

Revisiting Malay Muslim Political Leadership in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Malay Muslim political leadership has been a pivotal force in shaping Malaysia's national identity, socio-political structure, and governance. This study examines its historical evolution, guiding principles, and contemporary challenges through a qualitative documentary approach. Drawing on constitutional provisions, political party documents, and scholarly sources, it identifies core Islamic leadership values namely *amanah* (trust), *adl* (justice), *shura* (consultation), *hikmah* (wisdom) and *wassatiyyah* (moderation). Historically, this leadership served as a stabilizing bridge between ethnicity, religion, and governance. Today, however, it faces fragmentation, integrity crises, ideological disputes, and global pressures. The study proposes a renewed, value-based leadership model rooted in Islamic ethics and democratic inclusivity, contributing to ongoing debates on political Islam and governance.

Keywords: Malay–Islam Leadership; Malaysian Politics; Islamic Governance; Political Identity

INTRODUCTION

Malay Muslim political leadership has long defined Malaysia's political development, constitutional identity, and nation-building process (Abdullah, 2020; Noor, 2018). The relationship between “Malayness” and Islam is constitutionally embedded, historically intertwined, and culturally reinforced (Azra, 2019). Article 160 of the Federal Constitution defines a Malay as “a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks Malay, and conforms to Malay customs,” while Article 3(1) positions Islam as the religion of the Federation (Abdullah, 2020). These constitutional features create a unique political ontology where ethnicity and religion converge to produce a distinctive leadership paradigm.

Since independence in 1957, Malay–Muslim leaders have shaped national institutions, mediated ethnic relations, and articulated Malaysia's developmental vision (Hamid, 2017). Their leadership, however, is not monolithic; it evolves through shifting political coalitions, ideological contestations, and the rise of Islamic consciousness (Ahmad & Ismail, 2021). As noted in the original document, Malay Muslim leadership is founded on ethical principles—*Amanah* (trustworthy), *adl* (just), and *shura* (consultation)—yet faces modern political challenges such as party fragmentation, integrity erosion, and global ideological currents (Salleh, 2019).

Recent political realignments—such as the fall of Barisan Nasional (National Front) in 2018, the emergence of Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance), and ideological competition between UMNO (United Malay National Organization), PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia), and BERSATU (Malay United Indigenous Party)—further amplify debates concerning the future of Malay–Islam leadership (Yusof, 2022). Contemporary policies, from *Islam Hadhari* (Contemporary Islam) to *Islam Wasatiyyah* (Moderate Islam), and most recently *Islam Madani* (Civil Islam), reflect evolving attempts to reconcile Islamic values with governance in a multi-ethnic nation (Salleh, 2019).

While existing literature addresses aspects of Malay nationalism, Islamic governance, and political Islam, few studies offer a structured analysis integrating history, political dynamics, Islamic principles, and contemporary challenges (Lim & Abdullah, 2022; Mujani, 2021). Thus, this study aims to fill this conceptual gap.

The main objectives of this research is:

1. To trace the historical evolution of Malay–Muslim political leadership in Malaysia.
2. To identify key Islamic leadership principles underpinning governance.
3. To analyze the roles of major Malay–Muslim political parties such as UMNO, PAS and BERSATU.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative-documentary research design, which is appropriate for analyzing political history, leadership concepts, and ideological developments (Hamid, 2017). The study relies on three categories of textual sources, they are (1) Historical records include post-independence political documents. (2). Scholarly literature such as books, journal articles, and theses on Malaysian politics, research on Islamic leadership principles and analyses of political Islam in Southeast Asia and, (3) Contemporary political documents of UMNO, PAS, and BERSATU constitutions and manifestos and Government policies of *Islam Hadhari*, *Islam Wasatiyyah*, and *Malaysia Madani* (Rahman, 2022; Mujani, 2021).

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, focusing on historical trajectory, core Islamic leadership values, party-based ideological interpretations, political challenges and future leadership frameworks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Malay Muslim political leadership can be traced back to early Islamic polities—most notably the Malacca Sultanate (Azra, 2019). Governance structures were built on: Hukum Kanun Melaka (Malacca Laws), Undang-Undang Laut Melaka (Malacca Sea Laws) and the integration of Islamic law with Malay customs (Hassan, 2020). These legal systems institutionalized justice, consultative decision-making, and social order.

The British intervention diminished the political authority of Malay rulers but preserved their role as heads of Islam (Noor, 2018). Islam increasingly became an identity marker that unified Malays against colonial domination (Mohamad, 2018).

During the Pre-Independence era of Malayan nationalism, Malay–Islam leadership became increasingly institutionalized under prominent figures such as Onn Jaafar and Tunku Abdul Rahman (Abdullah, 2020). These leaders strategically employed the Muslim-Malay identity as a unifying political force. The establishment of UMNO marked the emergence of a key political platform committed to safeguarding Malay political supremacy, upholding Islam as the moral basis of governance, and protecting the rights embedded within the social contract (Noor, 2018).

In the Malaysian Post-Independence period, each Prime Minister articulated distinct interpretations of Malay–Muslim leadership. Second Prime Minister, Abdul Razak Hussein emphasized educational advancement and rural development (Abdullah, 2020); Hussein Onn prioritized social justice and national reconstruction; Mahathir Mohamad promoted a modernist Islamic outlook and initiated administrative Islamization (Azra, 2019); Abdullah Ahmad Badawi introduced Islam Hadhari or civilizational Islam (Rahman, 2022); Najib Razak advanced the national Transformation Agenda (Salleh, 2019); Muhyiddin Yassin foregrounded a narrative of integrity (Sani, 2020); Ismail Sabri introduced the concept of Malaysia family (Yusof, 2022) and Anwar Ibrahim centers his leadership on the Madani framework (Zainal, 2022), which stresses justice, compassion, and good governance.

Because Islam serves as a foundational value in Malay politics, several core principles consistently shape national leadership. These include: 1. *Amanah* (Trust and Responsibility) — requiring leaders to uphold transparency, accountability, and ethical governance. 2. *‘Adl* (Justice) — ensuring fairness for all citizens, including non-Muslims, in line with the nation’s constitutional multiculturalism. 3. *Shura* (Consultation) — reflected in parliamentary democracy and collective decision-making. 4. *Hikmah* (Wisdom) — essential for navigating ethnic tensions and complex political challenges, and 5. *Wasatiyyah* (Moderation) — a defining feature of Malaysian leadership that emphasizes balance and rejects extremism (Karim, 2019; Rahman, 2022). These values form the normative framework expected of Malay Muslim leaders. However, despite these ideals, several Prime Ministers have been implicated in large-scale corruption scandals involving millions of dollars (Salleh, 2019).

Three major political parties represent the Malay Muslim constituency in Malaysia. The oldest, UMNO, is a nationalist–pragmatic Islamic party that promotes Islam primarily as a cultural identity through initiatives such as Islamic finance, Islamic education, and moderation-oriented policies. However, UMNO has experienced declining support in recent years due to credibility issues, particularly corruption scandals. For example, 1MDB scandal undermines public trust in Islamic leadership ethics (Noor, 2018; Salleh, 2019). The second party, the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), champions political Islam. PAS advocates for an Islamic state framework, Shariah-based governance, and an ulama-led leadership model. Its influence has expanded alongside the rise of Islamic consciousness in society (Ahmad & Ismail, 2021). The third party, BERSATU, positions itself as a middle-ground alternative, emphasizing anti-corruption, Malay rights, and ethical governance. Ironically, several of its leaders have recently faced allegations of multi-million-dollar corruption (Yusof, 2022).

The presence of three competing parties has led to significant vote-splitting among Malay-Muslim voters. PAS frequently leverages religious issues to attract Muslim support, positioning itself as the sole defender of Islam in the country. UMNO, in contrast, often mobilizes concerns related to threats against religion, royalty, and Malay identity to secure its traditional voter base. BERSATU, as a breakaway faction of UMNO, seeks to position itself as the primary champion of Malay interests in Malaysia. With the broader trend of Islamic resurgence in the late 20th century, all three parties increasingly employed Islamic narratives as a means to advance their political objectives.

Nevertheless, Malay Muslim leadership must acknowledge that Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation. Sustaining stability requires carefully crafted policies, inclusive public discourse, and strong intercultural competence. Any failure in these areas risks undermining harmony within Muslim communities and the country as a whole. Moreover, widespread corruption scandals have damaged the credibility of Malay Muslim political leaders, revealing a stark moral gap between Islamic ideals and actual political conduct. Restoring public trust therefore demands meaningful institutional reforms and a renewed commitment to ethical leadership.

A viable future model of Malay Muslim leadership must integrate moral integrity, participatory governance, socio-economic justice, moderation and inter-ethnic respect. This model aligns with *Maqasid al-Shariah* (Higher Objectives of Islamic Law) and modern governance needs (Zainal, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Malay Muslim political leadership remains a foundational pillar of Malaysia’s political identity and governance culture (Abdullah, 2020). From the era of classical Malay Sultanates to modern democratic governance, Islamic principles have shaped leadership ethics, policy priorities, and political legitimacy (Azra, 2019; Hassan, 2020). However, contemporary political fragmentation, persistent integrity concerns, and global ideological pressures pose significant challenges to the long-term viability of this leadership model (Salleh, 2019; Sani, 2020). This study concludes that the future of Malay–Islam leadership depends on several key reforms: Ethical and moral renewal grounded in strict adherence to Islamic leadership values (Rahman, 2022); Unity-oriented strategies that place national interests above partisan competition (Yusof, 2022); Institutional strengthening to uphold transparency and justice (Zainal, 2022); and the Integration of Islamic principles with modern governance frameworks, including participatory democracy and human rights (Lim & Abdullah, 2020).

The revitalization of Malay–Islam leadership must therefore blend historical insight, Islamic ethical foundations, and contemporary political realities in order to steer Malaysia toward stable, just, and inclusive governance (Ahmad & Ismail, 2021).

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