

**Refereed article**

## **Women's Empowerment in Religious Contexts: Competitive Modernity and the Feminized Public Sphere in Malaysia**

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### **Summary**

The Malaysian public sphere has provided an effective communication structure for the espousal of group positions. The empowerment of the country's women in the religious context can only be properly understood when examined within this social framework. However, the feminization of the public sphere in Malaysia has been complicated by the existence of multiple understandings of modernity, ones which are both competitive and dependent on a highly politicized and clearly demarcated sphere of contestation. In these circumstances, the common good has been interpreted differently, leading to the drawing of distinct battle lines in terms of political competition. In this article I identify the women's movements in which Malay-Muslim women participate as being categorizable as pragmatist, communitarian-oriented, and liberal-feminist in nature. Additionally, they operate within a state or market sphere and display agency that is the outcome of either formally organized or of unorganized action. This multiplicitous nature of modernity in the country engenders a worldview that is reinterpreted and reconstituted to suit both local and translocal contexts. The overarching goal of gender equality is seemingly muted, although women can still be empowered within these movements. This study shows that while the gender equality agenda may not be a pervasive dynamic engulfing all cultures and nation-states, the existence of competitive modernity has nevertheless enhanced the public participation and empowerment of women within the religious context in Malaysia.

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### **Introduction**

Malaysia is home to some 16 million Muslims, out of a total population of some 27 million people of various religious affiliations and ethnic groups. On the country's streets it is common to see women dressed in an assortment of veiled styles — from dull-colored, full-face coverings to chic high fashion — jostling with other women clad in more skimpy forms of clothing. Beyond these outward manifestations of

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diversity, we also find pluralism in Muslim women's groups organizing around different causes ranging from feminism to traditionalism. In all these contexts we see the trappings of modernity existing in contestation with other worldviews, so much so that both Malay-Muslim women's organizations and other similar platforms for the public expression of such ideologies can take on a variety of different characteristics — such as being pragmatic, communitarian, feminist or individualistic. By no means is this situation particular to Malaysia, as the same observation is also applicable to other Muslim societies — wherein women's collective mobilization has taken on a "range of discourses and ideological orientations" (Charrad 2011: 425).

In this article I posit that there are two simultaneously occurring phenomena that have led to this outcome. The first is a sense of competitive modernization leading to the pluralization of religious social movements; the second is the expansion of a feminized public sphere wherein all shades of gender posturing are made more visible, debatable, and contestable in the public realm. The public sphere within which nonstate religious women present their causes is a distinctively civic space wherein the powers of persuasion, conviction, and relevance are the necessary prerequisites for ensuring legitimacy and the mobilization of followers. Unlike the state, the public sphere of Malaysian civil society is not equipped with coercive and legalistic powers able to affect the discipline, acquiescence, and submission of their focus groups. It is the existence of a vibrant public sphere that is vital for women's politics of presence, enabling religion to derive opposing postures of empowerment. The gender equality agenda may not be a pervasive movement engulfing all cultures and nation-states, but this has nonetheless not limited the public participation and empowerment of women within a religious context in Malaysia.

### **The feminization of the public sphere in Malaysia**

The expansion of the public sphere as regards women's visibility provides some answers as to why the phenomenon of many active but different Islamic women's groups in a multicultural country such as Malaysia has arisen. The concept of the public sphere, as first introduced by Jürgen Habermas<sup>1</sup> is meant to denote a

For this, I draw on a study by Rachel Rinaldo (2008) on Indonesia — which discusses how a mobilizing ideology is implicit within current Islamic beliefs and practices, so much so that pious women there have become public actors themselves in pushing for their own specific personal or communal agenda. Rinaldo (2008) attributes this form of organizing to the feminization and democratization of the Indonesian public sphere. I find taking this approach useful also for analyzing the case of Malaysia, where structural factors such as the rise in women's participation in education and employment have already opened up space for women's public visibility. Recent trends in the country's economic development have resulted in the increase in the relative proportion of Muslim women forming part of the workforce. The number of women enrolling in tertiary educational institutions has also now exceeded that of men doing so. These indicators of female mobility are coupled with a growing conscious desire — supported by both the state and civil society — to uplift women's status in Malaysia. There are some aspects of both democratization and feminization to be found in this Malaysian context, even though they are not necessarily leading to the end goal of gender equality. However, conflating the multiple possibilities for agency within a feminized public sphere makes it feasible for women in the country's various religious contexts to be empowered, not just toward a single monolithic goal (gender rights, for example) but rather on the basis of a variety of other aspirations as well.

### **Multiple competing modernity**

What explains the apparent need for each and every Malaysian “women-centric” group to project their agenda — including those that are anathema to their own private gains — in a strident manner? Perhaps this question is no longer relevant as more and more studies are revealing the complexity of gender agency. For instance, despite the preponderance of gender-biased socialization, not all women internalize patriarchal norms (Mahmood 2005: 6). Women have also been carving out their agency by reworking and reconstituting traditional norms without transgressing social orders that may bring harm or danger to themselves (Charrad 2011: 426). I approach these seemingly contradictory circumstances as being due to the presence of multiple understandings of modernity. Eisenstadt (2000), for example, expounds that modernity should not be regarded as a unitary and homogenous state-of-being. It is thus more salient to view current aspects of political and social mobilization as based on the recognition that there are multiple group goals and interests to be achieved. This has led to there being “multiple interpretations of the common good,” and to battle lines being drawn regarding political competition (Eisenstadt 2000: 5–6). The many roads to agency existing among the Muslim women addressed in this study can perhaps be understood as stemming from the emergence of multiple modernity in the country. I add further that this multiplicity of understandings has also engendered a competitive modernity, one that is continually reinterpreted and reconstituted to suit local and translocal contexts.

In the midst of a rising tide of Islamization, the essence of modernity has never been completely displaced. The Islamic resurgence itself was a modern movement, in which procedural and organizational structures were heavily utilized so as to realize its goals. One familiar thesis about why Islamic fundamentalism is readily embraced is because in the wake of rapid modernization it allows members of newly urbanized, socially disintegrating societies to find a cultural refuge and to preserve their identity through the assertion of a familiar heritage — namely, Islam (Esposito and Voll 1996: 127). According to this perspective, Islam is enthusiastically embraced as a way of softening the disruptive and alienating effects of modernization. But this reinvention requires the reclamation of “authentic” traditions. The focal points of most political Islamic movements are the “original” years of Medina (of the seventh century) and the reconstitution of the political community in the form of a pan-Islamic *umma* (transnational community) from the late nineteenth century, as a reaction to Western colonial hegemony (Mandaville 2002: 69–82).

In the following sections, I describe the background to and characteristics of the various Muslim women’s organizations that have burgeoned within the Malaysian public sphere, since the early 1980s. I also include the various forms of “feminized” expression that have provided much grist for political and cultural contestation in the country. The key question, therefore, is: Have these multiple movements been successful in cumulatively defining an agenda for social transformation?

### **Women’s politicization through Islam: the early years**

Over the last two decades the feminization of the Malaysian public sphere has gradually expanded, allowing for many competing women’s voices to fill the different communication structures of society. Increasingly, the market sector has also enabled this phenomenon to emerge. Hence, while the state constructs its own notions of the authentic Islamic woman or family (with all the attendant ambivalences thereof) the nonstate sector also provides its own version of what the ideal female is. In Malaysia, Muslim women’s involvement in political civil society can be traced back to their engagement with nationalist politics during the early twentieth century (Ng et al. 2007: 16–40). With the onset of the Islamic resurgence movement from the 1970s onward, they played a central role in the rise of this campaign as well. The recruitment of women into Malay Islamic movements is quite similar to the circumstances of the early period of nationalist mobilization. Women were heavily courted as participants and drivers of these movements for two main reasons — namely the consolidation of a new communitarian identity and the mobilization of a mass following inclusive of women, youth, and children. This is not to say that they did not join these movements voluntarily and willfully. No doubt, these women also identified with the goals of Islam’s resurgence and felt that they could become more empowered by aligning with it (Sharifah Zaleha 2000).

Women's participation was highly crucial if the Islamization agenda was to succeed. Many female founders saw their decision to be part of the movement as being an act of defiance against the "Establishment" Islam of the time. The latter was considered too cautious in its push for a greater degree of Islamic governance in Malaysian society. Islam as a religion — although traditionally implanted deep in the social existence of Malay life — can still be reinterpreted in radical ways so as to impute a new meaning to the Malay political identity. During the resurgence of Islam, the new religious activists became the voice of dissent rather than of conservatism. For instance, society at the time did not look kindly on Muslim women's decision to wear the veil, frequently taunting those who were courageous enough to do so as *hantu bungkus* ("shrouded ghosts") (Khalijah 1996).

Most of the movements in which Malaysian Muslim women participated were initiated originally by young and highly educated Malays, many of whom had received their tertiary education abroad. A formal qualification and the prevailing New Economic Policy (NEP) — affirmative action for Malay advancement — guaranteed future well-paying and well-placed careers (on the background to and history of the NEP, see Gomez and Saravanamuttu 2013). This ensured that women within the movement — who were also beneficiaries of educational subsidies and scholarships — would not lose out economically in spite of a strong social drive to assign them to a domestic role. The paradoxical outcome for these women was assured upward economic mobility, while simultaneously cultivating an ethos of them having a secondary social role to that of males. At that time, the emblematic trappings of "domestication" — in the form of veiling and subdued social conduct — were at the same time combined with a new sense of economic empowerment. The meanings and interpretation of veiling have now subsequently been deconstructed in more nuanced ways under the auspices of "New Veiling" (Frisk 2009).

It was important that the movement could claim to be backed by the support of highly educated women. The legitimization of the newly founded resurgent Islamic organizations was dependent on the credentials of their members. During a period when Malays were trying to assert a sense of economic competence, this credibility was a significant projection to make. Hence, it was never possible to neglect the need for women's leadership, no matter how pervasively the discourse of domestication was being disseminated at the time. Women were actually shielded from the risk of real subjugation as there was still a gap between theory and practice, between discourse and reality — and between what was aspired to and what was actually achieved. In Malaysia there were two contradictory agendas: an ethnic one and a religious one. The NEP was aimed at creating a class of successful and assertive Malays, to a certain extent cutting across gender; the Islamic agenda, however, was heavily geared toward subduing women's public role. Thus, no matter how theoretically rigid some of the Islamic interpretations of women's roles were, women continued to exist in a practical world that allowed them leeway to escape from any manifestations of dogma.

### **Organizational diversity**

The interlinks between modernity (through education and urbanization) and cultural “re-traditionalization” (through Islam) thus led to the emergence of a variety of Malay-Muslim women’s organizations in Malaysia. These groups range from being pragmatist to centrist to communitarian to liberal-feminist in essence. Added to this spectrum of coalitions is a form of organized agency that exists among the country’s women, of which the wings of political parties can be classified as being significant examples. They are pragmatic and flexible in nature, so as to fit in with their party’s overall goal of capturing governance of the state through electoral politics. A second important such group are the women’s arms of nongovernmental Muslim organizations, or the civil society that grew out of the Islamic resurgence of the 1970s onward. Their goal is to achieve a communitarian ideal built around a religious identity, rather than one which is linked to women’s interests *per se*. Even religiously motivated but feminist groups could be said to belong to this grouping, as they are also part of that civil society. I have also identified Muslim women’s groups that espouse their causes and relevance through the marketplace. A final grouping would be women who express their agency in individual, unorganized ways, though not without affecting public opinion and consciousness on the status of women.

### **The state, religion, and party politics**

An example of the first group is the women’s wing (Wanita UMNO) of the ruling Malay party, United Malays National Organization (UMNO). This organization was formed in 1949, with the main parent party UMNO having been formed three years earlier. The original name of Wanita UMNO was Pergerakan Kaum Ibu (PKI, Movement of Mothers). The latter was changed by dropping the “mother” epithet, so as to attract the participation of young women and members of the professional class. Although Wanita UMNO’s ideological position with regard to women is not always obvious, its practical aims are clear: it functions so as to coexist with, and be supportive of, the party’s wider agenda — which is to remain as the primary ruling party through its promotion of Malay ethnic interests and supremacy. In this larger scheme, there is no ambivalence about the niche that had been carved out for the women’s wing. It is a vote mobilizer, specifically aimed at obtaining women’s support for the party.<sup>2</sup> Wanita UMNO did not start out as a religious movement however, but rather it found itself adapting to the changing circumstances brought about by the gradual but forceful influence of a rising Islamic lobby. At UMNO’s

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<sup>2</sup> Some materials from this section are drawn from an interview conducted with a Wanita UMNO Executive Committee member (name withheld for reasons of privacy) on June 15, 2003. The interviewee held at the time a high position within the wing and called herself an entrepreneur. She was wary about how much longer the wing would be able to play this “persuasive” role of talking to women voters, especially in urban areas given that people there are not usually willing to entertain strangers — such as those from the party undertaking door-to-door campaigning.

10th General Assembly in 2000, for example, a resolution was adopted to make it mandatory for its members to henceforth wear the headscarf at all annual party meetings.

Despite adopting the headscarf as legitimate attire for the female party leaders, many of those from the top-rung of UMNO leadership have been involved in various different allegations of corruption. For example, the head of the women's wing has recently been implicated in a scandal regarding the misuse of state funds for a large-scale cattle breeding project (Chooi 2012). Another of its leaders, a senator in the upper house of parliament, has in the last years been implicated in a botched land deal in the state of Selangor (Lim 2013).

Another similar movement to Wanita UMNO is the Dewan Muslimat PAS (Women's Assembly of Parti Islam SeMalaysia). This is the women's wing of Malaysia's main Islamic party, with the former being formally established in 1953. The original purpose of it was to complement the earlier establishment of the party's Dewan Pemuda (Youth Assembly) and Dewan Ulama (Religious Scholars' Assembly). The mission of PAS women according to the party's official memorandum is to "build a society of high morals in all spheres of human life and to be the upholder of true Islamic teachings," as well as to "spawn a generation of *mujahidah* (fighters with a cause) women who are knowledge, charitable, worshipful, and will function as the *da'ie* (preachers) of society." Until recently, all the female leaders received their formal training from within the field of Islamic education. The early women leaders, meanwhile, received their higher education from Islamic institutions either based locally or in Sumatra, Indonesia. However, an increasing number of professional women — including those educated in the West — are now joining and leading the party.<sup>3</sup> The modernization of the Dewan Muslimat has also started as a result of its participation in international networks such as the International Islamic Women's Union, which has its headquarters in Sudan.

Despite the reticence of PAS women in supporting gender rights, the party as a whole assumed a new sense of pragmatic relevance with the emergence of Reformasi — a movement spurred by the victimization of Anwar Ibrahim, the then deputy prime minister of Malaysia, after he was forcibly removed from government. In contesting the 1999 general election, UMNO and its Barisan Nasional (BN) partners were left with few viable strategies for victory given rising Malay disaffection over Reformasi — except to try and discredit PAS in the eyes of the country's voters. UMNO used the campaign strategy of painting PAS as unsupportive of women's rights, as PAS had a policy of barring women members from standing in elections. UMNO's attack on this immediately put PAS on the

<sup>3</sup> An interview with a leader of the women's wing of PAS was held on July 25, 2003 (name withheld for reasons of privacy). The interviewee was a medical doctor by profession, and was one of the upcoming leaders at the time of the interview. She was subsequently elected a Member of Parliament in both the 2008 and 2013 elections.

defensive. It had to dispel the impression among the electorate that its women members were playing second-fiddle to men within the organization and its hierarchy. It was at this point that PAS began to promote some of its women leaders in more prominent and conspicuous ways.

In 2004 the party finally relented on its previous stance by allowing women to take part in the country's 11th general election — with 35 years having elapsed since it last fielded its first woman candidate, who won a seat in 1969. By the time of the 2008 general election, PAS women's entitlement to contest seats was no longer a debatable issue. In this election, the party fielded 13 female candidates: three were subsequently elected as Members of Parliament while four others were chosen as State Assembly representatives. After the most recent general election, PAS retained seven female representatives in the national and state parliaments.

### **Civil society: from religious communitarians to women's rights groups**

Alongside political parties exist women's divisions of nongovernmental Muslim organizations, such as those found for example in Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) and Jemaah Islam Malaysia (JIM, Islamic Congregation of Malaysia). Muslim women are also actively involved in these. ABIM was among the earliest Islamic NGOs to spearhead the Islamic resurgence movement in Malaysia. It was formally first registered in 1972, with one of the founders being Anwar Ibrahim. In its early years it exerted a strong influence over Malay youths. The original structure of ABIM included a women's wing known as Helwa ABIM. One of the first issues that preoccupied its members was how to get Muslim women to adopt the veil, an ambition pursued despite the objections voiced from some quarters during that period (Khalijah 1996: 94). Women's early and main role in Helwa ABIM was also to establish a system and network of preschool education that emphasized Islam in its curriculum. Women ran daycare centers and Islamic kindergartens as it was believed that the goals of Islamization would begin to be realized by first being introduced in the schooling process.<sup>4</sup>

The counterpart of Helwa ABIM is Wanita JIM (Women's Division of JIM). It was formed in 1993, and functions as an important component of the central organization. It claims to adopt an "*umma*-centric" rather than a "group-centric" approach (Harlina 2000: 109). The emphasis is on the role of women as an "integrating" force within families. JIM advocates say that their task is to build, nurture, and create an alternative community based on the principles of Islam. The organization is very formal, with branches at the central, state, and local levels. A large proportion of its women leaders consists of professionals trained in the medical

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4 An interview was conducted on February 5, 2004 with one of the early members of ABIM, who was active in the women's section of the movement. The interviewee is a university professor and well-known as a scholar on Malaysia's education system.

sciences and in engineering. A primary goal is to advocate an Islamic way of life that simultaneously accommodates modern, progressive values — but strives to do so without upsetting the different and unequal, but ostensibly complimentary, gender role of men and women in Islam.<sup>5</sup>

A Malay-Muslim NGO that exists in contrast to all of the groups described above is Sisters in Islam (SIS). It came into being in 1988 as a reaction to an escalating climate of Islamic intolerance and the closed-mindedness of Islam's spokespersons in the country. It aims to reconcile Islam with the tenets of gender equality, human rights, and democracy. Zainah Anwar, a founding member, described the reason for coming together as being initially spurred by the group's "deep concerns over the injustice women suffered under the implementation of *Syariah* law" (2001: 228). The middle ground that SIS professes to occupy is based on a legitimacy drawn from the critical reexamination and reinterpretation of Islamic texts, done so that an Islamic tradition advocating progressive viewpoints on women can be promoted. SIS has played an important role in projecting a democratic Islam in the course of it challenging the country's numerous laws that impinge upon the status of women. Among the more controversial laws that the group has previously challenged were the *Hudud* enactments. Although a constitutional quagmire, these laws saw their passage through the PAS-led Kelantan government in 1993 and then the Terengganu government in 2002.

Attitudes toward SIS harbored by other Islamic movements range from quiet disapproval to open disdain, if not outright persecution. The resentment articulated by its detractors can be quite vehement at times. In 2009, PAS passed a resolution in its 55th general assembly calling for the government to ban SIS. The resolution — adopted without any prior debate — called for the group to be investigated and outlawed if found to be working against Islam. This move cost PAS much of its support from among liberals and human rights advocates, both of whom had previously backed the party during the 2008 general election. Yet another example of a show of intolerance toward SIS was when one of its books was banned by the government in 2008. The official reason given was that the book had gone too far in questioning Malaysia's present Islamic family laws for being too discriminatory against women, especially regarding issues such as polygamy and divorce. This was construed as disrupting national security and as a threat to public order. The organization's subsequent challenging of this ban was deliberated over by judges at the High Court, and in January 2010 the government's decision was overturned. Another onslaught against the organization came to pass when The Assembly of Mosque Youth, a NGO, sought to obtain a court order in March 2010 prohibiting SIS from using the word "Islam" in its name and identity. But in October 2010 the

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5 An interview was conducted on February 7, 2004 with several members of JIM who were at that time in the process of setting up a shelter for abused women.

court rejected this request and allowed the group to continue using its original name, on the grounds that the complainant had no legal premise for the case.

SIS has to this day remained the only Muslim women's organization in the country to function autonomously — that is, without being attached or directed by a parent organization — and to take up the issue of women's human rights within the Islamic context.

### **The market sphere and organized women's agency**

In this section I move on to describe the crucial role of the marketplace in spawning a religious movement that had previously been persistently suppressed by the state. Within this context, one of the most controversial women's groups to have emerged within the last five years in Malaysia is the offshoot of the banned Darul Arqam movement. Former members of this group after its disbanding reconstituted themselves as a registered business entity, taking the name of the Global Ikhwan Company. Within the family division of this company women cadres would first establish the Polygamy Club (2009) and later the Obedient Wives Club (OWC, 2011). Both these organizations have drawn widespread media attention, hence thrusting the female initiators behind these entities into debates in the public sphere over gender discourse and contestation.

The Darul Arqam movement was banned by the Malaysian government in 1994. The group — part messianic cult and part Sufi — was originally led by Ashaari Muhammad. The movement was accused by state religious authorities of practicing a deviant form of Islam. It was alleged that Ashaari Muhammad had proclaimed himself to be the coming messiah, or the Imam Mahdi. Another explanation given as to why the group was banned was because it was starting to attract too many Malay professionals, including some UMNO politicians. It was also accused of setting up its own armed militia. Based on these charges, the leaders were detained ISA and the commune where the movement was based was dispersed.

After the ban came into force and they were expelled from their original commune in Kampung Sungai Penchala some members resettled in a housing estate known as the Bandar Country Homes. Within this neighborhood, these individuals continued their previous devotional activities under the rubric of a registered business company. They ran several businesses under this entity in fact, with the leadership structure being renamed as the Board of Directors of the company.

Despite being a registered business, Rufaqa would still eventually be prosecuted for being a front for the continuation of the activities of Darul Arqam. Its leaders were charged according to the laws of the Syariah court regarding deviant teachings. The company was consequently forced to close down its operations in 2007. Rufaqa was subsequently replaced with another business umbrella, as noted called the Global Ikhwan Company, which was set up in 2008. In 2010 the spiritual leader of the group Ashaari Muhammad died. However with him still being revered as the

continued source of the group's *raison d'être*, Ashaari's third wife, Khatijah Aum, soon took over the leadership of the group as a proxy — or spiritual intermediary — between Ashaari's soul and the surviving members (Fauzi 2012).

The company claims to have a Family Division within which it has taken 3000 Islamic families under its wing. Under its Education Division, it claims to have set up 300 schools for children, youths, and adults so as to produce devoted worshipers and fighters. Under the Social Division, 100 charity homes providing care for widows, orphans, the poor, and the needy have been established. Under the leadership of the Economic Division, there are now 80 supermarkets, 60 boutiques, 70 restaurants, 3000 acres of agricultural land, 50 animal farms, and a date palm plantation located in Madinah. Hotels and chalets, hospitals and clinics have also been set up across the globe. Under the Publication Division, meanwhile, Global Ikhwan Sdn Bhd publishes books, pamphlets, bulletins, Internet and TV media, and newspapers.<sup>6</sup>

In launching the Obedient Wives Club its vice-president Rohaya Mohamad, a medical doctor, explained that the purpose of the club is to instruct its members about how to be better at sex so as to more satisfactorily fulfil their marital duties and thus prevent their husbands from straying from their partners.

All this while a good wife has been perceived to be prim and proper, just taking care of children and being a good cook. Never has there been an emphasis that a good wife is also a whore in bed [...] sorry to use that word [...] but why not, to your husband, and in this way a man would be responsible. What is the point of a man sleeping around?<sup>7</sup>

The club went on to promote a sex guide written by another of its spiritual leaders Hatijah Aum (supposedly acting on behalf of the deceased Ashaari Muhammad), which contains explicit accounts of her sex acts with her late husband (Pathmawathy 2010). Another spokesperson of the club, Fauziah Ariffin, has emphatically defended the production of the sex guide as an achievement that is on a par with those of the West in this regard:

Is Islam incapable of opening up the knowledge on sex that may even surpass [that of] the West? Is the field of sexology in accordance with Islam not allowed that it has to be kept totally under wraps? Who dares say that Islam prohibits and prevents the exposure of knowledge and techniques on holy sex?<sup>8</sup>

What is interesting about the OWC is that it is led by highly qualified, professional women. Many are doctors, engineers, and accountants and are therefore very asser-

6 The Global Ikhwan Sdn. Bhd. (Global Ikhwan Ltd.) website is: <http://thenurmuhammad.wordpress.com/2012/08/05/global-ikhwan-sdn-bhd-profile/> (accessed: 2014-04-10). It profiles itself as a business-religious entity.

7 Interview with Dr. Rohaya Mohamad, Video, "Club to coach wives to be good in bed", June 4, 2011, <http://www.malaysiakini.tv/video/21690/club-to-coach-wives-on-being-good-in-bed.html> (accessed: 2014-04-14)

8 Video, "Sex Guide not un-Islamic says Obedient Wives Club", October 21, 2011, <http://www.malaysiakini.tv/video/22554/sex-guide-not-un-islamic-says-obedient-wives-club.html> (accessed: 2014-04-14)

tive and vocal in articulating their cause. We thus have a paradoxical situation in Malaysia where women are aggressively fighting for their own submission, if not subversively confusing what the main aim of their own religious establishment is. However, to understand the OWC we must see it within the context of its role vis-à-vis the aims of the larger movement that is the modern reincarnation of the previously banned and state-persecuted Darul Al Arqam. At the heart of the movement is procreation and the increasing of the number of offspring as the basis of group membership (Ng et al. 2007: 102). This is tied in with the essence of the movement having recently taken on a business-like character. The necessity for doing this stems from concerns about economic survival, given that it has to exist independently outside the realm of state Islam (Fauzi 2012). It is in no small way important that the promotion of the Polygamy Club and the OWC has also profited the group through the related sales of their books, videos, and other such merchandise.

### **Unorganized feminist agency**

In this last section I present some examples of women's agency in Malaysia outside of the sphere of organizational politics. The case of Kartika Seri Dewi — a young mother who was charged for consuming alcohol in a hotel in the eastern state of Pahang in 2008 — illustrates how women, confronted with the might of the state, do exert a form of defiance that operates outside of an organized civic sphere, and in doing so throws the system off-balance — in this case the Syariah penal system.<sup>9</sup>

The Sharia High Court found Kartika guilty of alcohol consumption, considered an offence under Islamic law, and thus sentenced her to a fine of RM 5,000 (USD 1,500) and six lashes of the whip. This incident gained much national and international notoriety as it was one of the first cases to involve a female offender. Under the national penal code that is applicable to all Malaysian citizens, whipping as a sentence cannot be handed out to females. In this case the seemingly draconian — though in the end arbitrary — nature of Sharia law was laid bare. Public outrage over this issue would reach fever pitch, putting the Malaysian government in an embarrassing position as it might potentially tarnish its internationally projected image of being a moderate Muslim country. Simultaneously, however, Islamic NGOs supportive of Sharia law were insistent that the government should not interfere with the Sharia judicial process so as to have the sentence either mitigated or withdrawn entirely. These NGOs argued that, going by the separation of powers doctrine, the onus was rather on Kartika to appeal against her sentence — so the

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9 The case file is entitled *Timbalan Pendakwa Syarie Lawan Kartika Seri Dewi Binti Shukarno* (DPP versus Kartika Seri Dewi Binti Shukarno), with YA Dato' Haji Abd. Rahman bin Md Yunus Al-Birry presiding as judge, December 15, 2009. This document can be accessed through the website of the Jabatan Kehakiman Sharia Pahang (Syariah Judicial Department of Pahang), available online at: <http://jksp.pahang.gov.my/index.php/jurnal-hukum/93> (accessed: 2013-01-18).

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Executive should not wield its authoritarian stick at the Sharia judiciary just to please international critics. (The Malaysian Insider 2009)

The government was ambivalent about its own stance. While suggesting that the whole matter could be resolved if Kartika was simply to appeal, the Malaysian state also attempted to reassure the world that “whipping” under Sharia law would be quite different from that normally meted out for penal offences. Liberals and women’s groups concerned about human rights violations, meanwhile, decried the punishment as unconstitutional. For a long time the case and the defendant’s sentencing remained in limbo, as Kartika herself refused to appeal and even demanded that she be caned publicly (although this was not within the stipulations of Sharia law). However, women’s rights groups felt that filing an appeal against the sentence would be the best legal solution to the stand-off. In April 2010 Kartika’s caning sentence was finally commuted to three weeks of community service at a children’s home by the Sultan of Pahang, the constitutional head of Islam in the state where she was convicted.

The reactions to this turn of events revealed the multipronged contestation between women’s rights groups (representing a discourse advocating equal rights), Sharia Islamists, opposition politicians, and pragmatic national leaders. While women’s rights groups — led by SIS — lauded the humanitarian mercy shown by the ruler, defenders of Sharia law — most prominently the Muslim Lawyers’ Association — criticized the Sultan for not abiding by the principles of Islam as they considered caning to be “God’s law” (Manimaran 2010). A PAS politician who was (and still is) the head of the Kelantan’s Islamic Development Department dismissed the claims of the Sharia Islamists as irrelevant, since Islam was not the issue at stake here. According to him, the punishment for Kartika’s indulgence was not truly Islamic as this would entail 20 lashings of the cane instead of the six strokes actually sentenced upon her (Mohd Zuharman 2010). The federal minister of law — who most likely negotiated for the caning to be commuted to defuse the international outcry — censured the Muslim lawyers for being ignorant about the law, especially regarding the constitutional power held by the Sultan in matters of pardon (Asrul Abdullah Sani 2010).

By far the most fascinating reaction came from Kartika herself, who was actually displeased with the order to perform community service — which in effect would stretch her personal ordeal to three weeks in place of the shorter duration she would have experienced had a caning taken place instead. By this time her victimization had been stood on its head to become her agency. She had succeeded in unsettling national political and religious actors, all and sundry, and shone out as the most empowered of all them at the end of the day. She boldly questioned the legality of her three-week community service: “I don’t want Islam to be *fitnahed* [sic]. [...] For

those who study law, this thing is not in the enactment”<sup>10</sup> (Choong 2010). Kartika’s steadfastness and insistence on being caned can be seen as an appropriation of the whole surrounding fuss so as to reclaim her dignity rather than as an admission of her wrongdoing. It nevertheless leaves the question open as to whether the power of the Sharia bureaucracy had ultimately been dented or bolstered by the whole experience.

A final instance of unorganized agency that I wish to present here is about New Age Muslim women writers today. By the late 1990s, piousness among modern Muslims had become a badge of prestige — leading to what I call the formation of the cosmopolitan but pious Malay, or rather the birth of the “cosmo-pious” subject. This generation has thrown off any reference to colonialism and nationalism, being instead postmodern and cosmopolitan in ethos. In 2007 the writer and playwright Dina Zaman published her book *I Am Muslim*, a compilation of her columns that had first appeared on the online newsportal *Malaysiakini*. This work became quite the bestseller by Malaysian standards, with at least 20,000 copies of the book being sold within months of its publication.<sup>11</sup> What is different about Dina is that while she is a practicing Muslim she is also capable of being severely critical of the contradictions and ironies that Islam inflicts upon the everyday lives of its followers. Perhaps there are more questions aroused than answers that Dina herself can provide:

[...] are Muslim Malaysians lost? [...] what makes us Muslim when we wear the Hijab but consort with Shamans, drink and hold discourses on Cuban cigars while attending Friday prayers diligently, and at the same time swallow everything an imam tells us when he could be a con man? Who are we as people and personalities?  
(Zaman 2007: 11).

Dina’s unconventional, seemingly irreverent, take on Islam is even welcomed by the state — not least because embracing it is necessary for them to be seen to be validating a certain politics of openness. Her writings — which convey a sense of immanence, rather than of prescription — do not invite people to a commitment or to sacrifice. In a lighthearted way, the fragmented identities of being Malay, Malaysian, and Muslim are all allowed to merge together or distance themselves from one another — or to negotiate among themselves. As one reviewer of her book surmises,

[...] Dina is more than Muslim, of course, and she boldly explores the interlacing of her religion with her Malayness — the *bomohs*, black magic and occult sensualities of it; the shadowy vapours of her pre-Islamic antecedents. She doesn’t resolve these conflicting realities so much as absorb them; enfolding them into herself as part-and-parcel of her identity and being. That’s cool. The resolution of conflicts — within as much as without — is mostly a matter of management, after all. Dina is not as

10 The phrase “*fitnahed*” is the colloquial anglicized past tense of “*fitnah*”, which means to slander, bring shame on, or to discredit some action.

11 Personal information provided by a representative of the publisher, Horizon Books.

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concerned with resolution as reconciliation [...] But, again, Dina is more than Muslim — and more than Malay. She is also Malaysian, and does well by all three adjectives. (Rehman 2007).

Dina's articulations speak to those complex cosmopolitans who for some reason or other cannot but be ascribed a homogeneously unsettling Muslim persona, as portrayed by the post-September 11 media. Farish Noor argues for the cessation of this tendency toward modern-day oversimplification:

Here lies our concern with the privileging of one singular identity as the basis of subjectivity, regardless of whether that identity is a religious, ethnic, racial or cultural one: It denies the reality that we are all complex composite subjectivities who are the amalgamated assembly of many loyalties and attachments. (Farish Noor 2010)

What we have seen above is that while religion pulls some Malaysian women toward a certain norm of obedience and compliance, there are many others beside who, while still being drawn toward a religious discourse, also throw in new challenges to the social mix — and in the process subvert the very agenda of women's submission through religion in the country.

### **Conclusion: multiple modernity, the public sphere, and agency**

Several structural factors — in combination with new opportunities for Malay-Muslim women to assert their role as political agents — have made it economically and politically impossible to contain their upward mobility in the country. The expansion and specific feminization of the Malaysian public sphere have allowed for different shades of women's interests be heard, articulated, debated, and contested. But the spreading of this mobilization dynamic is also a feature of the multiple and competitive forms of modernity that are to be found in Malaysia. Political lines have been drawn, and there is certainly greater disunity and discord among women in the public sphere than there is consensus on a common agenda. Malay-Muslim women participate in a diverse range of movements, from the pragmatist to the communitarian-oriented to the essentially liberal-feminist in nature. There has been a lot of reworking of what is meant by gender rights and claims, some of the notions of which are based on absolutist ideological principles vis-à-vis differentiated gender roles.

But this pluralization of perspectives and goals would not have been possible if not for globalization, under which the condition of a multiplicitous modernity has been generated. In a way, the diversity of ideological and practical pursuits expressed by Muslim women in Malaysia has provided something of a bulwark against the onslaught of a more hegemonic political Islam in the country. Thus while patriarchal norms may still continue to predominate within Malay-Islamic socialization discourse and practice (Stivens 2006), at the end of the day some of these norms might not actually be internalized by the local populace. Women's movements in Malaysia have been quite successful in tempering the rise of political Islam as

regards its patriarchal intentions, a feat due also to the multicultural nature of politics in the country. However, it is not certain if Malay-Muslim women's organizations can function totally as autonomous entities or that they can be revolutionizing forces. With the exception of Sisters in Islam, they all fall within the ambit of being directed movements (Molyneux 1998: 229). Yet, even an organization like SIS — as well as forms of unorganized agency, such as those demonstrated by the Kartika case and the liberality of Dina Zaman's writings — must depend on the strong backing of a secular civil society and of an accommodative-developmental state if the impetus for a new social consciousness is ultimately to be nurtured and sustained.<sup>12</sup>

What is shown in the discussion of women's empowerment in the Malaysian religious context is that the country's public sphere has provided an effective communication structure for various different groups to each espouse their positions and particular brands of micropolitics. Nevertheless, there have hitherto been no disruptive episodes large or strong enough to suggest that spectacular social change is about to occur in Malaysia. The feminization of the public sphere has been further complicated by the existence of multiple understandings of modernity, ones which are extremely competitive with each other and therefore dependent on a highly politicized and clearly demarcated sphere of contestation. For now, a liberal-feminist agenda based on the narrative of gender rights and equality has still some ways to go before it can emerge victorious from this competition.

To come finally to the answering of the question that I posed earlier in the article: these multiple different women's movements may ultimately be unsuccessful in cumulatively defining a single, shared agenda for social transformation in the country, but they do at least continue to inform and shape the pluralistic modernity to be found in present-day Malaysia.

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12 The reach of works published by SIS and Dina Zaman is still largely urban, being popular primarily among the English-educated and -speaking public. To date Dina Zaman has only written in English.

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