

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Moderate” vs “Extremist” Muslims? How a decontextualized distinction can trigger a contradictory assessment of security and radicalization in Malaysia

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Abstract

This article demonstrates how the application of a broad and decontextualized distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims can undermine our assessment of an Islamic identity, security, and radicalization. It compares how this distinction has been used by the British colonial administrators (in Raffles, Crawfurd, Marsden, and Swettenham) in nineteenth-century Malaya and by Malaysia’s Prime Ministers (Mahathir, Badawi, and Najib) in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. This comparison demonstrates that both groups, despite their very different backgrounds (Western non-Muslim and Muslim non-Western), introduced a similar distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” driven more by socio-political objectives than by religious ones. Furthermore, the article stresses the importance of considering the socio-political and contextual dimensions of Islamic identity before attempting to explain the process of radicalization and its implications for security. Such an approach discourages reference to broad categories such as “moderate,” “extremist,” “Islamism,” or “Salafism,” and allows for discussion of their contextual and socio-political connotations.

Keywords: “Extremist” Muslims; colonialism; Islam; Malaysia; “Moderate” Muslims; radicalization; security

Introduction

The appearance of the distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims is elusive. For some, this distinction was generated by the media and academia against the backdrop of the Iranian revolution in 1979 (Islam and Khatun 2015). For others, this distinction gained momentum in the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist events, particularly in the field of security and radicalization research (Esposito 2005; Jackson 2007; Haddad and Golson 2007; Modood and Ahmad 2007; Neumann and Kleinmann 2013; Silke 2008). According to Jackson (2007), after 9/11 “a discourse emerged which is founded on the deployment of core labels such as “Islamism,” “extremism,” “radicalism” [...] which are organized into a series of oppositional binaries, such as extremists vs moderates, violent vs peaceful, religious vs secular” (Jackson 2007, p. 401).

However, this article highlights that the distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims is not a recent one but can be traced back to the nineteenth century in Southeast Asia. Then it proceeds to a historical study that demonstrates that a similar distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims was drawn by the British colonial administrators in nineteenth-century Malaya who distinguished between the Arab Muslims and the Muslims of SE Asia. This historical study reveals how the same distinction has been used by two very different agents (Western non-Muslims and non-Western Muslims) during different historical eras, aiming to address socio-political and economic objectives

and less so religious ones. Then it is argued how a decontextualized distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims can also trigger a misleading assessment of Islamic radicalization using Malaysia as a case study.

Specifically, the first part (I) of the article focuses on a historical analysis, highlighting that it is misleading to approach the notions of “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims from an exclusively religious angle without considering the socio-political and economic rationale that often produces this distinction. This part demonstrates how the distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims has been used by both Western non-Muslim agents (British colonial administrators) in the nineteenth-century Malaya as much as Muslim non-Western agents by reflecting on Malaysia’s political administration (Mahathir, Badawi, and Najib) in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This comparison will reveal that both the British colonial administrators and the Malaysian Prime Ministers, despite their very different background, introduced a similar distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” driven by socio-political objectives and less so by religious ones.

The second part (II) and third part (III) demonstrate how the application of decontextualized binaries which distinguish between “moderate-extremist” Muslims, “secularist-Islamist”, “conservative-modern”, and promote a parsimonious understanding of an Islamic identity. Then it is argued how this decontextualized distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims can also trigger a misleading assessment of Islamic radicalization. The analysis stresses how the notion of radicalization gained traction after the 9/11 events in the US and UK. Highlighting the geographical and contextual origins behind the scholarly debate on radicalization reveals that most approaches to radicalization were often policy-driven, corresponding to Western states’ governmental and security needs (Borum 2003; Moghaddam 2005; Silber and Bhatt 2007) while (mis)representing Islam via a restricting dichotomy between “moderates” and “extremists”.

The last part (IV) reveals how a decontextualized analysis of radicalization in Malaysia which is premised on the distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims risks essentializing religion, failing to effectively assess the Malaysian’s vulnerability to radicalization. Specifically, it is demonstrated how an assessment of radicalization which focuses on religion and a decontextualized understanding of “Salafism” risks triggering two diametrically different conclusions regarding Malaysia’s vulnerability to radicalization from the Islamic State (IS).

These insights aim to challenge the distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims, discouraging the theorists from proceeding to a decontextualized application of the notions “moderate”, “extremist”, or “Salafism” from an exclusively religious standpoint which conceals their contextual and sociopolitical complexities. Instead, Malaysia is used as a point of reference to demonstrate the importance of treating Islamic identities as context-specific and relational before assessing the vulnerability to radicalization.

“Moderate and extremist Muslims” in Malaysia: assessing the terms “moderate” and “extremist” beyond an exclusively religious angle

The origins of the distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims are elusive but this distinction is not a contemporary one. This part demonstrates that a similar distinction can be traced back to the nineteenth-century in Southeast Asia when the British colonial administrators distinguished between the Arab and the Malay Muslims (Mandal 2018). The following analysis assesses the distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims, using Malaysia and the British colonial rule as a point of reference to demonstrate that such distinction is much older and fueled by socio-political objectives instead of religious ones.

It proceeds to this conclusion by comparing nineteenth-century British colonial narratives on Malaya with the contemporary twentieth and twenty-first centuries policies of Malaysia’s Prime ministers who convey a similar distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Islam. This aims to compare two very different agents: (a) a “Western non-Muslim” and (b) a “Muslim non-Western” to understand their motives behind drawing a similar distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims.

Nineteenth century distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims in the Malay Peninsula (by Western non-Muslim agents)

Mandal (2018) observes that a distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims can be traced back to the nineteenth century in Southeast Asia when the British colonial administrators drew a distinction between the Arab Muslims and the Malay Muslims in South-East Asia. To be more precise most British colonial administrators (Raffles, Crawfurd, Marsden, and Swettenham) portrayed the Malay Muslims as “moderate” and the Arab Muslims in the region as “bigoted” and “intolerant.”

Since the eighteenth century, the presence of Islam and Arabs in the Malay Peninsula and Southeast Asia has been observed and scrutinized by most British colonial administrators due to its disproportionate socio-political influence among Malays with its implications for regional commerce. In the words of Crawfurd, the Arab settlers are “more considerable from their influence than their numbers” due to the transmission of the Mahomedan religion (Crawfurd 1820, p. 138).

The following analysis draws on the personal memoirs and historical accounts of four British colonial administrators (Raffles, Crawfurd, Marsden, and Swettenham), highlighting that all of them drew a distinction between the “moderate” Malay Muslims and the “intolerant” and “bigoted” Arab Muslims in the region. It will be explained how this distinction was – among others – driven by socio-political and economic concerns due to the increased influence of the Arab Muslims on every front (cultural–administrative–commercial) at the expense of the British colonial and commercial interests.

To begin with, Stamford Raffles associates the Malay origins with the arrival of the Arabs and their cultural influence in terms of language and religion. According to Raffles’ memoir:

The most obvious and natural theory on the origin of the Malays is, that they did not exist as a separate and distinct nation until the arrival of the Arabians in the Eastern Seas [...] the Malays, to have been gradually formed as nations, and separated from their original stock by the admixture of Arabian blood, and the introduction of the Arabic language and Moslem religion (Raffles 1835, p. 40).

At the same time, the rest of the British colonial administrators (Crawfurd, Marsden, Swettenham) observed too important differences between the Arabs Muslims and the Malay Muslims in terms of cultural traits and religious practice. The Malay Muslims are considered to be more “moderate,” tolerant, and less consistent with regard to their religious practice something which is also reflected both in terms of the local customs and laws as well as the Malays’ personality traits. Such moderation is often attributed to the multi-cultural and multi-religious geographical background of the Malay region before the arrival of Islam.

In the *History of Sumatra*, published in 1783, Marsden contends that there are differences between the practice of Islam in Sumatra and the Middle East, arguing that:

The Malays did not possess much of the bigotry commonly found amongst Western Mahometans (followers of Muhammad) [...] even in regard to the practice of ceremonies they [Malays] do not imitate the punctuality of the Arabs and others of mussulman faith [...] (Marsden 1966, p. 346).

A similar point is also shared with Raffles in the *History of Java* who contends that:

Islam is an intolerant religion that has been spread by the sword and this religion is antithetical to the mild temper of the native wards in the Malay world (Raffles 1835, p. 83).

A similar point is also made by Swettenham (1907) who portrays the Malay chiefs and the sons of soil as “not bigoted” (ibid: 32) in comparison to other Muslims while stressing that the Malay Muslims

remain more prejudiced and connected to their ancient customs, unlike the Arab Muslims, rendering the Malay more moderate. The same observation is shared by Raffles who associates the Malay Muslims' moderation with the influence of their pre-existing customs (predating the arrival of the Arabs) which contribute to the Malay's moderate approach in contrast to the more rigid Islamic laws. As Raffles explains, the absence of bigotry and inveterate prejudice leaves them [Malays] much more open to receive new impressions and adopt new examples. Whatever may have been their former religion, its character does not appear to have been deeply imprinted, and they [Malays] have *carried the same moderate and temperate spirit into their new faith* [my emphasis] (Raffles 1835, p. 20).

Raffles demonstrates how the contest between the new Islamic laws of the Arabs and the pre-existing customs of the region can explain the Malays' moderate approach to faith but importantly this also reveals a conflict of interest in terms of socio-political influence between the Haji's and the adherents of the old Malay customs. Specifically, Raffles observes the struggle between the "adherents of the old Malay usages and the Hajis" (Raffles 1835, p. 80) which generates an antagonism between the latter who wish to impose the rigid Arab Islamic law to the pre-existing local customs and the former who wish to preserve the pre-existing ones (*ibid*). At the same time, Raffles explains how the Malays' moderate approach to religion can become an opportunity to promote the British interests, arguing that:

This mixture of religions and tribes has tended, to some degree, to *soften the intolerance of the Moslem religion among the Malay nations* [my emphasis], and neither the positive authority of Islam nor the persuasions of their Arab teachers, have hitherto been able to induce them to abandon their own peculiar usages and customs. Considering the Malays, therefore, as more open to instruction than the votaries of Islam in general, I beg leave to submit to your Lordship's consideration, whether the present opportunity might not be taken advantage of to invite the Malay chiefs to a revise of their general system of laws and usages (Raffles 1835, p. 81).

Furthermore, Raffles' distinction between the "moderate" Malay Muslims and the "bigoted, intolerant" Arab Muslims underscores his critique towards the Arabs who exploit their religious influence to obtain a privileged treatment by the Malay chiefs via tax exceptions which distort the commercial competition at the expense of the British interests. For Raffles:

The Arabs are mere drones, useless and idle consumers of the produce of the ground, affecting to be descendants of the Prophet, and the most eminent of his followers, when in reality they are commonly nothing more than manumitted slaves; they worm themselves into the favour of the Malay chiefs, and often procure the highest offices in the Malay states. They hold like robbers the offices they obtain as sycophants, and cover all with the sanctimonious veil of religious hypocrisy. Under the pretext of instructing the Malays in the principles of the Mahomedan religion, they inculcate the most intolerant bigotry, and render them incapable of receiving any species of useful knowledge. It is seldom that the East is visited by Arabian merchants of large capital, but there are numerous adventurers who focus on a coasting-trade from port to port; and by asserting the religious titles of Sheikh and Seyyad, claim, and generally obtain, an exemption from all port duties in the Malay states (Raffles 1835, p. 73).

As Raffles explains: [...] the Arabs, under religious pretext, are entirely exempted from duties, they may baffle all competition, and the Malay countries will inevitably be exhausted and drained, and the English deprived of the fruits of conquest merely to the advantage of two foreign nations, that are equally devoid of claims on the English and the Malays (Raffles 1835, p. 74).

Just like Raffles who argued that the Arabs (ab)use their religious influence to obtain socio-political and economic privileges, Crawford (1820) too explains how the Arabs' disproportionate

socioeconomic, political, and cultural influence in the region is associated with their effort to spread Islam which was steadily cultivated since the thirteenth century. As Crawford observes:

The Arab settlers are more considerable from their influence than their numbers. The Arabians began at a very early period to trade with the Archipelago. In 1290, when Marco Polo * visited Sumatra, he found many of the inhabitants of the coast converted to the Mahomedan religion, and about the end of the fourteenth century Mahomedanism had become the national religion of some of the most considerable of the western tribes (Crawford 1820, p. 138).

Crawford adds that the Arab Muslims' spiritual and cultural influence is particularly strong among the Malays: Of all the tribes of the Indian islands, the Malays are the most thorough converts to Mahomedanism, and they enjoy, among their less zealous neighbours, the reputation of being good Mahomedans. They are the only considerable nation of the Archipelago * who have followed the example of the great Mahomedan nations of western Asia, in adopting the Arabic character. This circumstance gives a facility to the introduction of Arabic in the written language, and, added to their superior zeal and longer conversion, is the cause why much more Arabic is found in the Malay, than in any other language of the Archipelago (*ibid*: 115)

At the same time, Crawford highlights too the Arab Muslims' bigotry and how they exploit religion via their portrayal as direct descendants of the prophet to amplify their spiritual, economic, and social influence.

Of all the nations of Asia who meet on this common theatre, the Arabs are the most ambitious, intriguing, and *bigoted* [my emphasis]. They have a strength of character, which places them far above the simple natives of the country, to whom, in matters of religion, they dictate with that arrogance with which the meanest of the countrymen of the prophet consider themselves entitled to conduct themselves (*ibid* 139).

The previous short excerpts suggest that the Arabs in the Malay peninsula practice their faith in a different manner compared to the local Malays who are also Muslims and practice it in a more "moderate" manner without bigotry. While these short "religious" observations initially appear to be drawing a distinction between the "moderate" Malay Muslims and the "bigoted" and "intolerant" Arab Muslims, a more contextual approach revealed that these observations are also fuelled by the British colonial interests.

According to the British colonial administrators, the increased influence of the Arab Muslims in the Malay world was attributed to the spread of the "Mahomedan" religion (Islam) stressing how this influence harmed the British socio-political and commercial interests. Raffles even argued how the Malay Muslim's "moderation" could be exploited by the British to prevent the influence of rigid Islamic laws (Raffles 1835, p. 81), revealing that there was an conscious attempt by both the British and the Arabs to use religion as a means to shape the local socio-political norms in order to pursue their socioeconomic and commercial interests.

The nineteenth-century memoirs and historical narratives of all four British colonial administrators in Malaya revealed that the distinction between "moderate" and "extremist" Muslims was fuelled by socioeconomic rather than purely religious motives. Specifically, this "religious" inspired distinction was informed by the British colonial administrators who distinguished the "moderate" Malay Muslims from the "bigoted" and intolerant Arab Muslims, highlighting how the latter via the influence of religion amplified their socioeconomic influence and commercial interests at the expense of the British colonial interests. Furthermore, it was even noted that the conversion of slaves to Islam was also damaging to the British colonial interests as it undermined their control (Raffles quoted in Alatas 1971, p. 30). Ultimately the production of the "moderate-extremist" Muslims narrative in the nineteenth century by the British colonial administrators was driven by political and socioeconomic interests in an attempt to address the Arab Muslim's disproportionate influence and safeguard the British colonial interests.

The following section assesses how the same distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims has been applied too by non-Western, Muslim political agents in the contemporary Malaysian state. Specifically, it examines the policies of three different Malaysian PMs (Mahathir, Badawi, and Najib) who used the same distinction, demonstrating that despite their “religious” narrative, their policies aimed to address socio-political and electoral objectives too.

A late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims in Malaysia (by Muslim non-Western agents)

The distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims also appears in the political narrative of the contemporary Malaysian state. Malaysia’s prime ministers often made references to Islam and moderation, conflating political affairs with religion. Since the late 1970s, Mahathir associated the practice of Islam with moderation and economic progress.

The conflation of Islam with the Malay socio-political identity was deployed by Mahathir while promoting the New Economic Policy. Mahathir aspired to transform the Malaysian Malays and upgrade their economic status with affirmative action policies while attempting to influence their value system and “culture” in order to compete more effectively in the Malaysian economy (Muhamad 2008). As Ooi Kee Beng notes Mahathir often ended up “scolding” the Malay’s and the Muslim’s of the world for their sceptical attitude towards science and materialism (Beng 2006, p. 174).

In that respect, Mahathir emphasized the compatibility of Islam with business and progress while at the same time he was criticizing the inappropriate interpretations of Islam which lacked moderation, disassociating Islam from modernity and the study of sciences. As Mahathir argued:

Islam is a religion of peace and moderation. If it does not appear to be so today, it is not because of the teachings of Islam but the interpretations made by those apparently learned in Islam to suit their patrons or their own vested interest (Mahathir 2002).

For Mahathir, the historical descent of the Muslims began when they started rejecting “learnings” which they erroneously considered non-religious:

As the Muslims turned away from all leaning which were not exclusively about religion, their skills deteriorated. They became weak and were unable to match the sophistication of European sciences, weaponry, and military prowess (Mahathir 1999).

Therefore, Mahathir argued that contemporary Muslims should change their attitude towards science and materialism:

In the early years of Islam, the Muslims, obeying the injunction to “Read”, i.e. to acquire knowledge, studied the works of the Greeks and others on philosophy, medicine, science, and mathematics ... Because of the extensive knowledge in all fields of learning and their consequent skills in the acquisition of wealth, in administration and in military defence, the Muslim civilization thrived and grew, enabling the Muslims to live the way of life as prescribed by the Quran (Mahathir 2003).

Although the previous excerpts reflect Mahathir’s recent speeches, Mahathir clearly associated economic development with the practice of Islam from the beginning of his political tenure as Prime Minister. Mahathir claimed that:

Muslims all over the world have failed to apply the laws of Islam in the field of muamalah (human interaction). This failure is most evident in the financial system. This failure does not

stem from our ignorance of the laws [...] but from a failure to implement them. It is clear that [finance, management, and accounting] all have a close link with the practice of Islam, but Islamic societies will never succeed and be whole again (tidak akan berjaya dan sempurna) if Muslims, apart from worshipping Allah, have no other skills (Mahathir, 1985).

Mahathir's "Vision 2020" aspired among others to establish a united Malaysian nation (*Bangsa Malaysia*), a scientific, progressive, and tolerant society (Mahathir 1991) while his electoral campaign stressed that flawed interpretations of Islam act as a divisive force in the Malaysian society (Mahathir 1991). According to Hooker (2000) by describing radical Islam as a threat to Malaysia's unity and progress, Mahathir drew a distinction between a "moderate" and "extreme" Islam. For Mahathir and his then political party (United Malays National Organisation-UMNO) the "extreme" Islam can be divisive and undermine technological development (*ibid*: 16). According to Mahathir, this kind of Islam is practiced and promoted by the rival Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS).¹

As Sundaram and Cheek (1988) observe, UMNO's Islamization programme during the 80s was politically inspired to curtail and undermine the influence of PAS. Mahathir recognized UMNO's vulnerability on the Islamic front and decided to make certain symbolic concessions by increasing the size and activities of the various government-controlled Islamic organizations while curbing activities and teachings deemed misleading, deviant, or heretical (*ibid*: 855–861). Before the 1982 elections, Mahathir attempted to isolate and diminish PAS's influence by recruiting Anwar for UMNO, who was considered to be the most influential youth leader and religious activist after establishing the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) in 1972. Mahathir's political "Islamization" tactic paid off at the time since UMNO's coalition dominated both elections in 1982 and 1986.

As Noor (2003) observes, Mahathir used similar tactics to undermine PAS's political influence and gain votes in other electoral contests too. During the 2004 electoral campaign, Mahathir proclaimed Malaysia to be an Islamic state, forcing PAS to adopt an even more extremist narrative, supporting bin Laden and the Taliban (Noor 2003, p. 202). Then Mahathir exploited PAS's image as extremist and terrorist sympathizer by successfully portraying UMNO as the "moderate" alternative for both domestic and international audiences (Chan 2018, p. 424).

Farish Noor describes UMNO's "Islamization" tactic as an attempt to "fight Islam with Islam" (Noor 2003, p. 205) by preventing PAS from controlling the discourse over the meaning and content of Islam (*ibid*) which is viewed as contest between "moderate" and "extremist" Islam. As Noor argues:

UMNO's brand of modernist and *moderate Islam* [my emphasis] was based on a chain of equivalences that equated Islam with all that was positive in its eyes. Islam was equated with modernity, economic development, material progress, rationality, and liberalism [...] UMNO's understanding of Islam was also framed against a negative chain of equivalences that equated PAS's Islam with obscurantism, *extremism* [my emphasis], fanaticism, intolerance, backwardness, and militancy. This was the "wrong" version of Islam to which UMNO's Islam was the answer (Noor 2003, p. 205).

Mahathir's political successor, Badawi, also "maintained the 'two Islam dichotomy stressing that UMNO will not embrace Islamic radicalism to recapture parts of the Malay heartland it lost to PAS" (*ibid*: 16). As Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani (2010) argues, "Badawi introduced 'Islam Hadhari' which is not very different from the Malay Islamic values propagated by Mahathir. Speaking in his hometown, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi argued that the "Muslims should reject the narrow view of Islam in order to make progress [...] if we continue with the old mindset, we will be left behind" (Hamid 2007).

¹It should be highlighted here that the agenda of PAS underwent many transformations depending on the leadership and its electoral performance, see Sundaram and Cheek (1988, p. 851).

In September 2004, during the 55th UMNO General Assembly, Badawi, outlined the ten principles of his policy “Islam Hadhari,” drawing emphasis, among others, on the development of an economy and civilization capable of building the Muslim Ummah’s competitiveness. However, the description, the timing (in the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist events), and the socioeconomic objectives of “Islam Hadhari” beg for the following question: Was “Islam Hadhari” a policy launched to meet post 9/11 international expectations or domestic needs?

A contextual assessment suggests both. It is true that in the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist events “Islam Hadhari” attracted worldwide attention portrayed as a model of tolerance and coexistence between Muslims with non-Muslims. Badawi’s statements during UMNO’s general assembly highlighted that Malaysia is a “living proof that a progressive and moderate approach will defeat a conservative ideology and extremist ways” (Badawi 2004a). Furthermore, Badawi’s attempt to promote interfaith dialogue advocated a tolerant approach that promoted the co-existence of religions when in the World Council of Churches assembly, he stated that:

We need to talk to one another openly about the issues that impact on all our lives. Let us go beyond arguing over differences in theology and religious practice. Islam enjoins pluralism (Badawi 2004b).

However, Badawi himself denied that “Islam Hadhari” has been an approach to pacify the “West” in the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist events and claimed that:

it is neither an approach to apologize for the perceived Islamic threat nor an approach to seek approval from the non-Muslims for a more friendly and gentle image of Islam. It is an approach that seeks to make Muslims understand that progress is enjoined by Islam (Badawi 2005)

Despite its international appeal and the explicit portrayal of “Islam Hadhari” as a moderate and tolerant version of Islam by Badawi himself, many analysts agree that objectives of “Islam Hadhari” had a lot to do with controlling the political environment within Malaysia. For Humphreys (2010), Badawi – just like Mahathir before him – aimed to “to limit the ideological space of their political opponents and use 9/11 as a pretext to control the discourse on Islam in their country at the expense of the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) (Humphreys 2010, p. 47)”. However, Islam Hadhari by “institutionalizing Islam and bringing the religion even more to the forefront of domestic politics, had inspired increased Islamisation of the public itself though not in the direction desired by the government” (*ibid*:41). Badawi himself stated that:

Let me be clear *Islam Hadhari* is not a blank cheque to bring about conservative revivalism in this country. While I will protest Islam’s position and the role of the Shariah courts from being undermined, I will also ensure that no one tries to hijack Islam in Malaysia to breed intolerance and hatred (AFX Asia: 2006).

Despite Badawi’s statement, local analysts like Ahmad Fauzi (2018) argued that “Islam Hadhari” ended up losing the discursive battle against an ascendant Islamist conservatism which became obvious when Badawi’s successor Najib Razak changed his rhetoric. Initially, Najib championed Malaysia as a moderate Islamic state with a secular agenda which could set the example for the rest of Muslim world but later “aggravated the developing tension by categorically affirming Malaysia’s Islamic state status to the point of denying that Malaysia had ever been – or would ever be – a secular state” (Norani 2008, pp. 49–50). Thus, Najib’s narrative has been inconsistent.

Specifically, in 2009, Najib succeeded Badawi and rhetorically maintained a moderate approach by associating the concept of “wasatiyyah” (Islamic moderation) with “1Malaysia” programme (El-Muhhamadi 2019; Mujani *et al.* 2015). The “1Malaysia” programme highlighted the “importance

of national unity regardless of race, background or religious belief for a better tomorrow” (Razak 2009).

Najib developed inconsistent narratives that were driven by politico-economic objectives rather than purely religious ones. Najib liked to claim, Malaysia had become the world’s biggest publisher of the Quran (Radhi 2017) but at the same time, Najib was the inventor of the Global Movement of Moderates (Boo 2018), attempting to balance between the Western world with the Saudi allies. The close politico-economic ties between the Saudis and Najib allowed the prevalence of the “conservative Wahhabi-Salafism over other Islamist trends as the main plank of Malaysia’s Islamic policies” (Fauzi 2018, p. 380). Although the Saudi influence has been present in Malaysia earlier, it increased during and after Najib’s administration. Powered by Saudi petro-dollars, the impact of Wahhabi-Salafism was decisive against “the type of tolerant Islamic discourse that was once the distinctive feature of Malaysian Islam” (*ibid*) while in the past (70s–80s) these perspectives were moderated by an eclectic reading of thoughts of other scholars such as Syed Naquib Al-Attas and Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi (*ibid*). Therefore, Najib’s tenure accommodated an inconsistent approach to moderation while his “1Malaysia” programme which propagated the principle of “wasatiyyah” was not exclusively driven by religious concerns.

This section demonstrated how the distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims was greatly politicized by Malaysia’s prime ministers and became a part of a political narrative that primarily served socio-political and electoral objectives in terms of counterbalancing the rival Islamic party (PAS). However, “Islam Hadhari’s” poor implementation as well as the corruption scandals which followed from Najib’s “1Malaysia” programme, led to a conservative reaction that was exploited by PAS. The politicization of religion by Malaysia’s political leaders led to an “islamization race” between UMNO and PAS for electoral gains, steering the country towards a conservative direction (Chan 2018; Nawab and Osman 2014; Osman 2017). Local analysts like (Tan 2014) imply that this “islamization race” offset a conservative turn to Salafism in Malaysia which can amplify extremism and render Malaysians more vulnerable to radicalization from the Islamic State’s (IS).

However, a reference to the terms “Islamization,” “extremist Muslims,” “Salafism,” and “radicalization” devoid of a contextual analysis can be misleading, essentializing religion without considering the historical and socio-political characteristics of a local Islamic identity.

The following section explains how it can be counter-productive to premise our understanding of local Islamic identities and (violent) radicalization on binaries which draw a broad distinction among extremist-moderates, conservative-modern, and secular-Islamic. It will be argued how these decontextualized binary distinctions tend to essentialize religion, obscuring the contextual, historical, and socio-political characteristics of the local Islamic identities.

Defining Islam: a “Clash of civilizations,” a “Clash within civilizations,” or a “Clash of (Contextual) ignorance”?

The present section focuses on the insights of Said (2001, Said 2003), Kundani (2008), and Ismail (2004, Ismail 2007), discouraging the application of broad distinctions among “moderates-extremists,” “Islamism-Secularism,” and “East-West” which obscure contextual considerations. It will be highlighted that an Islamic identity is relational, stressing the need to consider too the relevant socio-political, historical, and context-specific features that shape it. Then it is pointed out how these insights are met in the historical analyses of Roff (1967), Milner (1982), Shamsul (2001, Shamsul 2005), and Peletz (2013) who capture the dynamic development of Malaya’s Islamic identity before, during and after the British colonial administration. These historical analyses reveal the complexities of determining an Islamic identity, prompting us to approach Malaysia’s Islamic identity beyond the restricting binaries of “moderates-extremists,” “conservative-modern,” and “secular-Islamic.”

Kundani (2008) observes how a (mis)understanding of Islam emerged from drawing distinctions among “secular and Islamist,” “tolerant and intolerant,” “pluralist and anti-pluralist,” and “democratic

and totalitarian.” He mostly criticizes contemporary Anglo-American narratives which no longer approach “Islamism” as a “clash of civilizations but as a “clash within civilizations” between “extremist and moderate Muslims” (Kundani 2008, p. 41). Kundani observes how this particular understanding of “Islamism” (which is often used interchangeably with Salafism) has spread to British think-tanks, politicians and intelligence services who design counter-radicalization policies by portraying the Salafi as highly suspect of committing acts of violent extremism and exploiting young and vulnerable people by misinterpreting religion (Kundani 2008, pp. 54–55).

An understanding of “Islam” on the basis of binaries which distinguish among “moderates-extremists,” “conservative-modernist,” and “secular-Islamists” can be counterproductive. Revisiting the *Orientalism* (2003), Said argued that:

The terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics like “America,” “The West,” or “Islam” and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse, cannot remain as potent as they are, and must be opposed (Said 2003, p. xxvii).

Therefore, Said objected to Huntington’s, *Clash of Civilizations*, calling it a “Clash of Ignorance” arguing that Huntington transformed civilizations and identities into something they are not: “shut down and sealed off entities underplaying their interdependence” (Said 2001, p. 1). Said highlighted that:

I go a great deal further when I say that words such as orient and occident correspond to no stable reality that exists as a natural fact. Moreover, such geographical designations are an odd combination of the empirical and imaginative (Said 2003, p. xxvii).

Said’s point suggests that a reference to broad categories such as “Islam” or “Islamism” fail to capture the complexity of the real world. Contemporary scholars like Salwa Ismail, attempt to capture this complexity by arguing that the formation of an Islamic identity is relational.

Ismail (2004) highlights, that the formation of an Islamic identity or any religious identity is relational where the public sphere and other social dimensions play an important role which cannot be ignored. As Ismail (2007) argues in Muslim-majority countries “the construction of Muslim public selves interrogates the project of modernity modelled after the Western experience, while proposing alternative visions of the public sphere” (Ismail 2007, p. 1). Therefore this popular distinction between “secular vs Islamic” which is regularly met in the work of Anglo-American (Western-centric) analysts is misleading and devoid of context. Ismail explains that this distinction “makes us assume that where Islam is the dominant religion, this religion is the defining element of Muslim identity and other dimensions of identity-formation such as class, gender or national belonging are treated as secondary” (Ismail 2004, p. 615). However, an Islamic identity is relational, it influences and is being influenced by other social dimensions such as gender, class, lifestyles, and race.

Ismail’s insights on the context-specific and relational characteristics of an Islamic identity are important and reflected too on a number of historical and contextual analyses which underscore the dynamic development of Malayas’ Islamic identity before, during, and after the British colonial administration with its ongoing implications today.

The following paragraphs capture the contextual and sociopolitical nuances of Malaya’s Islamic identity. The analysis below underscores the fluidity and dynamic formation of the local Islamic identity, explaining how Islam was initially “embedded” in the region’s preexisting pluralist background and later stresses the sociopolitical impact of British colonialism on the role of Islam in Malaya.

Shamsul (2005) argues that before the British colonial experience, Islam arrived at the Malay world in an “embedded,” not a “pristine form” (ibid: 453), encountering a preexisting, pluralist civilization that had a history of at least a thousand years. Then Shamsul (2005) highlights the sociopolitical implications of the British colonial administration to the local Islamic identity in 1874. The Pangkor Treaty was signed on 20 January 1874, creating a new structure that for the first time separated religion from

state affairs when the British officers took over government control, leaving the administration of religion to the Malay Rulers (Wan Jan, Wan Saiful 2018, p. 130).

This separation in combination with the reconceptualization of key terms like *Raja-Raja* (Rules for Rulers) to *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals) and Raffle's references to the concept of "Malay nation" which was later adopted by the locals as *bangsa Melayu* (Malay race) (Shamsul 2001, pp. 363–365); reveal how the British colonial intervention redefined administratively the role of Islam while racializing and territorializing the perception of Malay Islamic identity (ibid: 363).²

Anthony Milner (1995), unlike Anderson's the *Imagined Communities*, argues in the *Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya* (1995) that the term "bangsa" was not imagined but rather "conceptualized" in a top down manner under the influence of the British colonial administrators (Milner 1995, p. 89). Milner contends that the pre-existing customs and traditions in the region were not only affected by the appearance of Islam but also from British colonialism. He cites Hirschman to highlight that Malay racial thinking was "not a prehistorical residue it was a 'new' theory that accompanied the rise of European technological superiority and expansion" (Milner 1991, p. 110).

As Milner (1991) notes, prior to the British colonial administrators, there was no government in the European sense of the term (Milner 1991, p. 114). He explains that "the Raja was not only the 'key institution' but the only institution, and the role he plays in the lives of his subjects is as much moral and religious as political" (ibid: 113). According to Shamsul (2005) the British colonial administrators transformed the previous local governance system known as *KERAJAAN* (fusion of religion and state), into *kerajaan* in which the religious component became marginalized from the political administration. As a result, the indigenous religious (Islamic) pre-colonial *KERAJAAN* was systematically perceived by the British colonial administrators as a non-rational system and its position was downgraded to a peripheral role in an attempt to develop a "rationalist" secular colonial state (ibid).

The process of the transformation from *KERAJAAN* to *kerajaan* occurred in at least three critical spheres of influence, the general bureaucracy, the judiciary, and education (ibid: 462). Wan Saiful (2018) highlights how this separation between religion and political administration shaped religious discourse in the Malay region and eventually led to the formation of two contested Islamic fractions. The first fraction, *Kaum Tua*, was working from within the formal bureaucracy at the core of the British colonial administration whereas the other fraction, *Kaum Muda*, from outside and the relative freedom of the Straits Settlements of Penang and Singapore, where "they had no worry about Islamic religious censorship" (Wan Saiful 2018, p. 130). The scholar who first elaborated on the socio-political differences between these two fractions was Roff (1967) in the *Origins of Malay Nationalism*.

The *Kaum Tua*, the old faction, was the group of the traditional elites that operated within the British bureaucracy, aligning themselves with the traditional Malay power structure and the Sultan at the top. They enjoyed authority stemming from the official government machinery set up by the British, controlling the formal religious bureaucracy (Roff 1967, pp. 84–85). The *Kaum Muda*, the young faction, raised questions about the legitimacy of the traditional religious elites and attacked the orthodoxy of many of their teachings. The *Kaum Muda* was a reformist group comprised of the urban classes most of whom performed the hajj rituals bringing them closer to the middle east and the Arab Islamic thought (ibid).

According to Roff, the "Kaum Muda" adopted anti-colonial and nationalist ideas influenced by the spirit of nationalism from the middle east. This group was primarily influenced by the ideology in Egypt, creating an Islamic magazine named *Al-Imam* in 1906 which was closely related to *Al-Manar* magazine in Egypt. The *Al-Imam* magazine contributed to a socio-political consciousness of the Malays by calling for social change in Muslim Malay societies in Malaya and Singapore. As Roff argued, the "Kaum Muda" fraction appealed to Malay Muslims who were concerned about political, economic, and social progress compared to old fraction who focused mostly on religious topics (ibid

²Specifically, Shamsul argued that "The 1891 colonial census recognized three racial categories, namely, 'Chinese', 'Tamil', and 'Malay'. [...] Furthermore [...] the introduction of the Malay Reservation Enactment in 1913 provided a legal definition of 'Malay', and helped fix the idea of 'Malayness' in the public mind" (Shamsul 2001, pp. 363–364).

160–166). The implications of the “Kaum Tua”–“Kaum Muda” contest were not limited to the beginning of the twentieth century. As Nawab and Osman (2008) observes: in the long term, the *Kaum Muda*’s impacts on Malay society were felt in both the religious and political spheres. *Kaum Muda* activism planted the seeds for the growth of a Malay-Muslim intelligentsia, which tried to diagnose and analyse the circumstances that arose among Malays due to colonialism. This led to an increasing awareness among Malays of the importance of education. While the *Kaum Muda* themselves were less politically active, their successors utilized the revivalist spirit to form political organizations such as Hizbul Muslimin (HM), Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM), and the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) (ibid: 117–40)

Should we attempt to approach the *Kaum Tua* – *Kaum Muda* competition via the binaries of “conservative-modern” or “religious-secular” we risk obscuring the origins, the local features, and the sociopolitical context of these fractions during the British colonial rule in Malaya.

In that respect, the previous historical overview and contextual analysis reveal the dynamic formation of the Islamic identity in Malaya, underscoring that Islamic identities are relational and shaped too by the existing cultural and sociopolitical environment. Such analysis reveals the nuances of the local Islamic identity which cannot be captured by decontextualized distinctions among “moderate-extremist,” “secular-Islamic,” and “modern-conservative.” These distinctions portray identities as homogenous and static, downplaying their interdependence and dynamic formation which can be best viewed as “assemblages” (Peletz 2013).

Peletz (2002, Peletz 2013) who thoroughly studied Malaysia’s Islamic institutions and identity applies the notion of “assemblages” which reflects the insights of Said (2003) and Ismail (2004; Ismail 2007) who highlighted the relational sociopolitical features of an Islamic identity. These “assemblages” are better viewed on the (trans)formation of Malaya’s Islamic identity via its exposure to the secular sociopolitical features of the British colonial administration. It was explained earlier how the British colonial administration inspired the racialization of the Malay (Islamic) identity and the perception of a Malay nation in the spirit of modernity (Milner 1991; Milner 1995). Then, the transition from KERAJAAN to kerajaan and the bureaucratization of the Malay Islamic administration by the British colonial governors not only triggered the creation of a religious bureaucratic fraction (Kaum Tua) but also fuelled an oppositional fraction (“Kaum Muda”) influenced by the principles nationalism and anti-colonialism, politicizing the agenda of this religious fraction (Roff 1967; Shamsul 2001; Shamsul 2005).

Drawing attention to these “assemblages” with the implications of the British colonial administration can help us understand the dynamic, contextual, and socio-political features of the local Islamic identity, demonstrating that the application of decontextualized binaries among “moderate-extremist,” “secular-Islamist,” and “modern-conservative” is restrictive and counter-productive.

The following section demonstrates that exegetic relevance of these “assemblages” which are often neglected by many influential (Western-derived) analyses on extremism and radicalization that are often premised the decontextualized distinction between “moderate-extremist” Muslims. The influential approaches to radicalization by Borum (2003), Sageman (2004), Wiktorowicz (2005), Moghaddam (2005), Silber and Bhatt (2007) tend to promote a monolithic understanding of an Islamic extremist ideology equating it broadly to (Jihadi) Salafism and Sayyid Qutb. The explanatory shortcomings of this decontextualized and monolithic perception of Islamic extremism and Salafism are revealed in the following section which scrutinizes the (Western-derived) approaches to radicalization and how their decontextualized application can fuel a contradictory assessment of (Islamic) radicalization in Malaysia.

Assessing seminal approaches to radicalization and their implications to the perception of Islam, Salafism, and (violent) extremism

The previous section demonstrated how the rigid and decontextualized binaries among “moderate-extremist” Muslims, “conservative-modern,” and “secular-Islamic” collapse once we take

into account the implications of “assemblages.” The consideration of these “assemblages” offsets a more nuanced understanding of an Islamic identity beyond the binary distinctions that essentialize religion divorcing it from its contextual, socio-political, and cultural characteristics. Thus, the consideration of the historical context with its “assemblages” is necessary to comprehend the nuances of the local Islamic identity which can in turn help us review the appearance of Salafism in the Malay context beyond its Western-centric reception in the field of radicalization research.

In the study, *How Rigorous Is Radicalization Research*, Neumann and Kleinmann (2013) highlight that radicalization research does not necessarily constitute a rigid academic discipline with strict methodological guidelines; and the fact that it was largely developed in the aftermath of 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist events often brings forth the distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims, essentializing religion. Furthermore, Neumann and Kleinmann (2013) observe that radicalization research is often subject to governmental influence since many radicalization experts are often recruited or funded by governments to produce reports that focus on policy matters rather than a methodologically rigid academic analysis.

In that respect, the most influential and highly cited studies on radicalization developed after 9/11 and were often policy-driven. The emphasis here is drawn on the influential studies by Borum (2003), Sageman (2004), Wiktorowicz (2005), Moghaddam (2005) and Silber and Bhatt (2007) because certain Southeast Asian analysts such as Ramakrishna (2011), Ramakrishna (2017), Mohd Mizan Aslam (2017) rely on these studies to analyse radicalization in Malaysia.

However, the highly cited studies of Borum (2003), Sageman (2004), Moghaddam (2005), Silber and Bhatt (2007) which focus on the study of Islamic extremism rely on data from local contexts, corresponding to the Western states’ governmental needs.

Specifically, Moghaddam’s (2005) influential article concludes with policy recommendations for the US officials; Silber’s and Bhatt’s (2007) is a New York Police Department (NYPD) report, aiming to inform US policy makers and law enforcement officers against the threat of home-grown radical jihadists; Borum’s (2003) academic report is a psychological profiling of violent Islamic extremists which aims to produce “operationally-informed findings” for US personnel (Borum 2003: 3); while Marc Sageman is a former CIA case officer who worked undercover on the Afghan frontier during the 1980s and his 2005 book highlights the role of social networks in the transformation of socially isolated individuals into violent Islamist extremists.

Borum’s (2003), Sageman’s (2004), Wiktorowicz’s (2005), Moghaddam’s (2005), Silber and Bhatt’s (2007) analyses rely on particular local contexts but often conclude that the process of radicalization takes a generic form. Specifically, most of these analyses on radicalization collected a significant amount of data from specific socio-political regions (Britain, US, or other Western liberal democracies) attempting to explain how the members of their Muslim minorities become radicalized via a process that assumes a broad framework in the form of “steps” (Borum 2003), “phases” (Silber and Bhatt 2007), or “a staircase” (Moghaddam 2005).

Therefore, these key approaches draw contextual strength and data from a Western environment, attempting to explain how home-grown extremism takes place and how it affects their Muslim minorities there. Wiktorowicz (2005) conducted ethnographic fieldwork in London with al-Muhajiroun, the radical Islamist group founded by Omar Bakri Muhammad. Silber and Bhatt (2007) conducted research funded by NYPD entitled *Radicalization in the West*, relying on data from the US. Moghaddam (2005) and Borum (2003) rely almost exclusively on Western sources. Furthermore, these context-specific approaches to radicalization convey a number of propositions that imply that terrorist violence can occur from a larger pool of extremist who share a particular Islamic theology (Salafism) that inspires their actions. Specifically, Silber and Bhatt clearly state that:

“certain Salafi-based NGO’s, extremist sermons/study groups, Salafi literature, jihadi videotapes, extremist-sponsored trips to radical madrassas, and militant training camps abroad have served as “extremist incubators” for young, susceptible Muslims – especially ones living in diaspora communities in the West” (Silber and Bhatt 2007, p. 8)

Sageam (2004) draws emphasis on the psychological dimension and group pressure by analysing the cases of 172 global Salafi *mujahedin* and concluded that about two-thirds joined the *jihād* collectively as part of a small group (“bunch of guys”) or due to a friend who already had joined (*ibid*), implying a link between Salafism and violent extremism.

Even if these analyses have some explanatory strength within specific contexts (US and UK), it was explained in the previous section (II) that it is neither logically nor empirically sound to draw a (decontextual) link among Muslim extremists – Salafism – violent radicalization with a broad applicability. Therefore, these Western-derived approaches to radicalization appear to be concerned with why some individual Muslims (particularly in Western liberal democracies) support a traditionalist interpretation of Islam (Salafi) that has led to violence, producing a framework in the form of “steps,” “phases,” or “a staircase” which potentially allows the government services to predict and intercept their radicalization process.

When an analyst reads these post-9/11 approaches to radicalization and re-appropriates them devoid of their contextual framework, this analysis risks advocating an approach that overestimates the effect of religious beliefs as a cause of violence and terrorism, downplaying the socio-political “assemblages” and contextual understandings of the local Islamic identities. The approaches to violent extremism which overestimate religion at the expense of other factors have already been criticized by a number of scholars (Barkawi 2006; Crenshaw 2008; English 2015; Gkoutzioulis 2020; Gofas 2012; Gofas and Chenoweth 2019; Jackson 2007; Martini 2018), thus this critique will not be replicated again. However, the following section reveals that when analysts attempt to assess the process of radicalization by focusing on religion and Salafism – broadly – without considering the local socio-political context of an Islamic identity, this prevents them from developing an accurate assessment of radicalization.

The following paragraphs scrutinize the approaches of Ramakrishna (2017) and Mohd Mizan Mohammad Aslam (2017) who cite the aforementioned Western-derived approaches to radicalization in order to assess Malaysia’s vulnerability to radicalization from the Islamic State (IS). It is revealed that a decontextualized (mis)appropriation of Western-derived radicalization models which does not pay sufficient attention to the complexities of Malaysia’s Islamic identity cannot assess effectively the Malaysians’ vulnerability to radicalization. Specifically, it will be demonstrated how the use of the term “Salafism” is treated differently, triggering two contrasting perspectives on Malaysia’s vulnerability to radicalization from IS. Analysts like Ramakrishna (2017) and Mohd Mizan Mohammad Aslam (2017) who rely on Western-derived models of radicalization that are premised on a uniform understanding of Islamic violent extremism and Salafism suggest that Malaysians can be vulnerable to radicalization from IS. On the other hand, analysts like Schultze and Chernov Hwang (2019) and Liow and Arosoaie (2019) who rely on a context-specific account of Malaysia’s Islamic identity argue that its particular socio-political characteristics render Malaysians resilient to radicalization from IS.

Specifically, Ramakrishna (2017) cites Silber and Bhatt’s (2007) analysis and draws a link between Muslims extremists and terrorism. Influenced by Silber and Bhatt (2007), Ramakrishna argues that “the Radicalization into Violent Extremism (RIVE) process is consummated and the individual, now reconstructing himself as a warrior in the path of God, is ready to mount terrorist attacks” (Ramakrishna 2017, p. 6). Then Ramakrishna, confirms Schmid’s (2014) conclusion that “that there is no such thing as ‘nonviolent’ extremism and suggests that ‘not-yet violent’ extremism is a more accurate term” (Ramakrishna 2017, p. 2) for the entire Southeast Asia, homogenizing an entire region on the basis of religion ignoring the particular Islamic identities of each Southeast Asian state.

Mohd Mizan Mohammad Aslam (2017) also cites the analysis of Silber and Bhatt’s (2007), highlighting the four phases of radicalization (pre-radicalization, self-identification, indoctrination, and *jihādization*), adding that Malaysia’s de-radicalization initiative is effective due to the introduction of the Religious Rehabilitation Program. Silber and Bhatt’s (2007) approach draws a (decontextualized) link among Muslim extremists – Salafism – violent radicalization, essentializing religion. Thus, Mohd Mizan Mohammad Aslam (2017) draws emphasis on the role of religion, arguing that Malaysia’s de-radicalization programme is conducted by Malaysia’s Department of Islamic Development (Jabatan

Kemajuan Islam Malaysia – JAKIM) which focuses on religious counselling, claiming that this programme is very effective since “at the end, a radical ideology based on the *salafi-wahhabism* thinking will be replaced by a more authentic Islamic teachings especially towards the real meaning and idea of *jihād*” (*ibid*: 30).

However, since Mohd Mizan Mohammad Aslam’s (2017) analysis is inspired by Silber and Bhatt’s (2007) model which essentializes religion, this analysis proceeds without sufficiently examining the following:

First, Malaysia’s de-radicalization programme is uncritically perceived to be successful without presenting us with a specific methodology which measures its success besides a broad reference to “recovered ex-prisoners such as Ahmad Wan Ismail and Suhaimi Mokhtar” (*ibid*). On the contrary, relevant academic literature suggests it is generally very difficult to assess the efficiency of a de-radicalization programme especially in Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia and Malaysia (Horgan and Braddock 2010; Johnston 2009; Suratman 2017).

Secondly, it was previously explained that these exclusively religious approaches to (de)radicalization which are inspired by Western-derived models tend to draw a broad link among extremism, Salafism, and violent radicalization while downplaying the context-specific socio-political characteristics which shape particular Islamic identities. Thus, Mohd Mizan Aslam’s link between the “radical ideology based on the *salafi-wahhabism*” (*ibid*: 30) with violent radicalization obscures the complexities and socio-political “assemblages” of Malaysia’s Islamic identity.

The following section focuses on a context-specific analysis which explains how the infiltration of Salafism to Malaysia has been co-opted by Malaysia’s political scene (Malik 2017; Nawab and Osman 2014) and does not necessarily render Malaysian Muslims vulnerable to radicalization from the Islamic State (Liow and Arosoaie 2019; Schultze and Chernov Hwang 2019). The definition of Salafism is complex but these complexities are often downplayed in the Western-derived models of radicalization since there is a tendency to exclusively associate Salafi extremism with Sayyid Qutb (Manne 2016; Sageman 2008; Silber and Bhatt 2007; Wiktorowicz 2005) while the Malaysian context is different.

(Re)assessing violent extremism in Malaysia beyond decontextualized radicalization models and the “moderate-extremist” binary

The present section approaches violent extremism beyond Western-derived radicalization models and the distinction between “moderate and extremist” Muslims in an attempt to explain the contradictory perspectives on Malaysia’s vulnerability to violent Islamic extremism from IS.

The analysis below scrutinizes the decontextualized link among extremist Muslims – Salafism – violent radicalization via a contextual approach that focuses on the socio-political and historical features that inform Malaysia’s Islamic identity. Emphasis is drawn on a context-specific assessment of Islam and “Salafism” in Malaysia proceeding to an analysis that takes into consideration the historical and socio-political factors as much as the religious ones.

It was mentioned earlier how Roff’s (1967) historical analysis highlighted the formation of two competing groups of Islamic thought (Kaum Tua and Kaum Muda) which affected Malaysia’s socio-political scene and the rise of nationalism in the country (Roff 1967, pp. 39–43). Maszlee Malik (2017) highlights that the reformist movement *Kaum Muda* introduced Salafism in Malaya, adding that Salafism is not homogenous and made its appearance in the Malay peninsula at “different times with different motivations” (Malik 2017, p. 1). First, Malik observes that Salafism in Malaysia is not exclusively associated with Qutb, Wahabism, and violent extremism but it represents a reformist ideology that is not rigid. While the early Salafi movement in Malaya was “inspired by the Middle Eastern Abduh-Afghani Pan Islamism [...] the current Salafi trend in Malaysia is closely related to the global Islamic revivalism of the 1970s and 1980s and was also affected by the return of Malaysian students

studying abroad during the 1990s and early 2000s” (*ibid*: 14). Furthermore, Malik adds how the Saudi embassy in Malaysia officially promotes Saudi-Salafism (Wahabism) by sponsoring Islamic and da’wah events across the country.

Therefore, Salafism is not treated by Malaysia’s federal religious territory as a deviant group but simply perceived as just another facet of Ahl al-Sunnah theology (Malik 2017, p. 26). Furthermore, as it was noted earlier, the Salafi inspired *Kaum Muda* movement was not only concerned with religion but also with socio-political issues, drawing a link between religion and the Malaysian identity (*ibid*: 7).

The link between religion and the Malaysian Malay identity is still evident today. A quick reference to Malaysia’s constitution article 160 suggests how Islam in general is politicized and racialized ever since the establishment of the Malaysian state in 1957. Specifically article 160 mentions that:

Malay means a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom (The Federal Constitution 2010).

The imperative to this definition of Malaysian-Malay was to draw specific boundaries which encapsulate “special rights” for the *bumiputras* (the indigenous) at the expense of other minorities (Chinese) which were economically and socially more powerful. The privileged position of the *bumiputras* is also met in article 153 which “grants the king of Malaysia the responsibility to safeguard the special position of the Malays” (*ibid*).

Bumiputra’s privileges were propelled further via affirmative action policies (New Economic Policy) which followed after the 1969 the Chinese-Malay racial riots. By the mid-1990s it was becoming clear that Mahathir’s priority was the economic development of Malaysia and “Islam” was a vehicle which allowed him to sell his vision promoting affirmative action programmes which exclusively benefited the local Muslim Malays and effectively “racialized Islam” in Malaysia. As Fauzi and Ismail (2014) highlight that Mahathir’s party (United Malay’s National Organization – UMNO) “undertook piecemeal Islamization via incentives and measures to counterbalance the challenge emanating from Islamist rivals such as the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS: Parti Islam Malaysia) and independent social movements, especially the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia” (Fauzi and Ismail 2014, p. 159). Some of these measures included a constitutional amendment that allowed the autonomy of the Sharia courts. Specifically, in 1988, clause 1A was inserted in article 121 of the Federal Constitution, specifying that civil courts could no longer interfere in the jurisdiction of Sharia courts, raising the status of Sharia courts and judges to be on a par with their civil counterparts (*ibid*: 164).

These two political parties in Malaysia, UMNO and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic party (PAS), regularly act as the gatekeepers of the Malaysian Malay Muslims’ privileges. Recently when the Malaysian government in 2018 attempted to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) which could potentially undermine article 153, the political elites from UMNO and PAS “promised to uphold sanctity of Islam and Malay rights by rejecting ICERD” (Ariff 2018). Thus, we can see how religion, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic privileges, and political contests are blended into the formation of Malaysia’s Islamic identity.

Nawab and Osman (2014) observe, that UMNO and PAS were actively involved too to politically control – if not exploit – the rise of Salafism in Malaysia too. As it will be explained later, for some analysts this political control over the rise of Salafism insulates the Malaysian Muslims from IS radicalization.

According to Nawab and Osman (2014) there is a marriage of convenience between UMNO and the Salafi religious scholars in Malaysia (Salafi Ulama). UMNO is Malaysia’s most influential party which until recently dominated the country’s political scene since its independence until 2018.³ Over the last ten years, Salafi influence in Malaysia was amplified further via a “newly formed

³In the latest General Elections (19 November 2022), the historically dominant coalition Barisan Nasional (BN), with UMNO being the founding and principal member of BN, fell in the third place.

organization, the Pertubuhan Ilmuwa Malaysia (ILMU) and the UMNO's young ulama wing" (*ibid*: 206). The Salafi scholars provided an Islamic legitimacy to UMNO which safeguarded the party against critique from PAS until both parties formed a coalition in 2019. Despite the Salafi Ulama's absolute approach to the Islamic law and their scepticism towards politics (a diversion that leads people away from religion), ultimately Malaysia's Salafi scholars provided their support to UMNO. As Nawab and Osman (2014) claims, the Salafi scholar's objective's was to infiltrate the political scene, augment their influence, and implement Islamic laws that can change Malaysia's socioeconomic system. The Salafi Ulama succeeded in shaping policies on Islam in Malaysia "such as institutionalizing laws against the Shiites and Sufis as well as creating awareness of the need to implement rigid Islamic laws within the state" (*ibid*: 224). At the same time UMNO enjoyed the support of the Salafi ulama, acquiring Islamic credibility and defending itself against PAS's critique.

While analysts like Ramakrishna (2011; Ramakrishna 2017) and Mohd Mizan Aslam (2017) implied that the rise of Salafism in Malaysia renders the Malaysian Muslims more vulnerable to IS radicalization and violent extremism, Nawab and Osman (2014) observes that Salafism does not operate beyond control, outside Malaysia's socio-political scene but within it. This observation is important as scholars like Liow and Arosoaie (2019) and Schultze and Chernov Hwang (2019) argue that the rise of Salafism in Malaysia does not render Malaysian Muslims more vulnerable to radicalization from IS. Although PAS reportedly did have party members being detained (*ibid*: 3) and a former member (Mohd Lofti) joining IS in Syria, this member was ultimately expelled from the party for his actions (Malaysia Today: 2014), suggesting that PAS does not encourage or approve of violent extremism.

As Liow and Arosoaie (2019) and Schultze and Chernov Hwang (2019) argue despite the rise of Salafi influence in Malaysia, radicalization from IS remains low because IS's narrative is not compelling or compatible with Malaysia's specific Islamic identity. This is an interesting inconsistency which reveals how a contextual and a non-contextual study of Malaysia's Islamic identity can trigger two diametrically different conclusions with respect to the country's vulnerability to radicalization from IS.

Liow and Arosoaie (2019) explain that the very existence of these conservative and exclusivist religion-political narratives articulated by Malaysian Islamists within Malaysia's party system in fact limits the appeal of ISIS in Malaysia. UMNO and Malaysia's Malay-Muslim elite adopted Islam as a political language and (in the aftermath of the 1969 race riots) proceeded to some important (affirmative action) policies that supported the Malay - Muslim ethnic majority ("New Economic Policy"). From that perspective, Islam assumes a political and racial dimension within the Malaysian context.

As Liow and Arosoaie (2019) argue, the "New Economic Policy" aimed to (economically) empower ethnic Malays and erode Chinese influence. Allegiance to Islam is meant to bolster the current affirmative policies granted to the Indigenous Muslim Malay (*bumiputra*) groups. In that respect, from the 80s onwards during Mahathir's administration, there was a political race between PAS and UMNO, attempting to "out-Islam" each other, influencing the prominent political, legal, and economic Islamic infrastructure of the Malaysian state.

As Sani (2015) observes, the political leadership's attempt to Islamize the Malaysian bureaucracy already commenced in the 1960s but intensified during Mahathir's political administration. In 1968, the Malaysian National Council for Islamic Affairs was established which was the highest religious forum and was chaired by the Prime Minister of Malaysia and the secretariat of the National Council and "was later re-launched as the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM or Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia)" (*ibid*: 4). In that respect, Malaysia's Islamization policy was initiated and controlled by the government, forming an Islamic bureaucracy which monopolizes the (Sunni) interpretation of Islam within the country rendering resilient to different interpretations (Sani 2015).

Therefore, the religion factor alone or a decontextualized reference to Salafi extremism cannot determine or explain why IS failed to gain greater sympathy in Malaysia (unlike the situation in neighbouring Indonesia and Philippines) despite the rise of Salafism and the Islamic outlook of Malaysian politics. Liow and Arosoaie (2019) explain this by highlighting that IS rhetoric does not resonate with Malay Muslim identity since IS adopts a general recruiting narrative that ignores regional and the Malay-Muslim particularities. As Liow and Arosoaie (2019) argue:

The resonance of ISIS narratives to a Malaysian audience was therefore diminished by the fact that, for reasons either of ignorance, neglect, or miscalculation, they prioritized the universal over the particularistic. In most of IS's propaganda directed at Malay Muslims, the group did not make any reference to the racialized realities and struggles of Malay Muslims (*ibid*: 94–95).

In that respect, a context-specific approach to Malaysia's Islamic identity suggests that Malaysians are less vulnerable to IS propaganda. Specifically, the Malaysian state's constitutional, political, and religious institutionalization of Islam as well as Mahathir's anti-Western narratives and the policies (New Economic Policy) which socioeconomically empowered the *bumiputras*, render the Malay Muslims resilient to IS propaganda. This resilience can be attributed to the role of the Malaysian state as an agent that has shaped the Malaysian-Malay's Islamic identity on racial terms and a key provider of Islamic control and legitimacy through the establishment of JAKIM. Furthermore, Malaysia's religious and political authorities are committed to containing IS and the violent (jihadist) approaches to Salafism in Malaysia including PAS as announced in the party's 60th general assembly (Ghazali 2014).

In stark contrast to Malaysia, neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia appear to be more vulnerable to terrorist recruitment and violent extremism. The strong presence of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia and Abu Sayyaf in Philippines should prompt us to focus on the context that gave rise to these terrorist groups and examine why deadly events such as the 2002 Bali bombing and the battle of Malawi in 2017 have not taken place in Malaysia.

Key regional analysts such as Jones (2005) and Chernov Hwang (2017) highlight that JI is the product of Indonesian history dating back to the Darul Islam rebellions (1948–1965) and the suppression of the Islamists by Suharto's New order Regime. Similarly, Abu Sayyaf is a product of the Philippine history too. Since the 70s, pro-autonomy militant groups have been active in Mindanao, Philippines but when Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) reached a peace agreement with the government in 1996, a splinter group emerged (Abu Sayyaf) which opposed the MNLF peace deal and later pledged loyalty to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (former IS leader) (Jones 2005). Comparing Malaysia's resilience to IS with the Philippine experience whose Muslim community is marginalized and militant, explains why under such conditions IS propaganda can be more appealing to the Filipino Muslims. On the other hand, Malaysia's privileging of the Malay Muslims via the constitutional racialization of Islam, the government's New Economic policy, and the establishment of JAKIM suggests how these decisive policies on the political and religious level can contain IS propaganda in Malaysia.

Finally, this section demonstrated theoretically and empirically the value of examining the contextual specificities of an Islamic identity before assessing the risk of violent radicalization. It was explained why the application of the same explanatory term ("Salafism") triggers two contrasting perspectives with respect to Malaysia's vulnerability to radicalization from IS to stress the importance of examining the socio-political and contextual features of local Islamic identities.

Furthermore, it was highlighted that the analysts should refrain from applying a broad distinction between "moderate – extremist" Muslims and a decontextualized association of (violent) extremism with Salafism, explaining that analysts should instead consider a context-specific study of the local Islamic identities before assessing their vulnerability to radicalization from IS. A historical approach, beyond decontextualized binaries that essentialize religion, reveals that the distinction between "moderate" and "extremist" Muslims can obscure the relevant socio-political and contextual features of Islamic Identities. In that respect, the seminal "Western-derived" radicalization models which were developed to address the US's and the UK's post-9/11 governmental needs are incompatible with the Malaysian context since these models disregard the local socio-political "assemblages" and contextual features of Malaysia's Islamic identity, risking a misleading security assessment.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to scrutinize the narrative which distinguishes between "moderate" and "extremist" Muslims from a historical perspective with its implications for the study of radicalization.

While it is often thought that this narrative is a contemporary one, the present study highlighted that a similar narrative appeared earlier in nineteenth-century Malaya, fuelled by colonial socio-economic concerns and less so religious ones. This historical perspective allows us to challenge the dominant, decontextualized binaries among “moderate-extremist,” “Islamist-secular,” and “conservative-modern” which strip Islamic identities off their socio-political and contextual features while portraying them (erroneously) as rigid and monolithic. Specifically, the contribution of this article lies in the following points:

First, it revealed that a narrative that distinguishes between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims is not a recent but dates back to the nineteenth century when a similar distinction was drawn by the British colonial administrators in Malaya.

Second, it demonstrates how the narrative of “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims is contingent, introduced by dissimilar agents (Muslims as well as non-Muslims) during various historical eras driven by socioeconomic, political, or electoral concerns rather than exclusively religious ones.

Third, it stresses how the application of these decontextualized binaries among “moderate-extremist” Muslims, “secular-Islamic,” and “conservative-modern” can obscure our understanding of the local Islamic identities, misguiding our assessment of security and radicalization.

Finally, it warns against a decontextualized application of Western-derived radicalization models which often preserve these conceptual binaries, as they can lead to a misunderstanding of the local Islamic identity and radicalization in Malaysia. Approaching Malaysia’s vulnerability to radicalization without considering the contextual and socio-political features of the local Islamic identity revealed why a contradictory assessment of radicalization in Malaysia emerged among certain academics.

Ultimately, these points demonstrate how a decontextualized distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Muslims essentializes religion, produces a counterproductive approach to (Islamic) radicalization by placing uneven emphasis on the religious dimension at the expense of the socio-political, undermining our understanding of Islamic identities and radicalization. Instead, analysts are encouraged to adopt a historical and contextual approach that takes into account the relational and socio-political features that dynamically inform an Islamic identity before attempting to explain the process of radicalization and its security implications.

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