



Corporate Islam: Sharia and the Modern Workplace

By Patricia Sloane-White

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Malaysia has been the focus of much debate and academic interest over the last couple of decades, with the rise of its version of Islamization, reminiscent of the peculiar and fast-paced development of the Asian version of capitalism several decades ago in the neighboring countries of Southeast Pacific. The country has a more diverse racial and religious demographic compared to most other Muslim majority countries in the Middle East and North Africa, where Islam is seen to be a more integral cultural aspect of social life. The adoption of a lifestyle driven by religion is evident in many areas of private and public life in Malaysia, but that also seems to be more compatible with values and practices associated with the West. This compatibility is not necessarily in the sense of conformity to the implied forms of Western culture, as seen in most of the world, but rather to the driving values applauded in developed societies, such as democracy, capitalism, freedom, competition, meritocracy, and material success.

Patricia Sloane-White, an associate professor of anthropology whose previous work has concentrated around Islam and modernity within the specific sphere of business culture during the 90's in Malaysia, has taken an in-depth look at this more recent transformation in her book *Corporate Islam: Sharia and the Modern Workplace*. The book attempts to study "the trajectory and emplacement of *sharia*, or Islamic law, in the modern corporate workplace" in Malaysia. In the author's own words, the book is "an ethnography of 'corporate Islam.' It explores modern corporations in Muslim Malaysia as sites of Islamic expression, expansion, and uniformity where power, relationships, individual identities, practices, and often financial resources are mobilized on behalf of Islam.

Defining Islamization here as the "Malaysian emergence of an increasingly conservative, singular, and regulatory form of Islam", the author sees the rise of a very specific form of corporate capitalism guided by religious elites and their ideals as the reflection of such Islamization on the business culture of Malaysia. She notes that modern institutions such as corporations provide a middle point between the public and the private spheres of social life in

the long and daily stretch of time and space people live through. As such, corporate (office) life and culture provide fertile ground for both political (such as hierarchical organization of management, distribution of revenues and resources, vision and mission statements) and personal (behavioral patterns that succeed, motivation, relationships, engagement) values to be promoted and tried out. To this effect, the author believes her subjects (*sharia* advisors, religiously guided managers, entrepreneurs, and staff) are actually enacting a miniature model of an Islamic state.

The Malaysian Islamization experience is a very specific case, Sloane-White notes - one where ethnicity and religion are interlaced. Having studied the *bumiputera* generation of the 90's, she highlights that the government's push to raise the welfare of ethnic Malaysians, compared to those of Chinese and Indian origins, had not gone as planned in that particular experiment. Instead of the anticipated entrepreneur class, a very narrow Malaysian elite coupled to the state owned or driven institutions was born. It seems she believes that the Islamization of the Malaysian business circles seems to be a second attempt to that end.

No matter what the past debate was about Islam and capitalism, Islam is "reconfigured as an ethical 'entrepreneurial religion' wherein Muslim individuals' wealth and worth are calibrated to business knowledge" in this new setting. She notes that global capitalism transforms the understanding and practice of Islam, but also that Islam is enhanced and empowered by capitalism in this arrangement. It has allowed Islam to enter into new spaces.

The corporate Islamic workplace has become "a site of moral production" and is promoting a culture that is expansive, global, de-territorialized, cosmopolitan, authoritative, and triumphal. It seeks to emulate Western capitalism's dynamism and success without generating any of the accompanying economic and social injustices, and carries the approach that it alone can ameliorate them.

However, the author warns us that since many of the people she has interviewed had the belief that Islam should govern all facets of life - nonconformance being looked down upon by the more observant

micro-societies (people working in such settings) – the result is that many feel the pinch of a commanding and singular version of life. This is because Islam is said to grant authority to the leaders and nurtures a culture, where *sharia* advisors, constituting a closely-knit and small group of scholars into which admission is limited, are “state-sponsored elite makers” or are “movers and shakers”.

This result, presented in an offhand manner, is important because the author wanted to trace “Malay-Muslim social and economic transformations and understandings of Islam and sharia through corporate settings...where citizens of capitalism’s corporate regimes append the bulk of their waking hours.” Unfortunately, this has not been achieved well enough because the author has not attempted to show whether one can generalize the findings of this study, which remains rather singular. The book is the result of a well-prepared field study, but the findings are presented against an amorphous background. Questions such as how widely Islam is being adopted as a set of guiding principles by even Muslim Malaysians to shape their lives, let alone their businesses, or whether there is a uniform application of such principles throughout the society in all segments (small, medium size vs. corporates) are neither asked nor answered. It is understood from the context that there are many businesses and corporations of different scales that have different notions of how Islam or other guiding principles are to be applied in their institutions. Accordingly, while the author fervently engages the reader with the details of a capitalist setup built on religious principles and KPIs, and leads into a material and spiritual *jihad* against the degenerate capitalist culture by visionary *khalifahs*, who propagate a *dak’wah* promising a more ethical alternative to heal the wounds of the world, there is not a single indication in the book that anything of the scale of this idealized picture is to be found.