



Mahathir's Islam: Mahathir Mohamad on Religion and Modernity in Malaysia

By Sven Schottmann

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The book titled "Mahathir's Islam: Mahathir Mohamad on Religion and Modernity in Malaysia" refers to Dr. Mahathir Muhammad's personal viewpoints on religion. It is a quite timely work emphasizing the impact and significance of Dr. Mahathir, not only in Malaysian context, but in greater spheres such as Southeast Asian politics and in the Islamic world as well.

Sven Schottmann, a sociologist of religion, evaluates Dr. Mahathir's policies during his tenure (1981-2003) based on the implementation of Islamic principles and relevance to modernization in Malaysia. Two salient concepts emerge here as important, Islamization and modernization as significantly structured by Dr. Mahathir. The writer applies an analytical approach to evaluate both these concepts.

The writer considers the era of Dr. Mahathir in a way designed to comprehend this period in the form of social, political profile of Islam in Malaysia. This is no doubt quite different from the early approaches put forth by various writers dealing with 'export-oriented industrialization, the curtailment of democracy by Dr. Mahathir's presidential style of leadership,' etc.

The book analyses Dr. Mahathir's modernization process in the light of institutionalized Islamization. In terms of this title, there is no doubt that this is a novel approach to understanding this particular period in modern Malaysian politics.

For common readers the title seems to be attractive enough to satisfy the feelings of religious nationalism, but for those who are familiar to modern Malaysian politics they would probably be surprised to witness, to some extent, the exaggeration contained within it.

What is striking about the title of the book is that it is contrary to the common description of Dr. Mahathir as a 'chauvinist' or 'ultra' Malay politician. Even in the writer's interview with Dr. Mahathir, the latter describes himself as a "*Malaysian nationalist*". This statement by itself explicitly seems to be a counter-claim against the argument of the writer.

Schottmann argues that this process of Islamization occurred as a result of the ideas and policies of Dr. Mahathir himself. And this phenomenon as seen in his description of 'properly understood Islam' has

not been explored accordingly. His 'articulations of Islam' are explored by the writer's analysis of certain statements of Dr. Mahathir obtained from private talks, interviews and official speeches.

There is no doubt that these need to be discussed accordingly based on the type of audience and the aims of Dr. Mahathir. In addition, it is right to call this book as a personal archeology of Dr. Mahathir through the eyes of a sociologist of religion. This is clarified by the writer when he asserts that his intention is to articulate notions of Islam unexplored.

Through this analysis, the writer appears to expose the role of Islam in Dr. Mahathir's personality and beyond this in his policies. Trying to support his argument, he argues that almost all previous works dealing with Dr. Mahathir era had significantly neglected the perspective of Islam. In this regard, the writer criticizes and implicitly labels those who have written about Dr. Mahathir's era as reluctant to understand him "as an agent of late 20th century Islamic thought".

Though he seems to be clear in his argumentation, one can assume that a leader like Dr. Mahathir, merging both charisma and rationality in his personality, possesses distinct characteristics in his policies. Because of this reason, trying to differentiate between aspects of rationality, Islam and nationalism to understand his policies and what these policies mean to Malaysian people may mislead us, since all these components make up the personal features and ingredients of Dr. Mahathir's policies.

The 1980s and 1990s are important because of the economic modernization processes throughout the several five-term ruling governments of Dr. Mahathir. In fact, this feature can be observed almost in the whole region of East and Southeast Asia when Malaysia followed the same track of development like the Asian Tigers, pertaining to economic development with the significant investment on small and medium size industries and strong manufacturing sectors to transform into lead export economies.

Hence, there is a difference between the economic modernization and embeddedness to global capitalism playing its rules in bilateral and international agreements and the narrative of applying of Islamization in various institutions at the national level.

What makes this book peculiar is the narration based on the strong tendency of Dr. Mahathir towards institutionalized Islamization. And the writer seems to base his argument on assumptions such as the follows, "... Mahathir as a Muslim thinker or perhaps better, Muslim statesman...". These two concepts are too distinct to be pronounced in the same sentence. Beyond this, it is also observed in various passages of the book that the writer compares Dr. Mahathir with some distinguished 'Muslim thinkers' which is no doubt irrelevant to the discussion.

Though Dr. Mahathir is a vanguard of Islamization policies, it cannot be contended that he was the only sole constituent of all ideas about Islamic institutionalization. Indeed, what makes Dr. Mahathir peculiar is his own self-encouraged derived approaches to find a solution to some significant social problems relevant both to Malay-Muslim communities and also, to some extent, the nation-state establishment.

Since, Dr. Mahathir aimed to remould the Malay Muslim community starting from the civil servants, bureaucrats and then general public whenever he found opportunities either in social settings, such as the *ceramah*, or official meetings in UMNO general assemblies or governmental sessions where he disseminated his discourse of functionalization of the Islamic creed. He intended to give ideas on dominating their social life and views in Islamic values.

The 'foreword' describes Dr. Mahathir as "a truly modern Muslim democrat". However, it seems that this understanding is an exaggeration of the position of Dr. Mahathir in Malaysian politics. Labeling him as a "Muslim democrat" does not reflect the reality. Instead this attribution is perhaps more appropriately applied to Anwar Ibrahim, Dr. Mahathir's former deputy until he was sacked from the UMNO and his government post at the end of 1990s. Another misleading discourse is to compare him with some distinguished Islamic thinkers in the 20th century. Dr. Mahathir is a politician and he, like every political leader, consults with a group of experts in relevant fields. But this does not make him an Islamic thinker.

It should be remembered that there were reformists and distinguished Malay thinkers in the 1950s and 1970s, such as Dr. Burhanuddin Al-Helmy, a reformist, and Naquib al-Attas, an influential intellectual and

scholar. As observed in relevant pages of the book, the writer supplies some clues from the *Kaum Muda* movement about how and why Dr. Mahathir chose this path of representing a modernist Islamic perspective. Besides the eras mentioned, were the ones in which post-colonial discourse and methodology were being discussed significantly in both Western and Eastern intellectual life. These could have significantly influenced the thoughts and views of politicians like Dr. Mahathir.

It is understood that the writer questions Dr. Mahathir's commentary on Islam and argues that the latter has a strong tendency to be very practical. And he openly argues that his stand and his commentary on Islam is opposed to that of the mainstream religious scholars in the country. Since he is a politician, what he asserts should be understood as an individual view or opinion, not as a rule, in the religious sphere.

It should be clarified that Dr. Mahathir is not a religious scholar. However, it is observed that the writer compares him with Malay religious scholars, in particular when regarding the approaches of PAS circles and the contemporary globally recognized Muslim scholars.

What separates Dr. Mahathir's Islamic view from PAS is that he functionalized Islamic principles in the form of policies and implementations in public life without emphasizing on ideological discourse which has been observed to be highlighted in the PAS political discourse. And while Dr. Mahathir was initiating his policies on the basis of an Islamic perspective, he attempted to prove intentionally that these policies could be solutions to weaknesses of global capitalism. This approach seems to have dual aims -firstly to prove that a country like Malaysia can be a developing country while being a Muslim majority country, and quite industrialized; secondly to give a message to the international circles to pay attention to an alternative modernization based on a religious approach.

Mahathir's Islam is based on detailed analysis of Dr. Mahathir's statements and commentaries on Islamic principles which helps the reader to figure out a certain era in modern Malaysian politics. However, it is also important not to be trapped in some exaggerations about the role and function of Dr. Mahathir because of his being as a mere politician not a religious scholar or thinker.