unsure.

If we are to consider the outcomes of these surveys, the experience of increased religiosity among Muslims in Malaysia is not without its nuances. While overwhelming support is voiced for ideas that conform to orthodox Muslim belief (e.g. Quranic criminal penalties), there is a lot of disagreement when it comes to its actual implementation. However the idea of a struggle against 'enemies of Islam' has some appeal as we've seen from Pew's survey results.

The reader must also take note of a wave of Islamic revivalism that began in the late 1970s and 1980s. Many Malay students on government scholarships studied abroad in the United Kingdom, America and Australia and of course the Middle East. Most of them came from middle class backgrounds as well as rural, and were exposed to global politics and different cultures and lifestyles when they studied there. The wave of Islamic revivalism and the Iranian revolution had indefinitely impacted these students. The rise of reactionary post colonial discourse and the emergence of Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood) against the backdrop of a volatile Middle East shaped the rise of Islamism in Malaysia and influenced

the trajectory of socio-political Islam in Malaysia.

Many far right nationalists point to many factors, such as the proliferation of the LGBTQ community, marginalised groups such as refugees and foreign workers taking away jobs, and minority Muslim groups such as the Shiite and Ahmadiyah in Malaysia, but the main argument they use is that despite Malaysia being independent for over 60 years, the Malays are still economically disadvantaged.

Sometime last year in August, The Edge Markets reported that bumiputera households made up 53.5% of the 1.72 million households in Malaysia that had more than RM10,000 in monthly gross income in 2019.

“Yet, being the majority at 69.3% of 29.38 million Malaysian citizens and 65.1% of 7.28 million households, the ethnic group ranks high in both things to be proud of, such as the most number of graduates and people earning high incomes, and areas that need to be worked on, such as relative poverty and graduate unemployment. Bumiputera individuals made up 62.6% of the 32.52 million Malaysian population, which included 3.14 million non-citizens of different nationalities (who collectively exceed the 2.01 million Malaysians who are Indian).”

The Malaysian Department of Statistics also reported an uptick in household and disposable incomes.

However, this does not mean that

Malaysia will be an upper income country, yet. The Edge Market’s Special Report: Why high T20 numbers may have scant meaning, pointed out that wealth seem to be concentrated in urban areas,

“It is interesting to note that 539,900 — or 37.1% of 1.46 million — households in Malaysia, which are deemed to be in the country’s top 20% (T20), live in Selangor. That is according to our back-of-the-envelope calculations based on data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia’s (DoSM) 2019 Household Income Survey (HIS2019).”

“More than half (53.8%) or 783,000 of Malaysia’s 1.46 million T20 households are actually in the Klang Valley, if we add the 539,900 T20 households in Selangor, 228,500 in Kuala Lumpur and 14,600 in Putrajaya.”

“Conversely, only 13.5% or 392,900 of the 2.91 million households that are deemed to be in the B40 group reside in the Klang Valley. About a third or 963,400 of the 2.91 million M40 households in Malaysia live in the Klang Valley. (The M40 are Malaysians who are deemed too rich” to receive government aid but not feeling particularly rich in the face of the high cost of living.)

“... (the) T20, however, does not necessarily mean that these households are rich or that the government automatically thinks they are rich. The threshold just happens to be the cut-off point for the top 20% households in Malaysia when looking at the income levels of the 7.28 million Malaysian households in 2019.”

Hot on the heels of the above, comes a rather damning report by UNICEF, Families on the Edge. “... the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

on women and children in low-income urban families in Malaysia, as well as the relevance, adequacy and accessibility of public policy responses to the pandemic. The project involved surveying 500 low-income households living in sixteen of Kuala Lumpur's public housing estates in May 2020, September 2020, December 2020 and March 2021. Given its focus on the residents of Kuala Lumpur's low-cost public housing estates, Families on the Edge is not intended to provide nationally representative data but rather aims to provide specific insights into the experiences of Malaysia's urban low-income families who comprise around 10 percent of Malaysia's population," the report began.

Adding to the matter above, young Malay men are angry at the lack of opportunities. In a paper by Lee Hwok Aun,[8] He wrote about how "... Unemployment has been rising among 20-24 year-olds, particularly in urban areas, and remains persistently high

among 15-19 year-olds. Male youth unemployment is notably high in Sabah, while female youth unemployment is high in most regions. While women's participation in Science, Technology and Engineering remains low, Aun noted that "... upper secondary and tertiary-level students found female respondents to be more career-minded than their male counterparts (KRI 2018).<sup>6</sup> Among tertiary students, larger shares of women compared to men regard work success with clear career goals as their main goal in life." In a patriarchal society like Malaysia, this is most shameful for many Malay men who are brought up to be the heads of households. Aun's study is supported by many others and media reports on the declining of Malay men's career and educational paths.

In a country where a particular race, the Malays, are regarded as the rightful heirs to the land, and Muslims at that, these findings are frightening and very real to them.[]

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