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## Citation for Southeast Asia, Islamic Modernism in

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## Southeast Asia, Islamic Modernism in

Few movements better illustrate the importance of Southeast Asia to the contemporary Muslim world than Islamic modernism. The pioneers of the movement—Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838–1897), Muhammad ‘Abdū (1849–1905), and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935)—came to prominence in the Middle East in the final third of the nineteenth century. They argued that Muslims could only reverse the decline of their religion and civilization vis-à-vis the West by blending the Islamic concepts of reform (*islāh*) and revival (*ijtihād*) with a core principle of European modernism: the rejection of traditional modes of authority or thought. Islamic modernists called on all Muslims to return to the true path of their faith by engaging the contemporary world actively, embracing the Qur’ān and the *sunnah*, unifying politically, and rejecting their adherence to tradition (*taqlīd*). From the start, they sought to influence Muslims in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and other parts of the Muslim world. Through their regularly printed journal in Arabic, *al-Manār* (The Lighthouse), Rashīd Riḍā and other Islamic modernists won a strong following among young Muslims in the Indonesian archipelago and portions of Thailand and British-controlled regions of Southeast Asia. By contrast, the movement had little long-lasting impact in Borneo, Philippines, and French controlled Southeast Asia. Islamic modernism’s chief proponents in Southeast Asia, the Kaum muda (young generation), worked to reform and revive their societies and those in the wider Islamic world against the threats posed by European imperialism and civilization. Their knowledge of Arabic and Islamic law

allowed them to challenge the chief proponents of traditional Islamic practices in region, the Kaum tua (the traditional faction), and to contribute to similar debates then taking place elsewhere in the Muslim world. Understanding these debates is important today, as Southeast Asians take on an ever larger role in the Islamic world and in debates about how to reconcile Islam and modernity.

## ***Islam in Southeast Asia, 1400–1900***

The Muslim networks that shaped the Kaum muda reflected centuries of intellectual exchange and travel between Muslim communities of Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Southeast Asians traveled to the Middle East, remained for years, and became leading scholars. They formed scholarly networks and founded their own traditional Islamic schools. In addition, Malay and Indonesian scholars brought new Islamic texts and ideas home with them and attempted to apply them in Southeast Asia—sometimes by force. In what became known as the Paderi revolt in the early nineteenth century, Hajj pilgrims sought to use force to make Minangkabau people in West Sumatra conform to the ideas of the Wahhabi state in central Arabia.

These ties grew closer in the last third of the nineteenth century when the number of *hajj* pilgrims from Southeast Asia soared. By 1914 nearly half of all *hajj* pilgrims came from the region. The rise in the number of pilgrims paralleled the emergence of Shaykh Ahmad al-Khatīb (1860–1916) and other Malay and Indonesian-born scholars in Mecca. While Ahmad did not openly endorse Islamic modernism, his exhortations to cleanse Islam in Southeast Asia of the so-called “excesses” of Sufism, *taqlīd*, and aspects of local customary law at odds with the *sharī‘ah* inspired a generation of Muslims to adopt Islamic modernism in Southeast Asia. He also signaled out the matriarchal traditions of the Minangkabau people along with the practices of the Naqshbandī order for deviating from the teachings of Islam.

## ***Islamic Modernism and al-Manār in Southeast Asia***

Few were more inspired by Shaykh Ahmad’s teachings than his cousin, Shaykh Ṭāhir (1864–1956). He was born in Minangkabau, studied for thirteen years in Mecca under Ahmad, and became a formidable scholar in his own right, helping to educate scores of Southeast Asian Muslim scholars. In 1894, he moved to Cairo, where he earned a degree from al-Azhar, Islam’s most prestigious university, and befriended Riḍā. When *al-Manār* began to be printed in 1898, Shaykh Ṭāhir became a critical contact for the journal in Southeast Asia—a region which Riḍā saw as crucial to reviving the global Muslim community and—what he saw as the biggest prize—the conversion of China and ultimately Japan to Islam.

Shaykh Ṭāhir’s former students in Southeast Asia often wrote letters to the new journal about issues faced by Muslims in Southeast Asia. From the earliest issues of the journal until it ceased publication in 1935, *al-Manār* prominently featured these letters and the responses of leading scholars on how these problems should be resolved. While many of the letters

discussed issues faced by Muslims in the Arab world, where Islamic modernism originated, Southeast Asians also asked for guidance to challenges unique to their region. Among the questions asked were whether Islamic law taught that non-Muslim Chinese had the same status enjoyed by the “people of the book,” Christians or Jews; whether Muslims could sell alcohol and other prohibited products to non-Muslims; and whether it was acceptable to use a Malay translation of the Qur’ān based on an English edition rather than an Arabic one. Just by asking this second category of questions, Southeast Asians expanded the scope of Islamic Modernism beyond its Arab roots and helped to ensure that the movement could address the experiences of all Muslims—not just the 20 percent of the global Muslim community which lived in the Arab world.

## ***Islamic Modernism: Indonesia and Malaysia***

Significantly, Islamic modernism found a broader reception in Indonesia (especially in Java and Minangkabau) than it would in peninsular Malaysia, Thailand, Borneo, or the Philippines. In Malaysia in particular, Shaykh Tāhir and other prominent Kaum muda activists could not secure positions which had religious authority or would permit them to institutionalize Islamic modernist ideas. Aristocrats allied with religious officials to block religious reform and to prevent anyone in favor of Islamic reformist ideas from gaining power. Their position in religious affairs had been strengthened by British colonial officials in the nineteenth century, as London extended its influence in the Malay region. In their eyes, the ideas forwarded by Islamic modernists were strange and foreign, threatened social stability, and contradicted established religious practices going back centuries.

By contrast, Singapore, Malacca, and Penang were cosmopolitan, wealthy metropolises under direct British administration. There Kaum muda activists were active and had a natural audience among local Muslim communities. Those communities were composed of recent arrivals, some of whom questioned the religious credentials of Malay elites. Through regularly printed newspapers, they followed developments in the Muslim world. They also profited from Singapore’s status, along with Penang, as the final port of call in the region for *hajj* pilgrims before traveling to the Middle East. For Shaykh Tāhir, the *hajj* pilgrimage traffic allowed him to draw new recruits into the movement from individuals who had been schooled in Mecca and were returning to Southeast Asia.

### ***Al-Imām***

A key venue for the new recruits was *al-Imām* (the leader), a Malay-language magazine published in Singapore from 1906 to 1908. During the journal’s brief existence, it blended selections from *al-Manār* along with extended discussions of local affairs. Its articles discussed the lack of cooperation among Muslims, their ignorance of the world, and why Southeast Asian Muslims were under foreign domination. The journal’s writers accused royal courts of elevating Western decadence and secularism over core Muslim values—charges that were much easier

to make from the safety of Singapore. That said, the writers took a cautious approach to politics generally and particularly to the politics of Britain's colonial presence in the Malay states.

Despite its seemingly apolitical tone and short time in existence, *al-Imām* had a profound impact on Southeast Asian Islam. It provided a Malay vocabulary and frame of reference to explain how and why Islamic modernism, which had been born in the Arab Middle East, was relevant to all Southeast Asian Muslims—not just those who knew how to read enough Arabic to read *al-Manār*.

## ***Legacy of al-Imām***

After 1908, Kaum muda activists produced their own journals, built new schools, and broadened the appeal of Islamic modernism. In West Sumatra, Haji Rasul, who studied with Shaykh Tāhir, founded *al-Mūnir* (*The Illuminative*). The Islamic reformist journal had a wide circulation among literate Malays between the year it started, 1911, and when it ceased publication in 1916. In 1912, Haji Rasul (1879–1945) and another student of Shaykh Tāhir's, Ahmad Dahlan (1868–1923), founded the Muhammadiyah, an organization dedicated to bringing about Islamic reform through education. The organization gained wide appeal across the archipelago through its own schools and women's organization.

In the Malay states and the Straits Settlements, Sayid Shaykh al-Hadi, Abu Bakar, and other Kaum muda activists promoted Islamic modernism through education and journalism. Al-Hadi served as the headmaster of a school dedicated to Islamic reform, Madrasa al-Masyhur in Penang, in the 1920s while Bakar would found a reformist academy in Perak a decade later. In the mid 1920s, al-Hadi left education and founded a publishing house in Penang, Jelutong Press. The press published two reform journals in Malay, *al-Ikhwān* and *Sāudara*. It also published translations of well-known Islamic modernists and Egyptian writers, such as Muhammad 'Abdū and Qāsim Āmīn (1863–1908), an important proponent of women's rights and popular novels. Many of al-Hadi's books first appeared in serial form in *al-Ikhwān* and *Sāudara*, both of which circulated in Borneo, Cairo, the Dutch East Indies, London, the Malay states, Mecca, and Pattani. Throughout these various works, al-Hadi promoted a vision of Islamic modernism that would be recognizable to the Malays and addressed their daily problems.

## ***Faridah Hanom***

Without question, al-Hadi most successfully realized this vision in the novel *Faridah Hanom*, which uses characters in upper-class Egypt to discuss Islamic modernism in Southeast Asia and its criticism of traditional elites and practices. All the characters are Egyptian (Arabs and Turks), who regularly refer to Egyptian feminists, *al-Manār*, and Islamic modernist leaders. The heroine, a beautiful, educated, and morally upright Muslim woman, confronts many issues

familiar to Malays, such as the question of arranged marriages, premarital sex, and the draw of foreign novels and literature. In a critical scene, she convinces a character modeled on Muhammad ʿAbdū to issue a *fatwā* to dissolve her loveless and arranged marriage to an older man and permit her to marry her true love. Adding to the allure of the novel were fifty pictures and several sexually suggestive scenes. It was a great commercial success; it went through six editions between 1927 and 1950.

## ***Opposition to Islamic Modernism***

The success of *Faridah Hanom*, however, did not stop the opponents of Islamic reform, the Kuam tua, from mounting a vigorous defense of existing Islamic practices in Southeast Asia. Traditional religious and political elites tarnished the reputation of the reformist schools and religious periodicals among the masses. Sṣūfī shaykhs reacted angrily to Islamic modernist attacks, as did Ḥaḍramī Sayyids, who rightly saw the Kuam muda as a threat to their special social status in Southeast Asia. Minangkabau Muslims objected to Islamic modernists attacks on their matrilineal culture and customary law. The Kuam tua produced its own novels and literature and in 1926 formed its own mass organization in Indonesia, the Nahdlatul Ulama.

By the 1920s, the dispute between the Kaum muda and the Kaum yua was a full-scale social confrontation across Southeast Asia. Both sides accused the other of being heretics and refused to bury any adherent of the opposite side in the territories that they controlled. These tensions grew so great that Dutch authorities arrested Shaykh Tāhir in 1927 and detained him without charge for six months. It was only with the onset of the Depression that the conflict eventually ended.

## ***Decline.***

But the conflict had taken its toll. It was one thing to distribute materials and to advocate freely for a mass movement in the Straits Settlements; it was something entirely different to form a mass movement. The relentless opposition of religious elites limited both the financial viability and political appeal of Kaum muda publications and schools in Malaysia. Kaum muda schools in Malaysia rarely drew enough Malay students to remain open and to pay their bills. While the Muhammadiyah took form in Indonesia, a parallel movement did not materialize in other Muslim communities in Southeast Asia.

Furthermore, Islamic modernists, who had taken an ambivalent public position on European colonialism, looked out of touch in a region in which nationalist feelings rose sharply during the interwar years. Nor did the movement play an obvious role in the ideological conflict that would plague Southeast Asia for decades: the battle between communists and noncommunists. Even the articles in journals produced by Indonesian and Malaysian students in Cairo in the 1920s bear little resemblance to articles in Islamic modernist journals. Indeed, the term Kaum tua had already lost much of its original religious meaning by the late 1920s and was increasingly used

to describe a secular challenge to religious authority.

## **Revival**

Nonetheless, nearly a century after Kaum muda and its opponents have faded from the political scene in Indonesia and Malaysia, the movement's institutions and intellectual contributions continue to shape both Southeast Asia and the modern Muslim world. Both the Kaum tua organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, and the Kaum muda organization, the Muhammadiyah, still play an active role in Indonesia. They are the largest independent Muslim organizations in the world; they have 30 million and 20 million members, respectively. Haji Rasul's son, Hamka (1908–1981), became a significant writer and provided Indonesians a host of Islamic solutions to the challenges of modern life. In Malaysia, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS, the Islamic Party Malaysia) retains the mantle of using Islam to engage the modern world, while the ongoing demand for Islamic forms of modern knowledge remains strong.

## **Islamization Of Knowledge**

There is no better example of the contemporary Malaysian synthesis of Islam and modernity than the “Islamization of Knowledge” or IOK—the guiding concept for one of Malaysia's largest and most influential universities, the International Islamic University, Malaysia (IIUM). IOK seeks to understand modern subjects and ideas according to Islamic principles and core texts rather than those only of the West. It is the end process of a global consensus pioneered by Ismā‘īl al-Fārūqī (1921–1986) and others to revive the global Muslim community through *ijtihād* and to synthesize the scientific method and Islam.

And IOK may be one of Malaysia's most important intellectual exports. Here it is worth noting that one of the chief architects of Turkey's recent synthesis of Islam and democracy and its new foreign policy—Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu—taught for eighteen years at IIUM. One of his former IIUM colleagues, Amina Wadud, is a leading scholar of feminism in Indonesia and founded an important Malaysian woman's organization, Sisters in Islam. In addition, IIUM graduates hold key posts in governments in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

## **The Future**

In 2009, Ensar Eminović, Bosnia's Ambassador to Malaysia and an IIUM graduate, told the Malaysian media after his diplomatic credentials were accepted by the Malaysian government: “Saya buatan Malaysia” (or Bahasa Malaysian for “I am a product of Malaysia”). As Malaysia's and Indonesia's economies continue to grow, more people (and ideas) in the Muslim world will be “Buatan Asia Tenggara” (made in Southeast Asia).

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