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ANALYSIS

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The Henry M. Jackson Foundation contributes funding to the *NBR Analysis* series.

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Printed in the United States of America.

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**Introduction:
Civic Platforms or Radical Springboards?**

Robert W. Hefner

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The essays by Ann Marie Murphy and Bridget Welsh in this issue are products of the third year of a project by The National Bureau of Asian Research on Islamic education and professional associations in Southeast Asia. The first two years of the project (2004–06) were dedicated to examining the varieties and socio-political impact of Islamic education in five Southeast Asian countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines.¹ The research encountered three broad trends: first, Islamic education is booming across the region; second, the dominant doctrinal and theological currents in Islamic education are not politically radical but instead are moderate or moderately conservative; and, third, the primary influence on the reshaping of Islamic education has been not politics but rather the desire of parents, students, and educators that Islamic schooling should provide practical and vocational education as well as religious instruction. Although Cambodia's Islamic schools have come under the influence of Saudi-influenced *Salafiyah* reformism, and although a few dozen radical institutions can be found among Indonesia's 47,000 Islamic schools, the trends in Islamic education across the region are broadly pragmatic and modernizing in orientation.

Building on the first two years of research, the project's third year (2006–07) focused on the relationship between Islamic education and professional associations in Southeast Asia's two large Muslim-majority countries: Malaysia (60% Muslim) and Indonesia (87.8% Muslim). The project focused on these countries because of their considerable influence in Southeast Asia and the broader Muslim world. There was also, however, a comparative policy and analytic background to the research aims of the project's third year. In Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine in the 1990s, the growing influence of Islamist groupings with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood in professional associations raised questions as to whether these associations—long regarded as critical segments in civil society—constitute a force for democratization or, alternately, have become sites for Islamist challenges to Middle Eastern regimes. The two options are, of course, by no means mutually exclusive. Some analysts have suggested that Islamist participation in professional associations tends to have a moderating effect on Islamist political aspirations; others, however, cite examples like Palestine's Hamas to suggest there is no

¹ For discussions of this research, see Robert W. Hefner, ed., *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, forthcoming 2008); and Azyumardi Azra, Dina Afrianty, and Robert W. Hefner, "Madrasa and Pesantren: Nationalist Ideals and Islamic Education in Indonesia," in *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, eds. Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 172–98.

single political-cultural outcome.² All sides in this discussion agree, however, that the movement of individuals with ties to groups like the Muslim Brotherhood has been one of the more important developments in state-society relations over the past twenty years.³

Against this scholarly and policy background, we set out to take the pulse of Muslim professional associations in these two Muslim-majority countries.⁴ Our aim was to examine more closely how Islamic professional associations shape their membership's attitudes and behavior, not least of all as regards attitudes toward non-Muslims and the place of Islamic law (*sharia*) in public life. Over the past quarter century in both countries, a new Muslim middle class has emerged and become a major force in society and politics. Two of the more striking characteristics of this new class are a heightened enthusiasm for higher education and professional careers and, no less significant, a heightened commitment to Islamic observance. The two characteristics come together in the social life of professional associations.

Muslims and Professional Associations

The project focused on what can be called the “commanding heights” of religious and professional association in fields where Muslims are well represented. Our aim was to assess the social profile of the main professional organizations and to examine their implications for Muslim views of pluralism, governance, Islamic law, and the West. Unable to examine all professions in which Muslims are well represented, the project instead focused on five: business, medicine, journalism, law, and education.

The evidence from our research shows a situation subtly different from that reported in the Muslim Middle East. The first and most elementary feature of professional life in Malaysia and Indonesia reflects a colonial and postcolonial legacy distinctive to these two Southeast Asian countries. Specifically, higher rates of participation in tertiary education have allowed large numbers of Muslims to move into professions

² See Janine A. Clark, *Islam, Charity, and Activism: Middle-Class Networks and Social Welfare in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); and Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

³ For a recent article to this effect, see Peter W. Moore and Bassel F. Salloukh, “Struggles under Authoritarianism: Regimes, States, and Professional Associations in the Arab World,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 39 (2007): 53–76.

⁴ My own work focused on educators in Indonesia and will be the subject of a separate book on Islamic education and democratization that will appear in early 2009.

and professional associations in which they were previously underrepresented relative to the numbers of Muslims in society.

In both Indonesia and Malaysia, Christians and Chinese have long been disproportionately represented in the professions and professional associations. The situation has changed since the 1980s and the 1990s, however, with the emergence of what has come to be known as the “new Muslim middle classes.” Whereas during the first decades of the twentieth century the Muslim middle class was concentrated in government and small and mid-size commerce, the last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed the formation of a new Muslim middle class oriented toward higher education and employment in the professions.⁵ By the 1990s that new Muslim middle class was wielding considerable influence in professional associations.

The social ascendance of the new Muslim middle class coincided with another development of far-reaching importance: a revitalization or “resurgence” in religious observance among the Muslim population. The signs of the resurgence were apparent in attendance at Friday mosque services, the swelling numbers of students taking part in evening religion classes, the growing numbers of women wearing the *hijab* (head scarf), and a host of other developments. Although the social repercussions of the resurgence were felt in rural society, the leadership and social center of the resurgence were predominantly middle class.⁶ The Muslims that moved into higher education and the professions during these same years were thus considerably more observant in their profession of the faith than a generation or two earlier. These Muslims were also more likely to use religious referents in the identity politics that increasingly figured in the political contests taking place in both nations.

These circumstances have led some observers to wonder whether something similar to a Muslim Brotherhood “capture” of professional associations in Middle Eastern countries might be taking place in Southeast Asia. At an elementary level there is clearly a similarity: a more self-consciously Islamic segment of the population is now joining of ranks of professional associations in which, prior to this time, Muslims were underrepresented. In several important respects, however, the situation of Muslims,

⁵ See Abdul Rahman Embong, ed., *Southeast Asian Middle Classes: Prospects for Social Change and Democratisation* (Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Press, 2001); Patricia Sloane, *Islam, Modernity and Entrepreneurship among the Malays* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999); and Richard Robison and David S.G. Goodman, *The New Rich in Asia* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁶ See Michael G. Peletz, “Ordinary Muslims’ and Muslim Resurgents in Contemporary Malaysia: Notes on an Ambivalent Relationship,” in *Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia*, eds. Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvatich (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 231–73; and Robert W. Hefner, “Islamizing Java? Religion and Politics in Rural East Java,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 3 (1987): 533–54.

professional associations, and the state in Indonesia and Malaysia is quite different from that in the Egypt, Jordan, and neighboring parts of the Middle East. For example, in Egypt and Syria the Muslim Brotherhood had long been one of the most dominant society-based Muslim associations, and the Brotherhood has a history of contentious interaction with the state that reaches back decades.⁷ The Islamic “turn” of the 1970s and 1980s was characterized by not merely a general increase in Islamic piety and identity politics but, more specifically, growing Brotherhood influence. Inevitably this influence resulted in growing tension between the Brotherhood and regimes that had long regarded the organization not as constituents to be represented or clients to be co-opted but rather as a threat. The movement of Muslim Brotherhood members into professional associations was thus part of a very particular political game, in which, blocked from other avenues of political participation, Muslim Brothers sought to use professional associations as platforms for public participation and criticism of the state.

In all of these respects, the situation in Indonesia and Malaysia was quite different. Indonesia has a long and proud history of independent Muslim associations—indeed the country’s Nahdlatul Ulama (with 35 million supporters) and Muhammadiyah (with 25 million supporters) are the largest Muslim social welfare organizations in the world. Both organizations have, however, tended to be “nationalist” rather than Islamist in ideological orientation, and are inclined to seek out avenues for cooperation rather than opposition to the government. Although Muslim political organizations were tightly controlled during the first two decades of Indonesia’s “New Order” government under President Suharto (1966–98), social welfare organizations enjoyed relative freedom at the time. As the Islamic resurgence gained momentum in the 1980s, the public influence of both groups increased. Significantly, however, in political terms the influence these organizations exercised was moderate or even broadly democratic in orientation; both groups, for example, lent support to the democracy movement that finally ousted Suharto in May 1998.⁸ Although in recent years the leadership of both organizations has fallen into somewhat more conservative hands, both groups remain broadly democratic in orientation.

⁷ See Mansoor Moaddel, *Jordanian Exceptionalism: A Comparative Analysis of State-Religion Relationships in Egypt, Iran, Jordan, and Syria* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); and Quintan Wiktorowicz, *The Management of Islamic Activism: Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood, and State Power in Jordan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

⁸ See Bahtiar Effendi, *Islam and the State in Indonesia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003); and Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

The less polarizing and more accommodating nature of Muslim-state interactions in Indonesia is also illustrated in the recent history of the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS), a moderately Islamist party that won approximately 7% of the vote in the 2004 national elections. Founded in 1998 by students who had studied in the Middle East, the PKS is arguably the largest political organization in Indonesia that models itself in part on Brotherhood ideals. From the inception of the party, however, the PKS has committed itself to supporting the country's fledgling democracy. As the party's influence has grown, and as PKS leadership has begun to strike deals with other political groupings, the group has if anything become more, rather than less, moderate in its social and political programs.⁹ As some among the party's membership have become active in professional organizations, these individuals have sought not to use the associations as spring boards for political opposition but instead to use such groups as vehicles for advancing their own distinctive mix of piety and professionalism.

The situation in Malaysia is somewhat different from that in Indonesia. In part because of the greater authority of the country's traditional aristocracy in the management of religious affairs, Malaysia has a less exuberant history of non-state Muslim associations. In addition, the ethnoreligious landscape bequeathed by British colonialism has dramatically inflected national politics in Malaysia. That heritage granted the Malay-Muslims (who today comprise approximately 60% of the population) dominant control over the state, even as the country's vibrant Chinese population (today at 24%) controlled the commanding heights of the economy. Malaysia's Indian minority (at 7%) occupied an awkward middle ground, lacking the economic clout of the Chinese but not provided with the affirmative action benefits with which the Malay-Muslim population benefited from 1970 onward.

In part because Malay-Muslims have official control of the state administration and in part because of the intensity of the Malay rivalry with the Chinese (and to a much lesser degree, Malaysian Indians), Malays have long tended to look to the government as their representative, patron, and protector in all manner of political and cultural affairs. As far as most Malays are concerned, this arrangement has worked well. This setup has, however, also guaranteed that national politics and Muslim cultural affairs continue to show the strong influence of Malay political rivalries with non-Malays. Although there are strict-constructionist Muslims of a more conventional Islamist cast, especially in the opposition party known as the Islamic Party of Malaysia (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, PAS), the state in Malaysia has long attempted to position itself not as an

⁹ See Anthony Bubalo and Greg Fealy, *Joining the Caravan? The Middle East, Islamism, and Indonesia* (Alexandria: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2005).

intractable opponent to Muslim groupings but rather as the patron of those willing to cooperate with the government.¹⁰ Along the way, the government has attempted to contain the influence of Islamist opponents in PAS who challenge the government's claim to be the best representative of Islam.

This overview of Islam and politics in Malaysia and Indonesia helps to explain just why professional associations in these two countries do not conform to the script seen in countries like Egypt and Jordan. Although religious and ethnic issues are at play in Indonesian and Malaysian professional associations, heightened Muslim participation is not oriented toward the capture of these organizations so as to use such associations to storm the bastion of the state. There are, after all, many more accessible and convenient avenues for political participation than these professional associations. Rather than battering the state, the movement of middle-class Muslims into professional associations has given rise to professional initiatives more in keeping with the ethnoreligious landscapes peculiar to these Southeast Asian societies. These initiatives have focused on trying to enhance Muslim representation in the professions, an end deemed worthy in its own right. These initiatives have also given rise to extensive public discussions of just what the relation of Muslims to the professions should be—in particular, whether the traditions of learning associated with each profession should be “Islamized.” This influence has cut both ways, however. The movement of Muslims into the professions has also spurred an entire discourse and literature on the need for Muslims to develop greater professionalism both in personal affairs and in the public organizations to which Muslims lend their support. Rather than being part of a radical strategy for state capture, the growing influence of Muslims in the professions therefore has more to do with the creation of the new Muslim middle classes. And a key concern of those classes has been how to balance personal identity as a Muslim with participation in the professions and the life of the nation. On these critical questions, the Muslim professional community remains divided, indeed especially so in Malaysia.

Muslims and Proportionalism in Indonesia

Ann Marie Murphy's essay deftly analyzes the complexities of these circumstances in the Indonesian setting. Focusing attention on lawyers, journalists, medical professionals, and businesspeople, Murphy concludes that the signs of growing

¹⁰ For more information on the Islamic Party of Malaysia, see Farish A. Noor, *Islam Embedded: The Historical Development of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS (1951–2003)* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysia Sociological Research Institute, 2004).

Muslim professional influence are overwhelming. She finds, however, that there is little evidence of a dominant Islamist¹¹ influence in the professional associations in any of these fields, even though in two sectors, law and business, a minority wing in the professional community has organized along confessionally based lines. Neither of these two latter organizations has sought to present itself as a religious or ideological challenger to the main professional organizations, however, and neither has attempted to use the associations as a platform for challenging the state. Most professional associations remain multiethnic and multiconfessional, even though the ascent of *pribumi* (“indigenous” in the Indonesian context, i.e., non-Chinese) to key leadership positions has been a major trend in most of the organizations in recent years.

Rather than pursuing an Islamist agenda, the primary social issue these associations address is the continuing ethnoreligious imbalance in the professions and economic life. Christians and Chinese-Indonesians have historically dominated Indonesia’s professions. Although comprising just under 10% of the population, Christians have been represented in some professions at three times that figure. The demand for “proportional” representation in government, business, and enterprise has been a rallying cry of even moderate Muslim parties in Indonesia since the 1950s. The calls became even more urgent in the 1990s, as growing numbers of Muslim Indonesians completed their education and began to pursue careers in the professions.¹² Murphy’s research confirms that proportionalist concerns play a key role in professional life in Indonesia but in a manner that is more majoritarian and quasi-democratic than religious in its terms.

The exceptions to these general trends are specialized subgroups (rather than major factions within their respective professions). In the field of law, the Indonesian Sharia Lawyers Association (Asosiasi Pengacara Sharia Indonesia, APSI) was created in 2003 and today has two hundred members. APSI’s primary purpose has been to advocate for the right of graduates from faculties of Islamic Law to work as practicing lawyers in Indonesia’s civil courts, from which historically they were barred. Murphy’s observations aptly underscore the broadly professional rather than *étatist* aims of this organization: “The group of sharia graduates who formed APSI argued that they too were lawyers and should be permitted to practice in any court as long as they had passed the bar exam and had fulfilled the same apprentice requirements that apply to all other lawyers.” Tellingly, Murphy adds, “From the perspective of APSI, the right to

¹¹ The term “Islamist” refers to a variant of Muslim political activism committed to the notion that all of state and society must be organized in a way consistent with the Quran and *sunnah* (the recorded acts and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad).

¹² See Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 140–48.

practice law in public court was motivated not by religious concerns but by a desire to provide more opportunities to a group that had traditionally been viewed as second-class lawyers.”

In a similar manner, the major professional associations in the field of journalism are broadly committed to pluralism and democratic press freedoms. Although Indonesia today has a lively and even radical Islamist press, there are no Islamist journalist associations, and there is no evidence of Islamist lobbies within the major journalist associations.

In medicine there is a larger and self-consciously Islamic presence, but in the main professional associations this subgroup has not hived off and created a distinct lobby. Muslim student networks and doctors have instead created two Muslim medical-assistance associations: the Indonesian Red Crescent and Mer-C. Both originated in the early 2000s in response to the perception that mainstream medical associations were not treating fairly the Muslim victims of the conflict in Maluku, where warfare raged from 1999–2003 between Christian and Muslim gangs.

In the business sector, the primary lines of cleavage have traditionally related to pribumi versus Chinese. As Murphy makes clear, non-Chinese Indonesians have long resented Chinese-Indonesian dominance in the economy, and many have demanded that the state adopt affirmative action policies to redress this situation (with many favoring the Malaysian model). During the New Order period, the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce (Kamar Dagang Dan Industri Indonesia, KADIN) was dominated by businessmen associated with pro-pribumi affirmative action policies, and few Chinese joined the organization.¹³ By contrast, today some 90% of KADIN’s members are pribumi and approximately 10% are non-pribumi. From Murphy’s research appears to suggest that relations between pribumis and Chinese have improved. Jockeying for government contracts is of course a key issue, but not one that has led to efforts to transform KADIN into a vehicle of Islamist interests. That the organization sent a delegation to Israel in June 2006 is one sign of just how little the Muslim-dominated Chamber of Commerce is beholden to such interests.

Murphy concludes her report with the observation that there is no evidence that Indonesian professional organizations are engaged in processes of recruitment and socialization of political and religious values in an effort to deepen the Islamization of society and politics. Her study does find, however, that groups of Muslim professionals are committed to social transformation. In the case of legal aid groups and supporters

¹³ Andrew MacIntyre, *Business and Politics in Indonesia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990), 43–50.

of Islamic banking, this goal is largely consistent with the values of democracy and pluralism. She does observe that *Sabili* (a radical Islamist newsweekly) is antithetical to these values. *Sabili* is a hardline Islamist weekly and internet newsprovider that at the height of the Christian-Muslim conflict in Maluku used sensationalist reporting on the violence to boost sales and mobilize support for conservative Islamist causes. A telling sign of the times is that the *Sabili* journalists never succeeded at channeling their “moment in the media sun” into broader influence in Indonesia’s professional journalist associations.

Malaysian Professionals and Ethnic Rivalry

Bridget Welsh’s essay on Islam and professional associations in Malaysia describes a situation with more complicated dynamics than in Indonesia. In the simple sense of the phrase, “Islamic” concerns loom larger in Malaysia than in Indonesia but do so in a manner that often is more related to ethnic rivalries between Malays and Chinese (and, to a significantly lesser degree, Indo-Malaysians) than to any Islamist agenda for transforming the state. Welsh points out that today Muslim professionals comprise over 40% of Malaysia’s professionals; the figure in 1970 was approximately 4%. The numbers of Muslims have increased in all five of the professions examined for this research: law, medicine, academe, business, and journalism. The change is in part the fruit of the Malaysian government’s ambitious affirmative action program for Malay-Muslims, a program that greatly heightened access to higher education.¹⁴

The ascent of the Muslim professionals has paralleled the emergence of a new Muslim middle class, the size of which is much larger than that of Indonesia. Also in contrast to Indonesia, the creation of a host of new professional organizations explicitly based on confessional identity has accompanied the movement of Malay-Muslims into the professions. These associations not only to represent the professional interests of their members but also represent the associations in national politics. Perhaps not coincidentally, Welsh observes, the activities of the Muslim professional organizations have tended to heighten ethnoreligious tensions. In the discussion that accompanied an earlier version of her essay, Welsh noted that demographic shifts and rising activism will likely expand the role of this new Muslim professional elite in shaping Malaysia’s socio-political landscape and make this group an even more important cohort in Malaysian life.

¹⁴ See Abdul Rahman Embong, *State-led Modernization and the New Middle Class in Malaysia* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), esp. 45–57.

Within Malaysia differences between Muslim and non-Muslim professionals have been reinforced by both state-sponsored affirmative action programs and the varying educational careers of professionals from different ethnic backgrounds. Whereas many non-Malay (especially Chinese) professionals have studied in the West, Malay professionals have primarily been trained domestically. They are as a result significantly less “Western” in educational orientation; in addition, in the medical field, a substantial percentage of medical professionals have received their training in the Middle East. Differences between the Malay-Muslim and non-Muslim professional groups have been exacerbated by the fact that Muslim professionals have come to play key leadership roles in the two Malay-dominated political parties, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO, the dominant party in the ruling coalition) and PAS.

The degree of Islamic influence, however, varies by profession. As Welsh makes clear, Islamic influence began earliest and is today greatest in the medical profession, where associations based on Islam emerged in the early 1990s. Since then Muslim professional organizations have also become active in the fields of law and business. The impact of Islamic issues has been sharpest in the legal profession, where Islamist professionals have pressed for a heightened incorporation of sharia into national law. In academia and journalism, by contrast, the main professional organizations are not organized around Islamic identities. In these fields, Islamic issues became increasingly important at the individual level but have had only limited organizational impact.

More generally, as Welsh points out, the professional associations have created new networks and organizations that reinforce a sense of Malay-Muslim empowerment. In an at least casual sense of the term, the socio-political changes to which the associations are contributing are democratic in the sense that they have expanded the opportunities for their members to participate in public life. The associations have also contributed, however, to the formation of a stronger sense of Muslim identity. Some among the professionals, as with some among the Malay political elite, have tapped this sentiment to promote a less inclusive vision of Malaysian politics and identity. The tension between more and less inclusive versions of professionalism, and between more and less inclusive visions of Malaysian society, is likely to figure in Malaysian professional life for many years to come.

Conclusion

Although the professional and ethnoreligious landscapes in Malaysia and Indonesia differ, they nonetheless present certain basic similarities. In both countries urbanization,

the growth of higher education, and, especially in Malaysia, state-sponsored programs of affirmative action have contributed to the emergence of a new class of Muslim professionals. Second, the movement of Muslims into the professions has not resulted in Islamist capture, such as that seen in Egyptian professional associations in the early 1990s. “Islam” has exercised a growing influence, but less as a force for a system-transforming Islamism than as a basis for a social identity posed in opposition to the non-Muslim minorities long dominant in the professions. Notwithstanding small groups of self-conscious Islamists (whose numbers are greater in Malaysia than Indonesia), the central concern of this politics is to provide Muslims with a broader share of economic gains, not to storm the heights of the state. Indeed, as Welsh and Murphy both show, on the question of the state, there is a broad range of opinion even among the more observant Muslims.

Although outsiders might see these intrusions of religious identity into professional life as indistinguishable from what took place in, for example, Egypt in the 1990s, the two cases actually differ quite substantially. In the Middle East Islamists have at times used professional associations to circumvent regime controls and even to challenge the ideological foundations of the state. There are a few small professional organizations, especially in Malaysia, that attempt a similarly oppositional tack toward the state. In general, however, Muslim professionals in these two Southeast Asian countries have sought to woo the state, in the hope of securing contracts, patronage, or affirmative action largesse. In sum, in both the Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian cases, the way in which Muslim professionals relate to the state reflects the legacy of the broader Muslim community’s relationship to the state.

Whether all this is good for “making democracy work” is, of course, another question. Chances are, as with professional and social welfare organizations in the West, most professional organizations in Indonesia and Malaysia will be more concerned with advancing the economic and professional interests of their membership than with nurturing democratic habits of the heart.¹⁵ Some commentators might suggest that the former is exactly what the organizations should do, leaving the big issues of state organization to politicians and elected representatives. Whatever the case, these organizations are likely to continue to play a critical public role. The standards of professionalism and the attitudes toward non-Muslims that such organizations inculcate will play a major role in determining the culture and aspirations of a Muslim middle class that now lies squarely at the heart of politics and culture in both of these countries.

¹⁵ For more details on Western professional and social organizations, see Steven Brint and Charles S. Levy, “Professions and Civic Engagement: Trends in Rhetoric and Practice, 1875–1995, in *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, eds. Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 163–210.

The Role of Professional Organizations in Indonesia's Socio-political Transformation

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Executive Summary

This essay analyzes Indonesian professional organizations in the fields of law, journalism, medicine, and business to determine whether these organizations have been captured by proponents of conservative Islam and whether the activities of these organizations are consistent with democracy, pluralism, open markets, and positive relations with the West.

Main Argument:

Indonesian professional organizations exhibit no evidence of Islamist capture. Instead, these organizations are undergoing dramatic institutional transformation as their members seek to overcome the Suharto-era politicization of the professions. At the same time, many Muslim professionals have embarked on social activism programs motivated by Islam's call for social justice: for example, doctors are volunteering in health clinics and lawyers are creating legal-aid organizations. With the important exception of the radical Islamic press, these activities are largely consistent with democracy, pluralism, open markets, and positive relations with the West.

Policy Implications:

- Narrowing the wealth gap between *pribumi* (indigenous) and non-*pribumi* Indonesians is fundamental to domestic reform. Programs supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) would raise the economic stake of indigenous businesspeople and help reduce demands for a state-sponsored redistribution of wealth, a measure that could be detrimental to pluralism and open markets.
- Press freedoms, one of the defining achievements of the *reformasi* (democracy) era, are under threat from social conservatives who blame such freedoms for creating spiritual pollution. If agreement cannot be reached between press advocates and social conservatives over the licensing of content that many Indonesians consider morally unsuitable, then press freedoms may erode.
- Indonesian legal reformers and businesspeople have called for greater legal transparency and professionalism among lawyers and judges. U.S. support for legal reform may be beneficial in reinforcing trends toward democratization, good governance, and a more stable legal environment for Western business interests.

Indonesia's socio-political landscape since the fall of Suharto in 1998 has been marked by two dramatic contests: first, the contest to consolidate democracy between *reformasi* (democracy) advocates and elites whose interests are threatened by an open and accountable government; and second, the contest between competing Muslim groups that are attempting to influence the country's political development in ways consistent with their interpretations of Islam. Suharto's successor, B.J. Habibie, abolished the 1985 Mass Organization Law that had prohibited organizations from adopting Islam as their *asas tunggal* (sole foundational principle).¹ This led to the creation of Islamic-based political parties, professional groups, and social-service organizations. Radical groups have also taken advantage of these freedoms.² The social aims of some of these groups are fully consistent with democracy, pluralism, open markets, and positive relations with the West, but others are not.

One of the thorniest issues facing Indonesia today is how to reconcile support for democracy with the desire of some Indonesians for an infusion of Islamic tenets into the country's legal code. This issue is at the heart of the debate over local *sharia* laws (Islamic law). On the one side are democracy advocates who argue that all laws must conform to Indonesia's constitution, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, religion, or gender. On the other side are conservative Islamic groups that contend that Muslims should be governed by sharia in all aspects of life, not simply in family law as is currently the case. Indonesia is engaged in culture wars over these issues, and how such debates play out will have important implications for the United States, which has a strong interest in an Indonesia that continues to consolidate democracy, promote social stability among the country's diverse population, keep markets open, and maintain good relations with the West.

Indonesian professional organizations occupy a strategic position in the country's social life, and their control, or capture, by Islamic conservatives or radicals would create an important platform from which to influence the country's political future. Yet there is no evidence of Islamist capture occurring. Moreover, despite the historical

¹ Azumardi Azra, *Indonesia, Islam, and Democracy* (Jakarta: Solstice Publishing, 2006), 16. During the Suharto era, all organizations were forced to adopt *pancasila*, a set of five guiding philosophical pillars intended to unite the country, as their foundational principle.

² For purposes of this essay, Islamic "conservatives" are those who emphasize the central tenets of Islam as unchanging and all encompassing and thus assert that Islamic education and law must prioritize only the study of the Quran, recorded acts and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (*sunnah*), and associated commentaries. Islamic "radicals" are those who need not be theologically conservative, but who insist that society and politics must be restructured according to the Quran and *sunnah*. See Robert W. Hefner, "Islamic Schools in Contemporary Indonesia: New Trends in Educational Culture and Politics," The National Bureau of Asian Research, Southeast Asia Education Survey Report, 2006, 6–7.

dominance of Indonesia's professions by Christians, who comprise just under 10% of the population, and by Sino-Indonesians, this ethnic imbalance is not the politically salient issue that it has been in the past. Muslim under-representation in the professions is a legacy of the colonial era when non-Muslims had greater access to education. This under-representation also reflects longstanding *pribumi* (indigenous) preferences for bureaucratic public sector careers and disdain for business. As a result, Sino-Indonesians account for 65% of nonfarm private enterprises and Christians own much of the Indonesian press. This imbalance has generated tensions in the past, and state-sponsored affirmative action programs to redress the imbalance have been attempted. At issue is whether affirmative action efforts are antithetical to pluralism or necessary to redress legitimate social grievances to preserve social stability in Indonesia's pluralistic society.

Today a divide exists between the activities of professional organizations and the activities of Muslim professionals devoted to social transformation. Professional organizations are working to dismantle the political controls of the Suharto era. The Suharto government used its authority to license lawyers, doctors, and journalists as a means of silencing dissent. The Suharto regime also often intervened directly in the affairs of professional organizations by installing loyal Golkar functionaries in leadership positions.³ Creating new institutional mechanisms to prevent future government interference has therefore been a key objective of Indonesian professional organizations, and many of these mechanisms would also prevent capture of the professions by Islamist political parties.

This essay has five sections. The first four sections respectively analyze the fields of law, journalism, medicine, and business. In each field, the essay identifies the key professional organizations and briefly discusses their activities during the reformasi era. Each section examines the creation of new professional organizations and activist groups that have adopted Islam as their *asas tunggal* to determine if the activities of such groups are consistent with democracy, pluralism, open markets, and positive relations with the West. The final section concludes the essay with a summary of the main findings and draws implications for policy.

³ For a discussion of how the Suharto regime funneled support to a slate of military lawyers in an attempt to wrest control of Indonesia's first bar association away from lawyers who were challenging the regime, see Daniel S. Lev, "Between State and Society," in *Making Indonesia*, eds. Daniel S. Lev and Ruth McVey (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

The Legal Profession

In the Suharto era, Indonesia's legal system was rife with corruption and, rather than serving as a check on state authority, the regime used the system to coerce and silence dissidents. Lawyers who challenged the rulings of corrupt judges or the regime more generally had their licenses revoked. There was no overarching law applicable to the legal profession, and membership in the seven bar associations then in existence was voluntary.⁴ Each bar association possessed its own code of ethics and was responsible for the code's implementation. In effect this situation meant that lawyers expelled from one bar association could join another and continue to practice.⁵

To standardize the legal profession and achieve independence from the government, lawyers and the bar associations actively lobbied for the Indonesian Advocate Law No. 18/2003. The law mandated the Indonesian Advocates Association (Perhimpunan Advokat Indonesia, PERADI), which was created on December 21, 2004, by the seven previously existing bar associations and the new Indonesian Sharia Law Association (Asosiasi Pengacara Sharia Indonesia, APSI). Membership in PERADI is compulsory for Indonesia's approximately sixteen thousand lawyers.⁶ The law transferred the authority to regulate the profession from the state to PERADI. Today, only PERADI possesses the authority to administer the bar exam, license and supervise lawyers, ensure that lawyers practice in accord with the Advocates Code of Ethics, and discipline members who fail to conform to professional standards. PERADI solicited the advice of the American Bar Association when drafting a new code of ethics. Efforts to avoid future political interference in the legal field are also embodied in a new regulation stipulating that if a lawyer becomes a government official or a member of a political party's executive board, that individual may not concurrently practice law.⁷ This regulation would prevent Islamist political parties from capturing PERADI.

The need to create a functioning regulatory body such as PERADI in a short period of time meant that the leaders of Indonesia's eight bar associations became the

⁴ "Report on Visit to Indonesia by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers," available from the Asian Legal Resource Center, <http://www.article2.org/mainfile.php/0502/227>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See Perhimpunan Advokat Indonesia, (PERADI) organizational information sheet, http://203.140.28.137/en/directory/data/E05-Indonesian_Advocates_Association.pdf.

⁷ Author's interview with Fahmi Asseqaf (Secretary, Central Jakarta branch, Asosiasi Advokat Indonesia, AAI), Jakarta, January 12, 2007. AAI is the second largest bar association in Indonesia.

organization's executive officers.⁸ Many lawyers view this process as undemocratic and would prefer PERADI leaders to be directly elected on the principle of one person, one vote. PERADI will likely hold competitive elections within the next four years. Once PERADI is past this formative stage, what role the other bar associations will play remains unclear.

The rights of sharia lawyers were a contentious issue during the parliamentary debates over the Indonesian Advocate Law. Historically, graduates with Islamic law degrees became judges in or practiced before the religious courts; sharia lawyers were not allowed to practice in Indonesia's public courts. The group of sharia graduates who formed APSI argued that they too were lawyers and should be permitted to practice in any court as long as they had passed the bar exam and had fulfilled the same apprentice requirements that apply to all other lawyers. Adnan Buyung Nasution, founder of the Indonesian Legal Aid Institute (Lembaga Bantuan Hukum, LBH), one of the first NGOs dedicated to human rights and democracy, appeared before parliament and argued against APSI's request, arguing that Islamic and civil law needed to remain distinct.

From the perspective of APSI, the right to practice law in public court was motivated not by religious concerns but by a desire to provide more opportunities to a group that had traditionally been viewed as second-class lawyers.⁹ In the end, the bargain that secured the rights of sharia lawyers to practice outside the religious courts was a pragmatic one based on professional opportunities rather than religion: APSI members would be allowed to practice law in civil courts and traditional lawyers would be permitted to practice in family law courts. With this agreement, divorce—a lucrative source of revenue for lawyers—became an area open to all lawyers.

APSI would like to see Islamic values infuse Indonesian law. For example, the Quran states that in cases of bribery both the individual offering the bribe and the individual receiving the bribe should be punished. This injunction is reflected in Indonesian law, which punishes both parties. Because the constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion, APSI officials do not view the incorporation of Islamic tenets into Indonesian law as a threat to democracy or pluralism.

Precise figures regarding the religious affiliation of lawyers are not available, but many lawyers argue that Batak Christians continue to be represented in disproportionate

⁸ Author's interview with A.W. Adnan (managing partner, Pholet, Adnan and Associates, and member of the executive board, Ikatan Advokat Indonesia), Jakarta, January 11, 2007. Ikatan Advokat Indonesia is Indonesia's largest bar association.

⁹ Author's interview with Muhammad Muslih (chairman, Asosiasi Pengacara Sharia Indonesia), Jakarta January 6, 2007.

numbers.¹⁰ Recruitment in the legal field contains a religious dimension, with Christians using long-standing networks to obtain jobs and share legal business. These networks should be viewed, however, in terms of “old-boy” social connections rather than religious socialization. Increasing demands for the infusion of Islamic law into Indonesian civil law carry long-term implications for the ability of Christian lawyers, who lack the credentials to speak on Islamic issues, to compete for business.

Legal Activists Working for Social Transformation

LBH is Indonesia’s most prominent legal-aid organization and traditionally has been at the forefront of efforts to expand democracy and protect pluralism.¹¹ LBH representatives use two key factors to determine whether to oppose local sharia laws. First, LBH examines whether the content of the law is discriminatory. For example, the Tangerang Local Regulation No. 8/2005, prohibiting prostitution and explicit intimacy such as hugs in public, is open to wide interpretation. Because the regulation is directed against women, the law contradicts the constitution, which prohibits discrimination based on gender. Since local laws are not permitted to contradict national ones, LBH will oppose those sharia laws that target one group. Second, LBH looks at the process by which sharia laws were adopted. No law should be imposed by the elite; instead, the public should have an opportunity to debate proposed laws. If a local sharia law applies only to Muslims and proves consistent with the constitution, and if the law has been openly and publically discussed prior to adoption, then the law is deemed to reflect the will of the people and LBH will not oppose the rule.¹²

LBH has a new ally in the Indonesian Advocacy Center for Law and Human Rights (Pusat Advokasi Hukum & Hak Asasi Manusia, PAHAM), which shares LBH’s conviction that human rights are universal but maintains Islam as the organization’s

¹⁰ Author’s interview with Muhammad Muslih. For historical background on ethnicity, see Daniel S. Lev, *Legal Authority and Political Evolution in Indonesia* (London: Brill Academic Publishers, 2000), 298.

¹¹ See the mission statement of the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation (Yayasan Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Indonesia, YLBHI) on the organization’s website, <http://www.ylbhi.or.id>. In 1980 the Indonesian Legal Aid Institute (Lembaga Bantuan Hukum, LBH) created the YLBHI in order to coordinate the activities of the various LBH branches. The foundation (yayasan) organizational structure was chosen in part to minimize the risks of infiltration by government agents or sympathizers, given that yayasans are governed by executive boards whose members need not be directly elected by their members. See Edward Apsinall’s case study of LBH in Edward Apsinall, *Opposing Suharto: Compromise, Resistance, and Regime Change in Indonesia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 100–12.

¹² Author’s interview with Asfinawati (president, YLBHI Jakarta), S.H. Gatot (director of Studies and Development, YLBHI), and Febi Yonesta (staff lawyer, YLBHI), Jakarta, January 5, 2007.

asas tunggal.¹³ Established in May 1999, PAHAM's goal is "justice for all," and the group promotes social justice by providing legal representation in class-action suits and through advocacy programs to educate and empower people regarding their rights.¹⁴ PAHAM has advised the parliament on a number of legislative issues but has no official affiliation with any other group. PAHAM was established as a foundation precisely to protect against other groups' attempts to exert undue influence over the organization.

PAHAM is currently working against several local sharia laws with LBH. PAHAM contends that when the two groups join forces on such issues, PAHAM can lend a distinct advantage because the organization has the Islamic credentials to criticize a law based on inconsistencies with Islam whereas LBH can only criticize a law's constitutionality. With some constituencies, the perceived legitimacy of PAHAM can be critically influential, although PAHAM's activities also trigger opposition from conservative Islamic groups. Consistent with pluralism, PAHAM's advocacy work argues for equality of all Indonesians before the law. PAHAM, for instance, was among a group of NGOs that condemned the 2001 church bombings and worked on a related fact-finding mission.

The Journalism Profession

Recognition as a professional journalists' association requires the following: a minimum of five hundred members, representation in one-third of Indonesia's provinces, a transparent executive board, a code of ethics, and verification by the Press Council. Today, only three organizations meet these requirements: the Indonesian Journalists Association (Persatuan Wartawan Indonesia, PWI), the Alliance of Independent Journalists (Aliansi Jurnalis Independen, AJI), and the Association of Television Journalists (Ikatan Jurnalis Televisi Indonesia, IJTI). During the Suharto era, the government required all journalists to join PWI, whose executive board was traditionally dominated by Golkar loyalists. In addition the government required that all publications obtain a publication license from the Ministry of Information and that media groups obtain a separate permit. The regime's use of these powers to silence critics was illustrated dramatically in 1994 when the government banned three of Indonesia's leading publications: *Tempo*, *Detik*, and *Editor*. In response, 58 journalists

¹³ Author's interview with Pusat Advokasi Hukum & Hak Asasi Manusia (PAHAM) staff, Jakarta, January 10, 2007.

¹⁴ PAHAM, organizational pamphlet, 2006. The pamphlet is written in Indonesian, English, and Arabic, demonstrating the organization's desire to reach out to domestic, Western, and Middle Eastern audiences.

created AJI. Despite being illegal and suffering intense government harassment, AJI was at the forefront of the reformasi movement, and the organization continues to be Indonesia's staunchest defender of press freedoms.¹⁵

Habibie freed the press with the Press Law No. 40/1999, which removed permit requirements for publishing and lifted restraints on the incorporation of media companies. The law also lifted the compulsory PWI membership for journalists, allowing AJI to operate legally. To revamp the television and radio industry, parliament passed Broadcast Law No. 32/2002, which created a new independent body, the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia, KPI), that assumed the authority previously held by the state both to issue broadcast licenses and to regulate the content of television and radio. Freedom from state control led to an explosion of media organizations: according to the Press Council, there are today at least 700 press outlets.¹⁶ Over 7,000 radio stations are in operation, 3,000 of which have been established since 1998. In the television industry, 70 stations have submitted applications since 1998, and the KPI has granted 37 of them licenses.¹⁷

In the reformasi era, AJI's efforts have been devoted to three key tasks: first, ensuring press freedoms; second, enhancing the professionalism of journalists; and third, promoting journalists' welfare so that these individuals are not tempted by the traditional "envelope culture" in which public figures pay journalists to write favorable stories or to refrain from writing negative ones. AJI contends that press freedoms cannot be sacrificed to pressures "either vertically (from the government) or horizontally (from civilian groups in the community)."¹⁸

Discredited in the early reformasi period due both to close links with the Suharto regime and to the failure to protest the government's 1994 press bans, PWI held a pivotal congress in 1999 at which the group pledged to restore the organization's professional reputation. One of the congress's resolutions maintained that an individual could be a member of PWI's leadership or a leader of a political party—but not both. Since then

¹⁵ For a fascinating discussion of how journalists attempted to balance the competing demands of publishing the news objectively while retaining their publication licenses, as well as a description of the 1994 publication bans and related debates, see Janet Steele, *Wars Within: The Story of Tempo, an Independent Magazine in Soeharto's Indonesia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005).

¹⁶ "Reporters Without Borders Annual Report 2007," Reporters Without Borders, February 1, 2007, http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=20786.

¹⁷ Author's interview with Dr. Sasa Djuarsa Sendjaja (commissioner, Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia), Jakarta, January, 9, 2007.

¹⁸ "AJI Profile," the Alliance of Independent Journalists, Jakarta, Indonesia, February, 2006, 6. Information is also available on the organization's website, <http://www.ajiindonesia.org>.

PWI has more than doubled the organization's membership to approximately fourteen thousand, 80% of whom are print journalists.¹⁹ To enhance professionalism, PWI strengthened the group's code of ethics and tightened membership requirements (e.g., candidates must now possess two years of journalistic experience and pass a test).

Muslim Journalists Working for Social Transformation

The expansion of press freedoms has led to an upsurge of Islamic press in general and the Islamic press's radical fringe in particular. The Christian dominance of Indonesian publishing houses has long angered conservative Muslim journalists, who chose not to protest the 1994 banning of *Tempo*, *Detik*, and *Editor* because these publications were not Muslim publications: "We Muslims need to be realistic about who our friends are and what we should support."²⁰ Despite growing identification with Islam, *Kompas*, a daily newspaper published by a Catholic enterprise, remains Indonesia's largest and most profitable newspaper.

Indonesia's radical Islamic press is epitomized by *Sabili*, a weekly news magazine that by 2000 had a circulation of over one hundred thousand, surpassing *Tempo* and making the publication the country's largest weekly magazine at the time. *Sabili* promotes a radical Islamic worldview antithetical to democracy, pluralism, markets, and the West. The magazine rails against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other international financial institutions for supporting capitalism, which the magazine claims suppresses Muslims, and advocates a Malaysian-style affirmative action program for Indonesia. The publication criticizes President Yudhoyono for being insufficiently independent of the West in general and the United States in particular. *Sabili* supports the local sharia laws and opposed Megawati's presidency on the basis of her gender. When asked why they chose to join *Sabili*, the editors answered that Indonesia "needed a Muslim magazine to defend Muslim interests."²¹ *Sabili*'s editors claim that the magazine has no formal relations with any political party, but prior to the 2004 elections *Sabili* openly supported the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS).²²

Sabili journalists are not members of AJI or PWI. According to the magazine's editor-in-chief, M. Nurkilis Ridawan, the journalists, though not opposing these

¹⁹ Author's interview with Wina Armada (secretary-general, PWI), Jakarta, January 5, 2007.

²⁰ Lukman Harun quoted in Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 164.

²¹ Interview with Ridawan and Hutapea (editors, *Sabili*), Jakarta, January 9, 2009.

²² Santi W. E. Soekanto, "The Western Media and the Prosperous Justice Party," *Jakarta Post*, June 24, 2005, <http://www.AsiaMedia.ucl.ac.uk/article?asp.parentid=26047>.

organizations, “have a different agenda.”²³ *Sabili*’s editors claim that their goal is to bring about social change by advocating greater economic and political power for the Muslim community in the media. *Sabili*’s circulation has been declining in recent years, in part because the conflict in Maluku that triggered a surge in readership has died down. *Sabili*’s influence on the attitudes of the broader Indonesian public, however, is more extensive than circulation figures might suggest. *Sabili* and like-minded publications such as *Hidayatullah* are often discussed in the informal gatherings of Islamic preachers, who meet to discuss the content of their Friday sermons at the mosques.

There is a disjuncture between Indonesia’s professional journalist organizations and the radical Islamic press: *Sabili* journalists do not join such organizations, and members of these organizations do not view *Sabili* journalists as “real” journalists. Indonesia is in the midst of an intense debate over the role of the press in Indonesian society. Many conservatives—both secular and Muslim—are dismayed by the vulgar content in many of Indonesia’s new gossip and pornographic magazines, the lack of regulations on the sale of such magazines to minors, and the airing of adult programming during the early evening hours. In battles over press freedoms AJI often finds itself at odds not only with Muslim groups but also with PWI and nonreligious figures who believe social decency requires a “responsible press.” AJI representative Eko Maryadi has observed that media groups such as *Sabili* will support press freedoms only to the extent that such freedoms are consistent with their interpretation of Islamic law and values. This often means that *Sabili* and like-minded journalists will protest state interference into Muslim affairs but not conservative attempts to rollback press freedoms. How Indonesia resolves these debates will portend significant implications for the future of democracy and pluralism in the country.

The Medical Profession

The medical field is undergoing a transformation designed to upgrade the generally poor standard of health services, reduce malpractice suits, and give the medical profession greater autonomy over the licensing of doctors. Indonesia’s overarching professional organization for doctors is the Indonesian Doctors Association (Ikatan Dokter Indonesia, IDI). Membership in IDI is compulsory for all Indonesian doctors.

²³ Author’s interview with M. Nurkilis Ridawan, Jakarta, January 9, 2007.

IDI has over 58,000 members and a network of 289 chapters throughout the country.²⁴ Data on the ethnoreligious composition of IDI members is unavailable.

IDI lobbied for the Law on Health No. 29/2004, which authorized the creation of a new, independent body, the Indonesian Medical Council (Konsil Kedokteran Indonesia, KKI), to perform some of the functions previously carried out by the government bureaucracy. The task of KKI is both to establish standards for medical education, health services, and doctor qualifications and to uphold ethics, discipline, and the law. The government transferred the authority to issue medical licenses from the Ministry of Health to KKI in April 2007. To obtain a medical license, doctors must pass a written test administered by KKI. If KKI finds a doctor competent, a five-year license is issued. To renew the license, doctors must repeat the procedure, and KKI will attempt to determine if the applicants have demonstrated any unprofessional behavior. Similar to the legal field, IDI supported the medical-services law as a means to better regulate the profession, raise professional standards, enhance the reputation of members, and better serve the needs of the community.²⁵

To overcome the dominance of Chinese and Christians in the medical field, in 1957 the government enacted a “pribumi first” policy that allocated 90% of the seats at public medical schools to pribumis. Today approximately 80% of medical school graduates are pribumi. Ethnic and religious tensions exist among medical students because graduates who wish to train in a specialty must first obtain the approval of the faculty of the specialized medical department, sometimes a very political process.²⁶ The legacy of Chinese and Christian over-representation means that networks dominated by these groups have considerable influence in determining who receives specialist training.

Public Health

The field of public health has undergone a profound transformation in the reformasi era, leading to a dramatic increase in the number of public health professionals, a significant expansion of the role of NGOs in the delivery of health services, and the growth of new educational programs to upgrade professional skills. Membership in the Indonesian Public Health Association (Ikatan Ahli Kesehatan Masyarakat Indonesia,

²⁴ “Earthquake in Indonesia,” Uplift International’s website, <http://www.upliftinternational.org/Java%20Field%20Report.htm>.

²⁵ Telephone interview conducted by Jajang Jahroni (author’s research assistant) with Siti Wayhuni (IDI official), Jakarta, February 16, 2007.

²⁶ Author’s interview with Dr. Fachrisal (Mer-C), Jakarta, January 10, 2007.

IAKMI) has doubled from approximately five thousand members in 1998 to nearly eleven thousand today.²⁷

During the Suharto era, the delivery of health services was extremely centralized, as was the education system that trained public health workers. Decentralization has meant that local governments now have the authority to serve the health care needs of their constituencies, and local officials are working closely with NGOs to provide health care. As NGOs expanded their services, the groups created a demand for well-trained public health professionals. Many local universities responded to this demand by creating new programs in public health. Approximately half of the students in these programs are working professionals seeking new skills, such as nurses pursuing degrees in health management. Because salaries in the field are low, students' tuition is often paid by their employer on the condition that the students continue with the same employer upon graduation.

Islam is playing an increasingly prominent role in the field of public health in a number of ways. One example is that many of the NGOs now engaged in the delivery of health services are affiliated with larger social organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. (Christian groups have also expanded.) A second example of this phenomenon is that some of the new educational programs in the field are offered at Muhammadiyah universities.

Medical Activist Groups

The Indonesian Red Crescent (Bulan Sabit Merah Indonesia) and Mer-C were both founded by medical professionals in response to a perception that the Muslim victims of the conflict in the Maluku Islands were not receiving the same access to medical care as Christian victims.²⁸ The Red Crescent and Mer-C have Islam as their *asas tunggal*, but both organizations claim to treat victims regardless of religious affiliation.²⁹ In the case of the Maluku conflict, representatives of both organizations went to great lengths to state their belief that hostilities were not triggered by religious difference but rather by outside provocateurs who inflamed the crisis for their own interests. In addition to disaster relief, both organizations also operate health clinics, and the Red Crescent sponsors health training, ministers to refugees, and runs clinics and youth programs. The doctors and medical professionals who staff both organizations are volunteers.

²⁷ Author's interview with Syahrul Aminullah (head of Human Resource Development, Indonesian Public Health Association), Jakarta, January 8, 2007.

²⁸ The Indonesian Red Cross is significantly larger than the Red Crescent and employs many Muslims.

²⁹ Author's interview with Dr. Fachrisal (volunteer, Mer-C), Jakarta, January 10, 2007.

Many doctors have indicated Islamic values as the main motivation for volunteering instead of working for a fee.

Mer-C is independent and has no formal relations with any political party or major social organization such as Muhammadiyah or NU. In some areas, political parties use access to medicine or medical services to attract people to political rallies. Although some of Mer-C's doctors often assist at these events, the doctors do so as private individuals rather than as representatives of Mer-C. The Red Crescent has links to PKS because the former head of the party, Hidayat Nur Wahid, sits on the organization's steering committee.³⁰ The Red Crescent's secretary-general claims no formal ties to PKS, however, though the organizations share a common mission. During the tsunami relief effort, Red Crescent officials, claiming that there was an oversupply of "do-gooders" who did not "speak the language," said the organization wanted all foreign doctors in Aceh to leave.³¹ Coordination problems in the Aceh relief effort have been well documented. Given the magnitude of the need, however, particularly in February 2005 when the statement was issued, the Red Crescent's call raises the question of whether the organization was acting in the best interests of the victims Red Crescent claims to serve or on behalf of the political party with whom the organization works closely.

The Business Profession

Resentment among indigenous Indonesian businessmen over the economic dominance of Sino-Indonesians has, throughout Indonesia's independence era, triggered debates over how to remedy this gap. Given the antipathy of both the Sukarno and Suharto regimes to political Islam, their affirmative action programs referred not to Indonesia's Muslim community but to the pribumi. Even though political Islam is now a potent force, many Indonesians prefer the term pribumi because they perceive the term as less socially divisive.³²

The prominent economist Thee Kian Wee has noted that the challenge for any government is to balance the legitimate aspirations of the pribumi majority for greater equality with the need to reassure Sino-Indonesian businessmen so that capital flight

³⁰ Hidayat Nur Wahid remains active in the PKS. He resigned his party position in October 2004 after being elected leader of the Indonesian Constitutional Assembly (MPR).

³¹ Andreas Harsono, "Indonesia Targets Foreign Doctors," *Asia Times*, February 3, 2005, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/GB03Ae05.html.

³² Author's interview with Harmon Bermawi Thaib (Kamar Dagang Dan Industri Indonesia), Jakarta, January 12, 2007.

does not impede economic growth.³³ Liberal economists argue that the solution to the wealth gap lies in promoting general economic growth: creating jobs, generating additional sources of capital, and assuring an equitable distribution of economic gains. In contrast “pribumi hardliners” would prefer pribumis to benefit from state largess. This group believes that open markets only exacerbate income inequality by providing greater opportunities for the most efficient group, Sino-Indonesians, to compete.³⁴ During the Suharto era, Indonesia’s leading business associations, the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Kamar Dagang Dan Industri Indonesia, KADIN) and the Association of Young Indonesian Entrepreneurs (Himpunan Pengusaha Muda Indonesia, HIPMI), were run by affirmative action advocates. In 1979 and 1980 Suharto issued a series of presidential decrees that gave the “weak economic group” priority in obtaining certain government contracts.³⁵ Over the subsequent decade, more than 52 trillion rupiah (Rp) worth of government procurement contracts were distributed to pribumi businessmen at the same time that total private domestic investment was Rp 15 trillion. The legacy of this policy was the creation of a politically favored, dependent pribumi business class.³⁶

During the Asian financial crisis, many Chinese conglomerates went bankrupt and the Indonesian Bank Restructuring Agency took over their assets. Leading advisors to Habibie argued that the crisis removed the grip of the Chinese on the economy and created a golden opportunity to enact a Malaysian-style redistribution of wealth from the Chinese to the pribumi. In the end, however, the IMF vetoed this plan.³⁷

Today Indonesia’s leading business associations are transforming themselves from patronage tools for their leaders into professional lobbying groups that serve the broader interests of their members. For example, HIPMI and KADIN have jointly lobbied the parliament and the Electricity Authority on the importance of stable supplies of electricity, given that power outages can drive manufacturers bankrupt. In an effort to professionalize KADIN, the organization’s current leader, Mohamad Hidayat, has delegated authority away from the historically political national executive committee and toward the local chambers and sectoral groups, a move that many businessmen long desired. In 2005 Hidayat signed a memorandum of understanding that called

³³ Thee Kian Wee, “Policies for Private Sector Development in Indonesia,” ADB Institute, Discussion Paper, no. 46, March 2006, <http://www.adbi.org/files/2006.03.d46.private.sector.dev.ind.pdf>.

³⁴ Adam Schwarz, *A Nation in Waiting* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 127.

³⁵ These were presidential decrees (*kepres*) 14 in 1979 and 14 A and 10 in 1980. See *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁶ Richard Robison and Vedi Hadiz, *Reorganizing Power in Indonesia* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 60.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 197 and 220n27.

for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to assist KADIN in strengthening institutional capacity.³⁸ As affirmative action has declined as a politically salient issue, KADIN is attracting more Sino-Indonesian members. One indication that KADIN is not beholden to Muslim interests is that in June 2006 Hidayat led a KADIN delegation to Israel. Indonesia has longstanding, discrete business ties with Israel but no diplomatic relations.

In 2001 Muslim entrepreneurs created a new business organization, the Network of Indonesian Muslim Entrepreneurs (Jaringan Penguasha Muslim Indonesia, JPMI), to enhance the skills and capacity of Muslim entrepreneurs through seminars, provision of credit via the organization's networks in the sharia banking system, and assistance in securing government contracts. Islam is JPMI's *asas tunggal*, and the organization wishes to promote Islamic business, which the representatives of the group contend means ethical business. JPMI maintains a code of ethics that includes not engaging in corruption or bad business practices, treating employees well, contributing to the broader community, and performing tithing (*zakat*). Social transformation, in this view, should be achieved through enhanced professionalism and ethical behavior. In contrast to pribumi hardliners who call for redistribution of wealth, JPMI does not advocate affirmative action programs but rather wants the government to promote small and medium-sized enterprises (SME). Arief Mauiana, JPMI's executive secretary, stated that capitalism is universal and should be viewed as a challenge rather than a problem.³⁹

Social Transformation in the Business Field

Many observers argue that the social reformers in the business field are those promoting sharia financial products, which aim to transform society by making credit available to Indonesians of all socio-economic levels. Sharia financial products operate according to the tenets of the Quran and sharia, both of which prohibit charging interest on loans and paying interest on deposits. Instead, depositors are shareholders in the bank and receive a portion of the revenues instead of interest. Similarly, a sharia bank becomes its client's partner. Over time the businesses make regular repayment of the principal borrowed and a percentage of the revenue to the bank. The need to track revenues means that sharia banks closely monitor their borrowers. The banks provide oversight and advice to companies that might not otherwise receive much

³⁸ "U.S. Chamber, Indonesian Chamber Sign Partnership Deal," U.S. Chamber of Commerce, May 26, 2005, <http://www.uschamber.com/press/releases/2005/may/05-91.htm>.

³⁹ Author's interview with Arief Mauiana (executive secretary, JPMI), Jakarta, January 7, 2007.

assistance, thereby helping to raise the professionalism and chances of success of a given enterprise.⁴⁰

The social mission of Islamic finance is also visible both in activities to promote SMEs and in the way larger institutions support smaller ones, ensuring that money trickles down to the neediest members of the Muslim community. For example, Indonesia's sharia banks, which make loans in amounts over Rp 100 million, will deposit a portion of their capital in the second tier of Islamic financial institutions, rural sharia banks, which typically make loans ranging from Rp 5 million to Rp 15 million and which fund smaller enterprises. The rural banks, in turn, will deposit a percentage of their funds in Islamic savings and loan cooperatives, which provide small loans, often termed microfinance, that range from Rp 100,000 to Rp 5 million. By extending credit to villagers who do not have access to the conventional banking system, the Islamic financial sector seeks to reduce the number of Indonesian villagers forced to rely on moneylenders who charge usurious rates, which often trigger a cycle of indebtedness from which borrowers never free themselves. In short, Islamic financial institutions seek to provide members of the broader community with a means to engage in economically productive activities and hence to lift themselves out of poverty.⁴¹

Conclusion

Democratization has triggered tectonic shifts in the fields of law, journalism, medicine, and business. Indonesian professional organizations are working to raise professionalism and ensure their independence from the state. Such organizations are professionally, rather than religiously, motivated. Toward this end, many professional organizations have adopted rules that prevent members from simultaneously serving on a group's executive board and that of a political party, a mechanism that will prevent capture by Islamist political parties.

In the legal and medical professions, there is an ethnoreligious dimension to professional recruitment, with law students using informal networks to obtain internships and medical students competing for seats at specialist facilities. These

⁴⁰ Warren Caragata, "Islamic Finance 101," *Asia Week*, July 21, 2000, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/asia>.

⁴¹ Interview with Dr. Muhammad Syafi Antonio (member of the Board of Commissioners at Bank Syariah Mega Indonesia and member of the Bank of Indonesia sharia financing working group), Jakarta, January 10, 2007. Whether the Islamic financial sector meets such social goals is an empirical question outside the purview of this essay.

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networks, however, seem devoted to professional advancement and not to religious indoctrination.

In the business profession, calls for a state-sponsored redistribution of wealth have died down. Rather than focusing on zero-sum solutions to the wealth gap, Indonesia's traditional business organizations and new Muslim associations are working to enhance their members' competitiveness. Proponents of Islamic finance are working to funnel capital and business expertise to the Muslim community. If Indonesia's economy continues to grow at an annual rate of over 6%, as it did in 2007, then an expanding economy may benefit the broader Muslim community and reduce demands for affirmative action. If poverty continues to increase despite impressive growth rates, however, then demands for affirmative action may grow. U.S. support for SMEs, the sector in which most Muslim businesses operate, could help enhance the capacity of Muslim entrepreneurs and give these businesspeople a greater stake in Indonesia's economy.

Islam is also motivating many idealistic Indonesian professionals to use their skills to promote social justice. For the most part, these activities are consistent with democracy, pluralism, open markets, and good relations with the West. The unfettered expansion of media content that many Indonesians deem morally unsuitable poses a threat to press freedoms. Political elites who benefit from a compliant press may view this threat as an opportunity to rally the broader public behind efforts to clamp down on the press. Public U.S. involvement in Indonesia's culture wars would likely backfire. Support for Indonesian groups that promote the values of tolerance and democracy, such as PAHAM and AJI, could bolster countervailing forces to radical Islam.

New Identities, New Politics: Malaysia's Muslim Professionals

Bridget Welsh

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Note: Special thanks is due to Robert Hefner, Ann Marie Murphy, and Mercy Kuo, who provided constructive feedback on this report and the research. This study would not have been possible without the assistance of Siti Rahayu, Chong Wu-Ling, and Desiree Hwang, who assisted in the collection of material. The author is also especially grateful to Philip Koh and Harris Mohamed who assisted in arranging critical interviews. This report is an abbreviated version of a longer, more detailed study forthcoming in 2008. Any errors that remain are the author's.

Executive Summary

This article examines Malaysian Muslim professionals working in law, journalism, medicine, academia, and business to assess both the degree to which Islamist capture has occurred and whether changing socio-political identities associated with Islam within professional organizations have affected democracy and pluralism in Malaysia.

Main Argument:

Amid a societal climate of growing Islamization, Muslim professionals in Malaysia have emerged as a new, powerful elite that has inculcated religious issues and concerns into its professional organizations. The number of Muslim professionals in Malaysia has grown, and the public engagement of this group has expanded. The emergence of this new elite has yet to translate into conservative Islamist capture, but rather has both fostered stronger networks among Malaysian Muslims and raised tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims. The creation of “Islamic space” among Muslim professionals has had a mixed effect on democracy and pluralism. On the one hand, the empowerment and growth of this educated, dynamic community of professionals has broadened political participation and expanded channels of engagement between the state and civil society. On the other hand, the views of Islamic governance articulated by some Muslim professionals have challenged the secular rights of Malaysians, contributed to ethnic tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims over the polarization of views on religious rights, and fostered racial intolerance. These conflicting trends are likely to continue as the number and importance of Muslim professionals increases in the future.

Policy Implications:

- Malaysia’s Muslim professionals will play a decisive role in charting the country’s future, particularly with regard to the political role of religion and the quality of political governance. As such, it is vital that the state engage this growing cohort in Malaysian society.
- It is important to open up debate within and among Malaysian professional organizations by expanding democratic space and community networks among Muslim professionals.
- Efforts to extend professional training and increase professional standards would serve to dampen the rise of inter-ethnic misunderstanding between Muslims and non-Muslims in professional organizations by providing a shared outlook and by reinforcing dialogue among professionals across ethnic groups.

A profound deepening of religious identity has occurred among all the major ethnic groups in Malaysia. Nowhere is this development more evident than in the Malay-Muslim community that now comprises the majority of the country's population and holds political power.¹ This deepening of Islamization in Malaysia began in the early 1970s, with the narrowing of political space in the wake of the 1969 racial riots and the emergence of political Islam as the populace's main vehicle for organizing and voicing concerns, and further extended from the 1980s onward as the state embraced Islam for political legitimacy.² In 2001 Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad called his country an "Islamic state"—a label that has reinforced the contestation over Islamic and secular values as one of the country's main political issues. The role of Islam in Malaysian politics has important implications for democracy and pluralism in that Islam shapes the rights, political values, and political participation of different communities and affects relations among groups in this multi-ethnic society.

Societal groups play a major role in shaping how this contestation over the role of political Islam will evolve. One of the most important groups in this dynamic is Muslim professionals. Throughout the Muslim world professionals play a vital role in influencing political values, often serving as a conduit that feeds into the formal political elite. From Egypt to Indonesia, lawyers, professors, doctors, journalists, and businessmen are role models and leaders in everyday life and have considerable influence in shaping norms and in setting the public agenda. Muslim professionals in Malaysia similarly play this defining role. Muslim professionals now comprise 40% of all the professionals in the Malaysia, up from 4% in 1970. The expansion in numbers and influence of Muslim professionals has coincided with the deepening Islamization in the country.³ How these professionals identify with their religion and bring religion into their professional lives has an impact on democracy and pluralism in the country.

This report examines the political impact of changes in religious identity among Muslim professionals in Malaysia and the extent to which professional organizations have been captured by conservative Islamist ideas. The report focuses on the

¹ The Muslim majority has control of the state and holds the dominant position of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in the governing coalition known as the Barisan Nasional (BN or National Front).

² For a broader discussion of Islam in contemporary politics, see Patricia Martinez, "Mahathir, Islam and the New Malay Dilemma," in *Mahathir's Administration: Performance and Crisis in Governance*, ed. Ho Khai Leong and James Chin (Singapore: Times Books, 2001), 120–60; and Patricia Martinez, "Islam, Constitutional Democracy and the Islamic State in Malaysia," in *Civil Society in Southeast Asia*, ed. Lee Hock Guan (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, 2004), 27–53.

³ These figures are based on interviews conducted in January 2007 and on data gathered from the Malaysian government's *Third Malaysia Plan* and *Ninth Malaysia Plan* (published in 1971 and 2006 respectively).

professional organizations in which Muslim professionals operate in their work lives. In other countries, such as Egypt, Islamist capture within professional organizations has brought curbs on rights, decreasing tolerance, greater isolation by Muslims toward others, increased tensions between groups of different religious interpretations (both among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims), and distance from the West, especially from the United States. In Malaysia, however, Muslim professionals have not followed this route. Although in all of the professions studied for this report Islamic space has been carved out and conservative interpretations of Islam have gained traction, Islamists have neither captured Malaysian professional organizations nor come to dominate the identities of Muslim professionals. The emergence of new networks and organizations has reinforced a sense of empowerment, broadened political participation, and forged a stronger Muslim religious identity. At the same time the presence of some conservative chords within Muslim professional organizations has led to tensions both among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims on the crucial question of the role of political Islam. These tensions have not only contributed to a polarization in Malaysian society over the role of religion in public life but also fostered inter-ethnic tensions and created a climate of intolerance for the non-Muslim community. The overall impact these changes within the Muslim professional community have had on democracy and pluralism in Malaysia has been mixed, as they have given rise to new ideas of citizenship and community as well as to conflict.

To illustrate how the new identities of Muslim professionals have translated into new political currents, this report maps Muslim professional organizations in Malaysia and highlights the main political effects of the growing number of Muslim professionals and associated larger Islamic space. Rather than organizing the discussion by individual profession, this report focuses on three key issues: (1) a topography of Muslim professionals and their engagement, (2) the nature and form of Islamic space carved out by Muslim professionals both within organizations and broadly within Malaysian society, and (3) the political impact of the deepening Islamic identity among professionals.

Topography of Muslim Professionals: An Expanding Presence

In Malaysia, Muslims make up 61% of the population and are predominantly Malay. Muslims traditionally have not comprised a large share of professionals, due to the relatively low economic standing of Malays and to their concentration in rural areas. Prior to the 1970s many Malays could not afford the overseas training that was necessary to obtain a professional degree. In the aftermath of the 1969 riots the

government implemented the New Economic Policy (NEP), an affirmative action policy targeted toward empowering the Malay community. Since the 1971 implementation of this policy—which has coincided with greater educational access for Malays, expansion of the Malay middle class, and urbanization of the Malay community—the share of Muslims in the professions has steadily increased.⁴ In the last decade the increase in Muslim professionals has been driven by a broadening in local training, continued preferential placement given to Muslims in local public universities, and demographic shifts that have resulted a greater number of Muslims in the overall population. Due at least partly to government scholarships and greater access to university education, the number of Muslim professionals in Malaysia has increased more than 1,000% from 1970 to 2005. **Figure 1** shows the transformation in the number of professionals over time. Similar increases have occurred in academia, business, and journalism, although the numbers are not recorded officially.⁵

The phenomenal increase in numbers of Muslim professionals has led to changes within professional organizations. The first is a major change in the composition of long-standing professional bodies. Traditional professional bodies in Malaysia range from those that were formed, usually along ethnic lines, before independence (for example, the Malay Chamber of Commerce) to those focused on maintaining and protecting professional standards in specific professions and unions. The share of Muslims in the organizations not formed along ethnic lines has increased sharply. In the Malaysian Bar Council, the premier body of lawyers in Malaysia, the share of Muslims has increased to 42%.⁶ The share of Muslim doctors is also increasing: the majority of doctors in the public sector and more than a third of those now working in the private sector are Muslim. Muslim membership in the key medical professional body, the Malaysian Medical Association, has risen sharply to more than a third.⁷ It is estimated that 85% of academics working in public universities are Muslim and that the number in particular universities such as the International Islamic University is even larger.⁸

⁴ See Abdul Rahman Embong, “Social Transformation, the State and the Middle Classes in Post-Independence Malaysia,” in *Mediating Identities in a Changing Malaysia*, ed. Zawawi Ibrahim, special issue, *Southeast Asian Studies* 34, no. 3 (1996): 56–79; and Abdul Rahman Embong, *State-Led Modernization and the New Middle Class in Malaysia* (London: Palgrave, 2002).

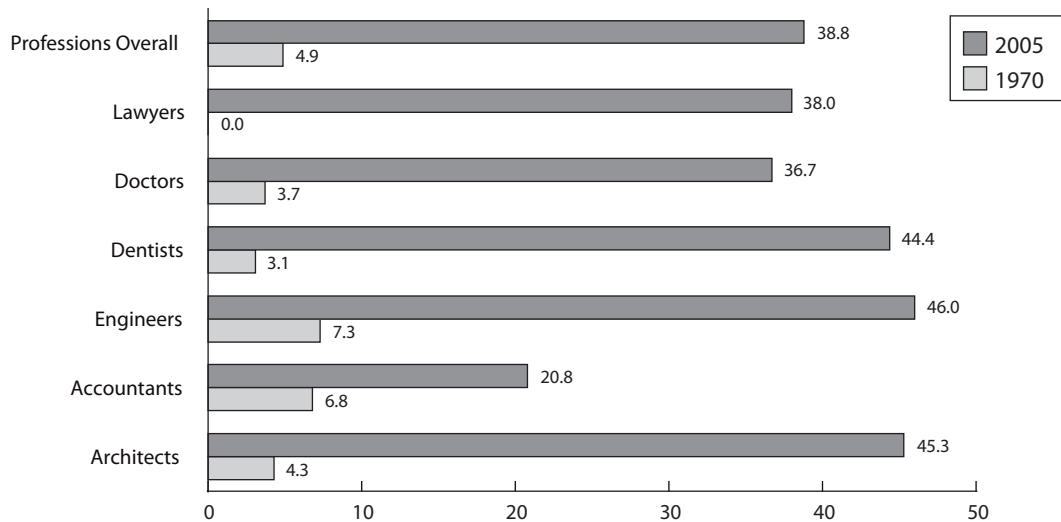
⁵ Author’s interviews conducted in Kuala Lumpur, November 2006 and January 2007.

⁶ Author’s interview with a member of the Bar Council of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, January 2007.

⁷ Author’s interview with a member of the Malaysian Medical Association, Kuala Lumpur, January 2007.

⁸ Interviews with Malaysian academics, including the president of the Malaysian Social Science Association and the deputy dean of the law faculty at International Islamic University (IIU) in Bangi and Gombak respectively, January 2007. The share of Muslims in private universities is considerably less, and was estimated by those interviewed at less than a third.

FIGURE 1 Muslim Share in Selected Professions in Malaysia (%)



SOURCE: Data from the Malaysian government's *Third Malaysia Plan* (1971) and *Ninth Malaysia Plan* (2006).

NOTE: Data for 1970 covers only peninsular Malaysia.

The main professional organizations for academics are unions in specific universities. On the whole, Muslims constitute the majority of the members of these organizations. Like academics, journalists have close affinities with their institutions of employment rather than with an umbrella professional body.⁹ The make-up of journalists as a group, however, is more ethnically fragmented due to the different languages of media in Malaysia. Although language orientation shapes the composition of the media, the share of Muslims in media is increasing. Muslims overwhelmingly dominate in the Malay-language media and now are employed to a greater degree in English-language newspapers, online media, and television. Business organizations are ethnically fragmented as well, although due less to language than to the colonial-era formation of the Malaysian private sector. Muslims traditionally were involved in agriculture. Due in large part to the NEP, however, since 1970 the number of Muslims in the private sector has increased sharply—by one estimate to nearly 40% of all businessmen in the country.¹⁰ Based on this estimate the number of Muslim businessmen entering the key

⁹ Author's interview with the editor of the Malaysia National News Agency (BERNAMA), Kuala Lumpur, January 2007.

¹⁰ Author's interview with the president of Persatuan Pedagang dan Pengusaha Melayu Malaysia (PERDASAMA), Kuala Lumpur, January 2007. PERDASAMA is a major Muslim business organization. Note that accurate numbers of Muslim businessman are not recorded, and due to the fluid nature of business, are difficult to assess.

Muslim business organizations has quadrupled since 1980. Aside from the ethnic-based organizations, in many major professional bodies Muslims do not yet the comprise majority. With the increase in sheer numbers of Malaysian Muslims, however, Muslims now comprise a significant share of these bodies and, as Muslim professionals rise through the ranks, will likely play a larger role in the leadership of professional bodies.

The second important change in Malaysian professional organizations is the prominent role and public engagement of Muslim professionals, through their organizations and individually, which has created a more visible role for Muslim professionals overall. Generally, Muslim professionals in Malaysia opt for public engagement in the existing pattern of their profession. Medical professionals consult on medical issues and concerns, often directly with the Health Ministry and out of the public view. This is in keeping with the Malaysian Medical Association norms.¹¹ Lawyers, in contrast, opt for a more confrontational and public approach with clear positions tied to principles and statutes. This reflects the Bar Council's style of engagement.¹² Academics and journalists engage in public life based on their personal capacities, since both professions lack cohesive professional bodies. Muslim businessmen establish connections, often driven by their needs for state access, capital, and contracts. Of all the professions, business is the least confrontational in style. Muslim professionals across professions play a key role in setting agendas and shaping debate related to such issues as appropriate professional standards for *sharia* law (Islamic law). In some cases Muslim professionals have been the driving force in forming other civil society groups to draw attention to issues. For example, Muslim professionals formed the Registered Malaysian Homeopathic Medical Practitioners Association (RMHMP) in 1984 and the Malaysian Public Health Specialists' Association (FSMA) in the early 1990s.

Many individual professionals have moved from civil society directly into formal politics. Although most Muslim professionals who run for office are lawyers and academics, a high share are from business and engineering as well. Collectively, professionals (including businessmen) comprise more than half the candidates running for office. For example, Zaid Ibrahim, who in 1985 founded the Muslim Lawyers Association of Malaysia, became a member of parliament for UMNO. Mohammad Hatta Ramli, a medical doctor and founding member of the Islamic Medical Association, is now the treasurer of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS). From the early days post-independence, Muslim professionals have entered politics. The contemporary pattern

¹¹ Malaysian Medical Association, *The History of the MMA: The First 35 Years* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Medical Association, 1995).

¹² Bar Council of Malaysia, *Justice through Law: Fifty Years of the Malaysian Bar, 1947-1997* (Kuala Lumpur: Sanon Printers, 1997).

is distinguished by the increase in the share of Muslim professionals running for office, as shown in **Table 1**. Muslim professionals have also assumed prominent leadership positions within political parties. Since 2004 professionals have come to dominate leadership positions in PAS. Although extending back to the 1980s when Dr. Fadzil Nor took over leadership of the party, this trend has deepened over the past few years. After the 2004 general elections professionals were voted into most of the important PAS party leadership positions, with the exception of the presidency. In short, the engagement of Muslim professionals in public life has expanded.

New Islamic Space without Islamist Capture

Perhaps the most significant transformation of Malaysian professional organizations is the creation of new organizations that reflect the growing importance of Islam. This has led to a distinct “Islamic space” carved out by Muslim professionals in Malaysia. Since independence Muslim professionals have been involved in organizations that have had a “Malay” identity, such as the Malay Chamber of Commerce, yet in these organizations religion was overshadowed by other ethnic concerns such as language. A gradual change took place in the 1970s, however, when political Islam emerged as an important part of social activism. Rooted in the student movement and coinciding with the expansion of educational opportunities for Malays under the NEP, Islam became a stronger marker of Malay identity. Many of the activists went onto professional graduate studies, studied abroad, and returned committed to incorporating their religious values into their professional lives.¹³ Some joined Jemaah Islam Malaysia (JIM), a non-governmental organization committed to expanding the role of Islam in society. In the early 1980s others formed the Muslim Professionals Forum (MPF), still the organization that most actively forges ties among Muslim professionals. Muslim professionals moved on to form Islamic-based professional bodies in specific professions, beginning in medicine with formation of the Islamic Medical Association (PPIM) in 1990. The process continued, extending to business in 1996 with formation of the Malaysian Islamic Chamber of Commerce (DPIM), an Islamic-focused business organization, and to law in 2000 with the Persatuan Peguan Syariah Malaysia (PGSM), or the Malaysian Sharia Lawyers Association, and later, in 2006, the Peguam Pembela

¹³ See Saliha Hassan, “Islamic Non-governmental Organisations,” in *Social Movements in Malaysia: From Moral Communities to NGOs*, ed. Meredith L. Weiss and Saliha Hassan (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 97–114; and Judith Nagata, *Reflowering of Malaysian Islam* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984).

TABLE 1 Malaysian Parliamentary Candidates with a Professional Background (%)

	1990			2004		
	Overall	BN ²	Opposition	Overall	BN	Opposition
Civil servant	18.5	22.3	10.6	9.0	14.2	3.8
Professional	28.2	28.5	27.3	39.8	41.0	38.6
Religious scholar/ Teacher	3.1	3.1	3.0	2.6	0.7	4.5
Businessman	20.0	21.5	16.7	20.7	23.1	18.2
Teacher/ Community leader	13.3	12.3	15.2	11.7	9.7	13.6
Other¹	6.7	5.4	9.1	6.8	5.2	8.3

SOURCE: Bridget Welsh and Ong Kian Ming, *End of Reformasi: Elections in Malaysia* (Forthcoming, 2008).

NOTE: For candidates that held more than one profession, the most familiar or most prestigious profession was recorded.

¹ This category includes those with a university degree only and excludes those with university degrees in other professions, such as “professionals.”

² BN (Barisan Nasional, or National Front) is the governing coalition that has ruled Malaysia since 1973.

Islam (PPI), or Lawyers in Defense of Islam. There are now an estimated ten specific “Islamic” national professional organizations, concentrated in law and medicine.¹⁴

The new “Islamic professional space” extended beyond the new organizations. As a result of the stronger articulation of Islamic identity, parallel institutional changes took place within existing multi-ethnic professional bodies. For example, in the 1990s an exclusively Muslim sharia committee that reports to the predominantly non-Muslim Bar Council leadership was set up to deal with issues of Islamic Law. Muslim professionals also expanded their activities in civil society. Female Muslim professionals comprise the leadership of the prominent advocacy group Sisters in Islam (SIS), founded in 1985. These groups have broadened the discussion of Islam in the legal community and women’s movement respectively, and this expansion has been driven by Muslim professionals.

Greater Islamic space within professional organizations coincided with the emergence of new concerns connected to religious identity. Particularly in the areas of academia, medicine, law, and business, both groups and individual professionals within organizations have used their platforms to draw attention to religious concerns.

¹⁴ Besides the six listed, the other organizations include the Muslim Lawyers Association, the Muslim Scholars Association, the Muslim Medical Specialist Association, and the Malaysian Red Crescent Society.

Of particular significance in Malaysia is the development of Islamic Studies—a field that has created an expanding core of academics focused on Islamic issues.¹⁵ The first Islamic Studies program was founded in the 1960s at the University of Malaya, followed by a program at the National University of Malaysia in 1970. When the International Islamic University was opened in 1983, it included the Faculty of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences and incorporated Islamic issues into other parts of the curriculum, notably law, medicine, and literature. In 1990 these programs were amalgamated to form the Academy of Islamic Studies (IPI). Subsequently, the expansion of Islamic studies was extended to the college level. The Islamic University College (KUIM) was formed in 1997, but due to the economic crisis did not enroll students until 2000. At present, seven states in Malaysia have Islamic colleges with trained faculty to teach religious issues and have incorporated religion into the general curriculum.¹⁶ Islamic Studies in academia now is vested with institutional interests, solicits funding and government support for discussion of a range of Islamic issues, and provides individual academics working in these programs a strong foundation for public engagement.

Professions outside academia are less institutionalized and raise a narrower range of issues but provide targeted and important inputs into public discourse. For example, PPIM lobbied the Malaysian Medical Council, the government body in charge of setting health standards and policy, to change how the hepatitis B vaccine was prepared.¹⁷ PPIM was concerned with the use of pigs in the development of the vaccine. From this initial concern, PPIM concerns later extended to management of the blood supply. More recently, PPIM raised concerns about the treatment of Muslim patients by non-Muslim doctors in discussion of legislation involving the monitoring of health care clinics.¹⁸

Concerns of the legal profession have revolved around the role of sharia law and the position of sharia law vis-à-vis civil law in areas such as family law, apostasy, and religious rights. There was extensive professional mobilization over the most controversial case, the 2007 Lina Joy conversion case, which effectively ruled that

¹⁵ Muhamad Muda, “Islamic Studies in Institutions of Higher Learning in Malaysia: Challenges and Prospects,” in *Islamic Studies in World Institutions of Higher Learning* (Kuala Lumpur: Kolej Universiti Islam Malaysia, 2004), 39–61.

¹⁶ These states are Johor, Kedah, Pahang, Perak, Melaka, Selangor, and Terengganu.

¹⁷ Author’s interview with a leader of the Islamic Medical Association (PPIM), Selangor, January 2007.

¹⁸ Author’s interview with a PPIM member, Gombak, January 2007.

Muslims could not change their religion.¹⁹ The PPI, for example, was one of a number of Islamic legal groups that submitted a brief opposing conversion. PGSM and MPF also submitted briefs opposing conversion. The case, while involving a person's right to change the religion listed on the national identity card, touched at its core on the deeply sensitive concern about apostasy within parts of the Muslim community and took place in a climate of increasing religious polarization.²⁰

With less controversy the business-oriented DPIM has actively engaged with the government on the promotion and regulation of halal (Muslim-sanctioned) products and in the dynamic area of Islamic banking. Due in part to lobbying and in part to the favorable reception of the government, Malaysia has emerged as one of the most competitive niche markets in Islamic banking.²¹

Specific religious concerns have been enmeshed in broader concerns about the well-being of the Muslim community, the *umma*. The resulting social activism has included international medical missions; increases in charity work, religious classes, and *dakwah* (proselytizing); and greater attention to injustice faced by Muslims. The activities of Malaysian Medical Relief Society (Mercy Malaysia), founded in 1999 with the stated aim of offering medical assistance abroad, are one example. The organization's leaders are Muslim doctors, many of whom are members of PPIM. Combined, these two organizations have sent medical teams to Maluku, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Aceh, Palestine, and Iraq.²² Their teams of Islamic doctors aim to treat Muslim patients, especially those who are fighting for the religion. These organizations receive funding for their missions through donations and Islamic charities and make public informal briefings before and after each medical trip. It is thus no surprise that Malaysia is one of the leading fundraising locations for Muslim charities in Southeast Asia.²³ Much of this philanthropy is driven by Muslim professionals who feel a moral and social responsibility to act for their religious brothers and sisters.

¹⁹ See Kerstin Steiner, "Islam, Secularism and Human Rights: The Case Study of Freedom of Religion in Malaysia" (paper presented at the conference Reframing Human Rights, Berlin, Germany, May 17–20, 2006), http://www.irmgard-coninx-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/archive/Kerstin_Steiner_III.pdf; and "Lina Joy's Despair: A Legal Blow to Religious Freedom," *The Economist*, May 31, 2007.

²⁰ See Bridget Welsh, "Malaysia at 50: Midlife Crisis Ahead?" *Current History*, April 2007, 173–79.

²¹ Author's interview with the chairwoman of the Securities Exchange Commission, Washington, D.C., November 2007.

²² Author's interviews with Mercy Malaysia and PPIM, Kuala Lumpur and Selangor respectively, January 2007. See also Mercy Malaysia's website, <http://www.mercy.org.my/about.php>.

²³ See J. Millard Burr, *Alms for Jihad: Charity and Terrorism in the Islamic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

In carving out Islamic space, many Muslim professionals have brought Islam into the mainstream of their professional lives. It would be a mistake, however, to equate their activities with Islamist capture. First of all, Muslim organizations in their totality comprise only a small share of professional organizations in Malaysia: within the major professional organizations, Muslims comprise less than half the membership. Additionally, Muslims hold even fewer of the leadership positions in these organizations than the membership numbers would suggest, since many Muslim professionals are comparatively younger than their non-Muslim counterparts. There is no Islamic capture within professional organizations characterized by Muslim dominance, nor is there Islamist capture characterized by dominance of a minority of conservative Muslims. Second, within these organizations the Muslim members' attitudes across a range of issues are extremely diverse. This is the case even within the more conservative organizations such as PPIM, PGSM, and PPI.

The picture that emerged from interviews with Muslim professionals, across the professions and on a range of issues associated with democratic governance and perceptions of markets and the West, was one of diversity.²⁴ Support for democratic governance was strongest among Muslim lawyers, with specific concerns for civil liberties, electoral fairness and participation, transparency, and accountability. Muslim lawyers joined businessmen and journalists in strongly supporting a multi-ethnic environment and a climate of tolerance and diversity. Muslim doctors, lawyers, and journalists were similarly strong advocates for open markets and a vibrant private sector. Interestingly, the Muslim doctors interviewed were perhaps the strongest advocates of the market-place. Negative views of the West, while expressed across the professions, were most consistently expressed by Muslim doctors, many of whom had studied in the West and gone on medical missions abroad to the Middle East. Yet overall the main finding was variation (see **Table 2**). Muslim professionals are diverse in political outlook, reflecting the pattern among Malaysian professionals and Malaysians as a whole. The findings suggest that professionals do not hold views on issues according to their specific professions. Training, professional experience, and professional networks may shape attitudes on an individual level but do not lead to consistent political viewpoints.

There is, however, an Islamist presence among Muslim professionals that cannot be ignored. Further research is necessary to assess the breadth of this presence. This study, drawing from fewer than a hundred interviews and positions articulated by

²⁴ Based on 80 interviews with leaders within professional organizations conducted by the author in November 2006 and January 2007. The use of snowball sampling was not systematic but provides an overview of the professions under review.

TABLE 2 Views of Muslim Professionals in Malaysia by Profession and Issue Area

Profession	Democratic governance	Pluralism	Role of Islam	Markets	Perception of West
Lawyers	strong	strong	varied	strong	varied
Doctors	varied	varied	varied	strong	negative
Academics	varied	varied	varied	varied	varied
Businessmen	varied	strong	varied	varied	varied
Journalists	varied	strong	varied	strong	varied

SOURCE: Author's interviews, Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, November 2006 and January 2007.

individuals in organizations publicly, found that pockets of conservative Islamic Muslim professionals are active in Muslim professional organizations and serve as influential role models. Conservative positions within Malaysia focus on two main areas: (1) Islamic law, which conservative advocates argue should be supreme to civil law within the Constitution; and (2) the rights of non-Muslims. Taking the view that Malaysia is an “Islamic state,” conservatives argue that the scope of rights allowed non-Muslims should be narrowed in such areas as behavior (drinking, food consumption, entertainment) and religious rights. These views were expressed by members of the Muslim Scholars Association, MPF, DPIM, PPIM, and PPI. Although these were views of individuals, not those of their organizations, the views were nonetheless strongly held.

Political Implications: Conflict with Empowerment

To assess their impact on democratic governance and pluralism, it is important to unpack each of the two controversial issues advocated by more conservative Islamist professionals. The role of sharia law, as outlined in Article 11 of the Malaysian Constitution, is secondary to the role of civil law. Sharia law is supposed to be applied only to Muslims and to be administered through state courts. This arrangement is in keeping with Malaysia's federal system and the traditional role of Malay sultans, who controlled individual states, in administering religion. With growing Islamization, religious administration (including legal administration) has both expanded in scope and become more centralized. The volume of cases involving sharia, especially child custody and divorce cases, has increased. It is thus not surprising that an estimated 40% of Muslim lawyers in Malaysia, approximately 2,500 individuals, practice sharia

in Islamic courts.²⁵ In the context of this expansion, sharia has also become politicized. Through 2004 the debate over political Islam in Malaysia was primarily a contest between a more “liberal” UMNO and a more “conservative” PAS. The push by PAS to implement *hudud* (Islamic law) in the two states it governed (Kelantan and Terengganu) intensified the public debate. Under Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, in power since 2003, the contestation has moved away from political parties to a struggle between civil society actors and the state and has included a wide range of issues from child custody to burial rights. Many of the recent cases involving sharia, such as the 2005 Moorthy Maniam burial, have involved non-Muslims.²⁶

The controversial unresolved issues embedded in the contestation over sharia involve implementation: which interpretation of sharia should be implemented, who should implement sharia, and who is subject to sharia provisions. PPI, PGSM, and MPF have regularly called for the expansion of Islamic law and labeled opponents of expanding the jurisdiction of Islamic law as either attackers of Islam or, in some cases, as infidels.²⁷ This polarization over the role of Islamic law has been decisive.

Consider the impact of divisions over implementation within the Bar Council. In 2003 the Bar Council split over the issue of the hudud laws introduced by PAS in the state of Terengganu. The Bar Council’s national committee declared that the hudud laws would be illegal.²⁸ Exactly one year later the Bar Council’s Sharia and Hudud Laws Committee endorsed the hudud laws, directly contradicting the central committee.²⁹ A member of the Sharia and Hudud Laws Committee described the contradictory positions as products of fundamentally different world-views.³⁰ This committee member is also a member of the PPI and MPF, and has submitted briefs on a number of cases involving religion. The conservative positions on Islamic law raise concerns about the rights of Muslims to practice as they choose and about the rights of non-Muslims, who perceive an increasing application of sharia in their lives.

²⁵ Author’s interview with the president of Persatuan Peguan Syaria Malaysia (PGSM) [the Malaysian Sharia Lawyers Association], Kuala Lumpur, January 2007.

²⁶ This case involved contestation over the conversion of a Hindu man to Islam and his burial. See K. Shanmuga, “A Summary of the Case and Related Events of Kaliammal Sinnasamy v. Islamic Religious Affairs Council of the Federal Territory, Director Kuala Lumpur General Hospital & Government of Malaysia,” December 29, 2005, http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/bar_news/berita_badan_peguam/re_everest_moorthy_.html.

²⁷ “Muslim Lawyer Forms Group to Defend Islam from Attack,” *The Star* (Malaysia), July 14, 2006, <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2006/7/14/nation/14835401&sec=nation>.

²⁸ “Lawyers: PAS’ Hudud Will Be Illegal When Gazetted in State,” *New Straits Times*, October 2, 2003.

²⁹ “PAS Version of Hudud Laws Gets Approval,” *New Straits Times*, October 2, 2004.

³⁰ Author’s interview with a member of the Sharia Committee of the Bar Council of Malaysia, Selangor, January 2007.

Tensions over Islamic law are compounded by public debate over whether Malaysia is an Islamic state as professed by leaders in both major Muslim political parties, UMNO and PAS. This has emerged as a serious and highly emotional issue since Mahathir's 2001 declaration. The 2004 main election platform of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) was to defend the secular rights of the non-Malays. In DAP's view expanding Islamic governance violates the constitution and infringes on the rights of non-Malays to practice their religion.³¹ In 2007 and 2008 issues linked to this debate have included the question of whether non-Muslims have the right to use the word *Allah*—denied to them to date by the Prime Minister, but pending in legislation³²—and the destruction of more than 3,000 Hindu temples in the last decade. Many of the destroyed temples were concentrated in the town of Shah Alam, which is “purifying” itself to earn the label of “Islamic City.”³³ The destruction of temples was one of the main reasons for the November 2007 mass protest in Malaysia by Indians who coincidentally labeled their movement HINDRAF (Hindu Rights Action Forum).

Conservative Muslim professionals have contributed to the public debate, often pushing for a larger role for Islam. For example, some Malaysian Muslim academics have opposed the use of the word *Allah* by non-Muslims.³⁴ These are members of the Muslim Scholars Association. The information minister, a former journalist, has backed this injunction as well.³⁵ While the role of Muslim professionals in public debate about the rights of non-Muslims is not as prominent as their role debating sharia, and Muslim professional organizations have not yet entered this arena full force, an increasing number of conservative voices are adding to ethnic tensions. Fundamentally, this issue is emotional because in the view of non-Muslims, who already have secondary citizenship status due to their minority position within the governing coalition, the push for an “Islamic state” deepens their secondary status.

³¹ Author's interview with Lim Guan Eng, secretary-general of the Democratic Action Party, Petaling Jaya, December 2007.

³² Patrick Lyons, “Allah by Any Other Name,” *New York Times*, January 8, 2008.

³³ P. Ramasamy, “The Hindraf Movement in Malaysia,” *Straits Times*, December 31, 2007; and Bridget Welsh, “Malaysia's November 2007 Protests: Challenge to Legitimacy,” East-West Center, Asia Pacific Bulletin, no. 6, December 21, 2007.

³⁴ Syed Ali Tawfik Al-Attas, “Kemelut pemikiran agama” [Crisis in Religious Thought], *Utusan Malaysia*, January 6, 2008. Dr. Syed Ali Tawfik Al-Attas is the Director of Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) and a member of the Muslim Scholar Association. In this article he argues that only Muslims have exclusive authority to decide how Bahasa Malaysia may be used for religious purposes.

³⁵ See Pauline Puah, “Different Faiths, Same Language,” *The Sun* (Malaysia), December 31, 2007, <http://www.sun2surf.com/article.cfm?id=20357>.

While the negative impact of conservative Muslim professionals cannot be ignored, it is important to assess the profound transformation within Muslim society in Malaysia more broadly. Muslim professionals have played an important positive role for democracy as well. As described above, the growth of a highly educated and motivated cohort of Muslim professionals has had significant positive effects on the quality of democratic governance in Malaysia. The participation of Muslim professionals both in traditional professional bodies and in the formation of new professional bodies has broadened civil society, creating new channels of representation and engagement. Professionals within organizations individually and collaboratively have forged networks and encouraged community-building in civil society. These networks have extended internationally in areas such as women's rights, legal jurisprudence, academic exchange, medical missions, and journalist training. The deepening of Islamic identity has served to break down other markers of difference among Muslims in Malaysia and has brought Muslim professionals from different regions, class backgrounds, and generations into a dialogue on how to address social and political issues. Not surprisingly, public engagement has intensified through the lobbying efforts of professional organizations, through increased social activism, and through increased entrance of professionals into formal politics. This broadening of political participation has strengthened the voices and engagement of Muslims and, in the process, extended democratic practices within Malaysia as a whole. The more vibrant civil society and the more educated, qualified candidates running for office offer conditions for a more representative government.

Conclusion

Muslim professionals have decisively carved out their own space in Malaysia. This space is "Islamic" in nature, in that religion is the central identifying marker for many of Malaysia's Muslim professionals. These professionals have increased in number over time, transforming existing professional organizations and forming new ones connected to Islam. They have actively transformed civil society and engaged publicly on a broad range of issues. Their networks are deep and broad, extending internationally. Muslim professionals are also increasingly entering formal politics. Although now a minority of professionals in Malaysia, Muslim professionals will in less than ten years comprise the majority of professionals. They already comprise more than half of the Muslim candidates running for office and play prominent roles in shaping norms in society.

This important group needs to be actively engaged. Muslim professionals should not be defined by the negative label of Islamist capture. Despite the common link of Islam, the political outlooks and perspectives of Muslim professionals are diverse. It is

important to appreciate this diversity. Malaysia's Muslim professionals interpret Islam with tremendous variation, and that variation extends into their professional lives. Consequently, among Muslim professionals there is a wide range of views that relate to democracy and pluralism. To maintain and enhance democratic discourse among Muslim professionals, it is important to support conditions and networks that open up the debate within and among Malaysian professionals.

There is, however, a vocal and active group of Muslim professionals who have a conservative view of Islam. This group wants to expand the role of religion in Malaysia in areas of sharia and more broadly in governance. The advocacy of this group has fostered tensions between Malays and non-Malays as well as within the Muslim community, where some feel that their own religious rights and civil liberties have been narrowed. To dampen the rise of inter-ethnic misunderstanding between Muslims and non-Muslims in professional organizations, it is important to create common ground among all professionals. One means to do this is to deepen professional training and increase professional standards. Training and standards provide for a shared outlook and reinforce dialogue among professionals across races.

The place of Islam in Malaysian politics is perhaps the most contentious issue facing the country today. This issue involves the rights of Muslims and non-Muslims, and is highly emotional and divisive in the country's multi-ethnic context. Muslim professionals have shaped and simultaneously become part of the public debate. Efforts to foster engagement, encourage debate, and build common ground are essential to assure that tensions over Malaysia's Islamization are reduced and rights for all communities protected.

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