



Malaysia in Transition: A Comparative Analysis of Asian Values, *Islam Hadhari* and 1Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper discusses on the principles of Asian values, propagated by Malaysia fourth prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, *Islam Hadhari* by the fifth prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and 1Malaysia by the current prime minister Najib Razak. This paper gives a special attention to Abdullah and *Islam Hadhari* because it links the Mahathir's period to current Najib's leadership. The intension of this paper is to prove that actually these concepts are similar in theory and practice in stressing more on Islam and neo-feudalistic Malay agenda. In fact, *Islam Hadhari* is ironically a concept created by Mahathir himself to counter the idea of Islamic State from the Islamic party, PAS. Therefore, even after resigning from government, Mahathir's agenda of Asian values is still being practiced. Najib Razak, current Prime Minister, on the other hand intended to promote quality leadership performance for the public and unity among the multiracial Malaysia. Although there are differences in term of the arguments for each of the idea, it is clear that these ideas or philosophies attempt to protect the real agenda of those three leaders which were to protect the political culture of neo-feudalism and ensure the ruling United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and Barisan Nasional (BN) will stay in power. This paper shows the debates between scholars in explaining the ideas and philosophies behind those three concepts in Malaysia's *realpolitik*.

Keywords: Malaysia, 1Malaysia, Asian Values, *Islam Hadhari*, Neo-feudalism

1. Asian Values: 'The Mahathir Model'

According to R.S. Milne and Diane K. Mauzy (1999, p. 168), 'Mahathirism is not a guide to Mahathir's thoughts or actions. Rather, Mahathir's thoughts and actions are a guide to constructing Mahathirism. Mahathirism is an exercise in allocating thoughts into logical categories with the aim of achieving intellectual satisfaction and understanding'. As an advocate of 'Asian values', Mahathir Mohamad, former Prime Minister who ruled Malaysia from 1981 till 2003, explained that the Malaysian perspective of 'Asian values' is based on Malay-Islamic culture and should be protected against absorption by Western values. He urged the three most basic elements of 'Malayness' – feudalism, Islam, and *adat* (traditional customs) as he saw it in 1970 in his book, *The Malay Dilemma*, should all be classed as features to be merely accepted as realities and perhaps adapted to modern needs (Barr, 2002, p. 42). Mahathir (Mahathir and Ishihara,

1995, pp. 71-86) rejected universalism or the Western liberal notion of human rights which, he believed, can corrupt Malaysian culture and religious beliefs. Concerned about the influence of Western individualism, and the future of Asian values and traditions, Mahathir accepted the idea of cultural relativism and launched the 'Look East' policy in 1982 as a broader campaign against 'Western values'. Mahathir told the 1982 United Malays National Organisations (UMNO) General Assembly to 'Look East' to emulate the diligence found there and 'to rid ourselves of the Western values that we have absorbed' (Khoo, 1995, p.69).

Errol P. Mendes (1994, p. 3) labels the Malaysian version of Asian values as 'The Mahathir Model' to differentiate it from other types of Asian values such as Singaporean School that stresses on Confucianism and China Model that emphasises the combination of Chinese-Nationalist-Communist values. 'The Mahathir Model' is basically influenced by Malay-Islamic values. As Alan Dupont points out, Mahathir had the clarion call for Asian values:

...despite the fact that the Islamic ethos of his country differs markedly from the neo-Confucianism of Singapore and other Sino-centred states in East Asia. However, he (Mahathir) reconciles this apparent contradiction by subsuming Malaysia's distinctive national character in broader obeisance to Asian Values. (Dupont, 1996, p. 14)

This model of Asian values has also helped to support the government agenda. Stability and enforced social cohesion in a heterogenous society has become internalised as a fundamental core Asian values (Mendes, 1994). Asian leaders, such as Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, also introduced the concept of Asian values in response to the global democratisation, booming economy and political stability of the 1990s, before the currency crisis of July 1997 had shocked Asian countries (Naisbitt, 1997, pp. 51-85; Inoguchi and Newman, 1997, pp. 1-2). The main elements of 'The Mahathir Model' are strong authority, prioritising the community over the individual, and a strong family based society. The distinctive feature of 'the Mahathir Model' is that it draws upon the experience of the Western world in order to evaluate state and society in the light of modernity. Its main critique both of a universalist-liberal democratic model of politics and individual rights as reflecting Western hegemony is based upon empirical and cultural grounds. Mahathirism or 'the Mahathir Model' is clearly a reaction to the debate between two main theories of human rights, universalism and cultural relativism, and it could also be expanded into these three arguments: anti-western imperialism, strong government and protecting community.

2. Abdullah'S *Islam Hadhari*

Mahathir Mohamad's successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, introduced a concept or a list of values called '*Islam Hadhari*' which, I believe, is not a new concept to replace Asian values propagated by Mahathir. Instead it is a new twist or expansion to the Asian values thesis where there are strong inputs on Islam and the Malay agenda. Abdullah has also never announced that he did not follow the concept of Asian values. Abdullah articulated his ideas of *Islam Hadhari* in his speech entitled '*Islam Hadhari* and the Malay Agenda' at the UMNO General Assembly on 23 September 2004 in Kuala Lumpur. He argued that *Islam Hadhari* is an approach of 'progressive' or 'civilisation' Islam that emphasises on development, consistent with the tenets of Islam, and is focused on enhancing the quality of life. It aims to achieve these through the mastery of knowledge and the development of the individual and the nation (Abdullah, 2006, p. 3). In addition, through the implementation of a dynamic economic, trading and financial system, it aims to achieve an integrated and balanced development that creates a knowledgeable and pious people who hold fast to noble value and are honest, trustworthy and prepared to take on global challenge. It also ensures that the government upholds the practice of good

Abdullah (2006, p. 3) also explains that *Islam Hadhari* is not a new religion, a new teaching nor a new *mazhab* (denomination). It is an effort to bring the *ummah* (the worldwide community comprising all adherent of the Muslim faith) back to the basics of Islam, back to the fundamentals as prescribed in the *Quran* and the *hadith* which form the foundations for an Islamic civilisation. Therefore, *Islam Hadhari* aims to achieve 10 main principles:

- 1) Faith and piety in Allah;
- 2) A just and trustworthy government;
- 3) A free and independent people;
- 4) A vigorous pursuit and mastery of knowledge;
- 5) A balanced and comprehensive economic development;
- 6) A good quality of life for the people;
- 7) The protection of the rights of minority groups and women;
- 8) Cultural and moral integrity;
- 9) The safeguarding of natural resources and the environment; and
- 10) Strong defence capabilities.

In Parliamentary session on 27 August 2007, the prime minister reiterated that Malaysia was a Muslim country and governed according to Islamic principles. He said that Malaysia firmly believed in the principles of Parliamentary democracy guided by the country's highest law, namely the Federal Constitution (Bernama, 2007). Abdullah argued that the *Islam Hadhari* approach did not mean that Malaysia was a theocratic country. He explained that:

The government that I lead is a government based on the principles of Parliamentary democracy and is answerable to Parliament. At the same time, the Cabinet comprises ministers who profess Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and others respectively, who reach consensus based on discussions and come out with the national development policies....I also dismiss the argument that it contravenes the social contract negotiated by our past leaders. We must remember that the Federal Constitution was successfully drafted on the basis of compromise and cooperation demonstrated by the three major races in the country when fighting for independence. (Bernama, 2007, p. 1)

The prime minister said that this approach in administration has been practised by the Malaysian government for over 50 years, and the unique formula had been tested and its effectiveness had been proven. The adoption of Islamic principles in the country's administration did not in any way change the social contract or the constitution (Bernama, 2007).

Islam Hadhari is also looked as a general framework for the development of the Muslim *ummah* away from the violent trend of *jihad*, extremism, and militaristic Islamic groups especially from the most famous of which are al-Qaeda and Jumaah Islamiah. Malaysia had the experience with Islamic militant movements such as the al-Maunah and Kumpulan Mujahidin (Militan) Malaysia (KMM) attempt at *jihad* in 2002 and 2003. Abdullah openly criticised and disavowed the violent streak in the Islamic jihadist movement (Zainal, 2006, p. 180). Besides, *Islam Hadhari* is in intention to erase Islamophobia among the non-Muslim especially in Malaysia. Therefore, Abdullah encourages dialogue between Muslim and non-Muslim in order to wipe out the stereotype of non-Muslim about violence in Muslim community.

Regarding democracy and free speech, Abdullah (2006, p. 114) believes that *Islam Hadhari* is entirely consistent with democracy, because *Islam Hadhari* is all about living peacefully and respecting each other in the society. *Islam Hadhari* encourages consensus building (*musyawarah*) as an approach to solving problems, and accepts the consultative process (*shura*) as the best way of dealing with various societal issues. Abdullah also urges people of goodwill, NGOs, and institutions of higher learning can all play a part to promote critical dialogue between the non-Muslim world and the Muslim world. While it is necessary on their part to find common ground with people of other faiths, Muslims must also open up the discourse within their own faith, a more open and diverse Islamic discourse. The observance of the canon of accountability in Islam was often matched by respect for the people's views. Morally upright Caliphs accommodated opinions that were different from theirs. In fact, there is a *hadith* that even eulogises differences of opinion within the *ummah* as a sign of divine blessing. It explains why at different points in Muslim history, there were healthy discussions and debates about religious and political matters among scholars and segments of the populace (Abdullah, 2006, p. 39).

3. Critics to *Islam Hadhari*

There are many criticisms to the concept of *Islam Hadhari*. First, there is obvious that despite the idealistic argument of *Islam Hadhari*, it was definitely a politically astute strategy that succeeded in Islamising UMNO with the result of nullifying the attraction of 'PAS Islam', especially among the Malay peasants and new professionals. Abdullah made it a key point to assert the civilising function of religion in his formulation of a strategy to face the challenge of the 'Islamic state' by PAS. According to Terence Chong (2006, p. 38), *Islam Hadhari* was a cause celebre in the run up to the March 2004 general election. The prime minister won by a landslide and *Islam Hadhari* was proclaimed a triumph by the onlooking media.

Historically, argued Zainal Keling (2006, p. 180), *Islam Hadhari* was first proposed in 2001, before Abdullah became prime minister, by several Islamic thinkers within UMNO who grappled with the loss of 22 seats, the defeat of senior UMNO figures, and PAS's win of a state government (Terengganu) in the 1999 general election. A special information unit was formed within the Ministry of Information to combat the growing violent messages of Islam by various factions in society and messages against UMNO by members of PAS. Islamic programmes were launched to search for the most appropriate strategy and to reduce the effect of the messages. By 2002, Abdullah, as the then deputy prime minister, began to speak of *Islam Hadhari* as a general concept for Islamic development, in line with the thoughts of several renowned world Islamic thinkers such as Yusuf Qardawi, Muhammad Amarah and Syekh Mohamad al-Ghazali. (Note 1)

Second, Chong (2006, pp. 38-39) argues that *Islam Hadhari*'s content continues to be heavy on rhetoric and light on meaning, even with the Minister of Religious Affairs Abdullah Md. Zin's offering of '*wastiyah* or a balanced approach to life'. While the details of *Islam Hadhari* remain vague, it is also traced to the teaching of Islamic philosopher, Ibn Khaldun. Its notion of 'progressiveness' is drawn from the adaptive mindset and practices whereby 'nomadic societies moved in a law-like manner from their tribal and primitive origins to a progressive civilisation'. Given the importance

that Ibn Khaldun places on laws, social order, and its enforcement, it is not surprising that the state finds *Islam Hadhari* attractive.

Clive Kessler (2008, p. 73) also argues that *Islam Hadhari* is woefully unexplained and unelaborated. It remains discursively underdeveloped and intellectually impoverished despite the great official investment in seminars, prime ministerial lectures worldwide, and ensuing books on the subject. Such an ‘unpacking’ of the term *Islam Hadhari* might provide the basis for, and so both unleash and give legitimacy to, a genuine modernist Islamic sensibility and politics. But this has not been attempted, not even this possibility has been officially glimpsed, in Malaysia (Kessler, 2008, p. 75). Instead of original creative thought in authentic, historically informed Islamic terms, all that is offered substantively is ‘ten key values’ of the utmost blandness, generality and unexceptional conventionality. All this talk about ‘values’ is the expression of a crippled, even defunct, sociology that is intellectually vacuous. It is circular, since it explains social reality in terms of supposedly determining values that are simply ‘shorthand’ summaries of the realities that they are invoked to explain. It is also politically impotent. As Malaysian experience shows, this approach cannot generate a new Islamic sensibility, an effective human agenda, an authentic and plausible politics, certainly not one to rival the Islamist dynamism of PAS. *Islam Hadhari* remains a failed challenge and a lost opportunity – if not a still-born child then an intellectual orphan. Yet it is only in such a genuinely civilisational understanding of Islam and by recognising the full implications of what *Islam Hadhari* might imply that the political impetus may be found to counter the ambitions of the encircling authoritarian Islamists (Kessler, 2008, pp. 75-76).

Furthermore, Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, Shahirah Mahmood and Joseph Chinyong Liow (2008, p. 15-16) and Kamila Ghazali (2006, p. 140) argue that on closer inspection to the concept of *Islam Hadhari*, it is little more than a repackaging of old ideas especially from Mahathir’s ‘*Penerapan Nilai-nilai Islam*’ (Inculcation of Islamic Values) and Anwar’s ‘*Masyarakat Madani*’ (Civil Society). (Note 2) It remains unclear how the abstract principles of *Islam Hadhari* have been, or indeed can be, operationalised. The inability of the Malaysian government under Abdullah to make this abstract concept speak to the everyday realities confronting the Malaysian people, particularly the non-Muslim minority, was made abundantly clear when *Islam Hadhari* was conspicuously absent in the government’s explanation of how it would address a host of challenges such as the integrity of the judiciary, rising inflation, polarisation wrought by the deepening of Islamic conservatism and perceived encroachment on non-Muslim rights. In fact, by enunciating ‘Belief in Allah’ as its first principle, the concept of *Islam Hadhari* marks a discernible shift from the *Rukunegara*, which has as its first principle ‘Belief in God’. In so doing, it has inadvertently contributed to the escalation of the Islamisation discourse and further heightened the reservation of non-Muslims. Ultimately, for non-Muslim, *Islam Hadhari* has proven to be less about Islam or civilisation than it has been about the all-too-familiar refrain of Malay primacy. While lip service is paid to the protection of the ‘rights of minority groups’ by the champions of *Islam Hadhari*, the baggage of race had undoubtedly weighed it down (Osman, Mahmood and Liow, 2008, p. 16). This is evident when Abdullah pronounced in his 2004 UMNO General Assembly speech:

Islam Hadhari is complete and comprehensive, with an emphasis on the development of the economy and civilisation, capable of building Malay competitiveness. The glorious heritage of the Islamic civilisation in all its aspects must be used as a reference in order to become the source of inspiration for the Malay race to prosper. (Abdullah, 2006, p. 3)

Not only academicians who felt that *Islam Hadhari* is not a proper concept, Malaysian *ulama* or Muslim scholars also reckon that although *Islam Hadhari* has principles and values which good for the society, many Malaysians still confuse and wrangle with the concept. For instance, Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, *Mufti* (religious leader) of Malaysian state of Perlis, asserts that after four years the concept being introduced, the government is still working hard to explain and give understanding to the people about the ambiguous concept. Many questions why the government needs to introduce the new concept of *Islam Hadhari*, and some even think that this is a new sect created by UMNO. Mohd Asri, personally, agrees for the word ‘Islam’ in the concept is to be replaced to other words such as ‘*Pemikiran*’ *Hadhari* (*Hadhari Thought*) or ‘*Gerakan*’ *Hadhari* (*Hadhari Movement*). According to him, it is improper to use the word ‘Islam’ as label because the word could create misunderstanding to the people. He sees so far *Islam Hadhari* is just a brand with no product because people do not understand the contents of the concept. What people’s want is not the concept of *Islam Hadhari*, argued Mohd Asri, instead they want a clean and transparent government from corruption and abuse of power, plus serving for the interests of the people (Yani, 2008, pp. 41-42).

Third, critics argue that *Islam Hadhari* was propagated to define the UMNO version of Islam. Anwar Ibrahim accused the government of appealing to puritanical Muslim sentiment to reinforce support ahead of the vote previously in the 11th general election and then in the 12th general election. Commentators in multiracial but Muslim majority Malaysia have sounded alarm over the growing ‘Islamisation’ of the country and the increasing polarisation of the three main ethnic communities. Anwar, speaking in the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies’ Regional Outlook Forum on 8 January 2008, argued that Malaysia’s problem is not radicalism but the issue of state-sponsored Muslim Puritanism which is more by racist sentiments than religious principles. Anwar said that ‘for some reason it is the belief of the present administration in Kuala Lumpur that playing the puritanical card would be best bet for the UMNO-dominated ruling

coalition to secure electoral success in the coming (2008) election...By holding themselves out to be the staunchest defender of Islam, UMNO hope to garner greater support' (AFP, 2008, p. 1).

Meanwhile, PAS attacks the concept as *bi'dah*, revisionism of Islamic tenets and injunctions – and highlighted the failure of the concept to relate the foundation of Islam to the *shariah* law and its necessity in an Islamic state (Zainal, 2006, p. 181). PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang accused the prime minister of being 'inauthentic' (Chong, 2006, p. 39). A roadshow was undertaken among its members to spread the message that *Islam Hadhari* was *haram* (unlawful) under Islamic *shariah* law. It is a new Islam, departing from truth (Zainal, 2006, p. 181).

4. *Islam Hadhari* and Asian Values: Are They Compatible?

Regarding the issue of democracy, Abdullah explained very little about the compatibility between this issue with *Islam Hadhari*. Although, Abdullah suggested that *Islam Hadhari* will encourage critical debates especially in resolving the Muslim issues locally as well as globally, the implementation is remained to been seen after more than five years in office. Many laws pertaining to restrict human rights are still continued to exist and be applied. With many criticisms of the concept of *Islam Hadhari*, clearly it does not contribute credential to be a new idea in guiding the Malaysian politics, instead it tries to copy the agenda of 'Asian values' propagated by Mahathir. Abdullah also propagates the cultural factor by mentioning about how importance culture to Malaysian people especially for the Malays. For instance, Abdullah argues that in order for the Malays to reach greatness and progress in development and economy, they have to go back and embrace their traditional cultures and values by saying that:

The Malays have to be reminded to return to the noble values that are a part of their culture, a culture that has produced our strength and built our civilisation. Enrich the Malay race with knowledge so that Malays will become a wiser people. The Malays are an industrious people. The Malays know that comfort does not come easy, and that wealth must be earned. We are a people that realise how important it is to be vigilant to ensure our survival; we are aware of how important it is to be prepared to face any eventuality. But when there are Malays who are inclined towards adopting negative values, then the Malay race is in grave danger. Then we will have Malays who would sacrifice substance for style, Malays who will betray their own kind in the name of short-term gain. (Abdullah, 2006, p. 20)

Abdullah believes that the Malays, UMNO and Islam in this country cannot be separated where together the three elements form a distinct culture and identity.

With regard to Malaysian multiracial society, Abdullah stresses that the young Malaysian must be taught to believe in God, to be of good morally upright character, to uphold family values and to be confident and patriotic (Abdullah, 2006, p. 28). Abdullah, as well as Mahathir, prioritises national stability and economic rights than civil and political liberties. By referring to political opposition, he argues that:

We are a democratic country. We value the people's right to choose and elect government they want. There are no grounds for anyone or any group to act beyond this democratic process or outside the confines of the country's laws....Much of our agenda to develop our people and our nation lies before us. We will continue to work together with the people to bring further development. We will bring full force of the law against anyone or any group that tries to obstruct us from fulfilling this development agenda through violence and rioting. (Abdullah, 2006, p. 25)

Thus, people of many faiths live in peace and harmony with mutual respect and tolerance towards each other. In achieving that, Abdullah maintains deliberate and sensible management of race relations through power sharing and managing economic growth and equitable distribution of wealth and benefits. Abdullah also wants to preserve the Barisan Nasional (BN, National Front) democratic style of consensus or consociational politics in decision-making process. According to Zainal (2006, pp. 186-187), BN is always very cautiously and principally using a consultative and circumspect bargaining method to reach a common decision. The prime minister would make the final decision on certain issues related to any particular ethnic groups after an open debate and information-sharing. Abdullah has revealed that:

All have the right to speak, even if the issue involves matters related to specific races or specific religions. In the BN style, we are confident that we can discuss all issues, even if they involved sensitive topics, in a wise manner and come to a consensus. The key to this is that we must engage in discussion in an attitude of moderation (New Sunday Times, 2004, p. 1)

Deputy Prime Minister, Najib Razak explains that 'We remain as one nation not because of the need to meet the constitutional requirements, but because we are able to reach political consensus under the BN' (New Straits Times, 2008, p. 4). The BN made decisions on the basis of mutual agreement, not majorities where the small parties had the same rights and voice as the big parties in the BN. The traditional BN-UMNO coalition has continued with the understanding that each and every political party in this coalition will represent the interest of their racial group within the government. Abdullah does not seem to have made any radical changes to the nature of the relationship or the process of decision-making. The enlargement in the number of Parliamentary seats and state legislative assemblies for

the previous general election, including in the 2008 general election, have been allocated to all parties within the confines of the general principle and the outcome generally has been accepted by all concerned (Zainal, 2006, p. 187).

Moreover, like Mahathir, Abdullah (2006, p. 47) is also critical to the Western values of individualism and the West for not doing much in resolving the issues of terrorism and Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. He urges the West to learn about Muslim world because in his view Muslims see themselves as a collective *ummah*, notwithstanding the occasional disunity among Muslims countries. Unlike Western individualism, Muslims have a strong sense of fraternity as a community of believers. This means empathy because Muslims who are not affected by poverty or who have nothing to do with Palestine feel so strongly about the issue. Abdullah argues that this is why without addressing and identifying the root causes of terrorism the war against terror will not succeed. Islam and the Muslims continue to be portrayed as 'violent', 'extreme' and 'intolerant'. In the post-11 September 2001, Western world has perpetuated a negative Muslim stereotype, well-documented and now clear for all to see especially by the Western media. Malicious generalisations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West. To their credit, some Western leaders have repeatedly stressed that 'theirs is not a war against Islam'. But this appears trivial when popular sentiment is driven by a sensationalist seeking Western media that focuses almost exclusively on extremist discourse. Abdullah (2006, pp. 55-56) hopes that there is a willingness on the part of the West to demonstrate that their policies can change accordingly and try to rectify the erroneous stereotype of the Muslims portrayed by the Western media.

Finally, one of the important characteristics of Asian values is Malay's neo-feudalism. First, Abdullah leads the UMNO's struggles to uphold the concept of '*Ketuanan Melayu*' (Malay supremacy). This concept defends the right of Malays to rule the country which makes some the non-Malays especially in the opposition felt that they are second class citizens. Abdullah said that:

I understand the apprehension of the *Bumiputeras*. I strongly uphold the objectives behind the formation of UMNO. UMNO was formed to fight for the right of the Malays. I strongly uphold the nationalist agenda of the Malays. It is important that we think critically and develop strategies to face global challenges. UMNO must not allow the Malays to be defeatists; we must not allow the Malays to believe that they are fated to be weak in perpetuity. (Abdullah, 2006, p. 18)

During the UMNO general assembly in December 2006, there was a serious disconnect between Prime Minister Abdullah and members of his UMNO party. When opening the party's annual meeting, Abdullah urged his party members to tone down on the rhetoric of race and religion, two extremely sensitive issues in multiracial Malaysia. However, in successive speeches by delegates at the UMNO general assembly which, race and religion have featured prominently in shrill tones, stirring unease among locals and foreigners. Hasnoor Hussein, a delegate from Malacca, was among those who railed against critics of the special privileges accorded to Malays and Islam's place as the country's official religion. He said that 'UMNO is willing to risk lives and bathe in blood to defend the race and religion. Don't play with fire. If they messed with our rights, we will mess with theirs,' in his 15-minute address to UMNO members (Lopez, 2006, p. 1). The DAP, which had been a vocal opponent of the SA, filed a police report against UMNO, whose annual general assembly had been noted for its heated rhetoric (Lopez, 2006). After the assembly, in response to public unhappiness, especially Chinese, Indians and other non-Malays, with speakers who touched on racial and religious issues, Abdullah reminded everyone that race and religious issues are still very sensitive matters. Whether any of the statements were seditious would no doubt depend on what was actually said and the effect of those words (Singh, 2006).

Furthermore, Abdullah, in his speech at the 2007 UMNO General Assembly on 7 November 2007, defended his UMNO Youth Chief action of *keris*-waving in the 2006 General Assembly which was received criticisms and considered by many non-Malays as a racist act to them. Instead Abdullah blamed the critics as wish to inflame communal sentiments and sensationalise the words and acts of a few UMNO leaders and speakers. He argued that the act of unsheathing and kissing a *keris*, which was seen by some opposition leaders as an act for war (Lee, 2008), is part of Malay cultural heritage and the act has been twisted to spread fear among non-Malays in order to smear the image of UMNO (The Star Online, 2007). The photo of the *keris*-waving had been circulated to the non-Malays especially Chinese and Indians during the 2008 general election, and managed to upset the non-Malays to vote the opposition.

In overall, *Islam Hadhari* is partly compatible with Asian values. It has several elements of Asian values, but unlike Asian values, it is not properly constructed as a great concept and policy agenda for the country. Although it is rather weak as a proper concept, the agenda to protect the Malays and Islam have become its priority which needs to be accepted as reality by other races in Malaysia.

5. New Leadership: Najib Razak with '1malaysia'

Several decisions of current premier Najib Razak since he took office are clearly in line or give a clear indication that he accepts the process of genuine democracy to be practiced in Malaysia. Najib, who assumed office as the nation's sixth

Prime Minister on April 3, 2009, has urged the people to join him in his quest to revitalize the country through the concept of '1Malaysia.' His slogan is 'People First, Performance Now.' '1Malaysia,' the thrust of Najib's new administration, which hinges on mutual respect and trust among the various races, will be the guide in programs and policies as well as in his vision for the economy, politics and direction of the government. Acknowledging the importance for any government to have the trust and confidence of the people, Najib Razak urged the government to be truthful to the people (Bernama, 2009a). Therefore, Najib introduced the eight values of '1Malaysia'; a culture of excellence, perseverance, humility, acceptance, loyalty, meritocracy, education, and integrity (Bernama, 2009a). With the spirit of '1Malaysia,' Najib also introduced Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for his ministers. Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Koh Tsu Koon said that the KPI was aimed at monitoring the performance of ministers and deputy ministers and making improvements and not to haul them up. The KPI framework and guideline were being drafted based on the one used to evaluate the ministry secretary-generals and department director-generals. Public feedback and views on the quality of the civil service including media reports will be among factors to be used in evaluating KPIs for ministers and deputy ministers. Direct feedback received by ministries would also be taken into account and that dialogue sessions would be continued (Bernama, 2009b).

Realizing that efficient implementation is the key to the success of the stimulus package, in May 2009, Najib stressed on the necessity of coming up with a new economic model for the country, which breaks away from the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) initiative that only focused on Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Najib announced on 22 April 2009 that the immediate dismantling of a rule that required companies in 27 service sub-sectors to set aside 30 percent of their company for Malay investors. Later, he announced new measures to boost the country's financial services sector, allowing greater foreign stakes in investment banks and both Islamic and commercial insurers from 49 percent to 70 percent.

In an interview follows the unprecedented "First 100 Days" event held on 11 July 2009 in which the PM emphasised that his administration would focus on six national key result areas – crime prevention, combating corruption, providing greater access to quality and affordable education, improving the quality of life for the poor, improving rural infrastructure and upgrading public transportation in the medium term. Najib said that: "The success of the government and my administration depends on the KPI achievement. It is easier if we did not choose this path, as there won't be so much pressure. Now the pressure is on to perform... We have to set a high target, but not too high until it is unrealistic. If the target was too low, then the people would think the KPIs were meaningless" (The Malaysian Insider, 2009a, p. 1).

Barely a month into his new role, Najib's new government also released 13 people who were held without trial under the ISA. He also promises to review the law which labelled as draconian especially by the opposition because it has not only used to detain terrorists but it has proven to be used against the leaders of opposition parties. Due to several new measures imposed by Najib, supports in his administration seem increasing. Around the time of his appointment, Najib's popularity rating stood at just 41 percent, an embarrassing figure considering his predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi enjoyed a figure of 46 percent despite being criticized as largely ineffective. In the latest Merdeka Center polls, Najib received 65 percent of approval rating from Malaysians answered positively to the question "How strongly are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way Najib Razak is performing his job as the Prime Minister?" Among Malays and Indians, the figure is even higher at 74 per cent while it was 48 per cent among Chinese (Liew, 2009, pp. 1-3).

However, there are criticisms made especially by the opposition that the new concept set by Najib is too rhetorical and has no real policy agenda, except only for gaining supports and portraying new image of the government with the same old policy of repressive politics. The idea of '1Malaysia' is nothing more a brand with the same old product with the intention to prolong neo-feudalistic political culture and the BN and UMNO in power. For instance, Anwar Ibrahim has ripped into the Najib administration's '1Malaysia' concept, calling it cosmetic and nothing more than a bald-faced political move to try and win back support from non-Malays who deserted from supporting the ruling government since the 12th general election in 2008. Other opposition politicians such as Lim Kit Siang (Zahid, 2009) and Tunku Abdul Aziz (2009) and online news portals like The Malaysian Insider (2009b) have questioned the meaning and content of '1 Malaysia' but Anwar gutted the whole concept, pointing out that Najib's comments about unity and togetherness are only for public consumption. He argued that behind the scenes, the Biro Tatanegara (BTN), an agency under Prime Minister's Department, is still continuing its indoctrination programs for Malay civil servants and politicians, telling Malays to be wary of Chinese and Indians and continuously spreading the neo-feudalism. Anwar's attack on the '1Malaysia' concept also betrays a growing uneasiness among the opposition on BN's charm offensive to regain the support of non-Malay voters, the segment of voters who since the 2008 general election have become a reliable vote bank for the opposition Pakatan Rakyat (PR, People's Alliance). The new administration has also liberalized the financial services sector and attempted to solve the thorny issues of conversion of children to Islam when marriages breakdown. Nothing has been said about dismantling the New Economic Policy or spelling out how equality can be achieved among Malaysians with the main architecture of affirmative action is still in place and the Malay-centric civil service calling the shots at implementation stage. In his blog posting, <http://www.anwaribrahimblog.com>, Anwar noted

that UMNO called PR as the tool of the Chinese and also hammered the DAP as a chauvinist party for its Malaysian Malaysia concept (The Malaysian Insider, 2009c).

6. Conclusion

In sum, there are similarities between the concepts of Asian values, *Islam Hadhari* and 1Malaysia even though they were propagated by different prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir, Abdullah, and Najib respectively. Asia values more or less tried to promote and strengthen the Malay values which were based on Islam. *Islam Hadhari*, similarly, attempted to blend Islam with traditional Malay values. 1Malaysia, however, has some added values in trying to promote quality performance by the government and unity among Malaysians since the end of 2008 general election. Therefore, some elements of these concepts especially in promoting the Malay-Islam agenda, were not actually dissimilar. However, they can be considered as concepts that purposely utilised to maintain UMNO's agenda of neo-feudalism and ensured it to stay in power and protect Malay rights. Even some especially from the opposition claimed that these concepts were used to manipulate the Malay values, Islam and national unity in justifying agenda setting and rules by leaders, Mahathir, Abdullah and Najib. What is clear is that these concepts have given significant impacts toward Malaysia society. Thus, in order to understand Malaysian politics, these concepts are definitely relevant and must be explored in understanding the future of Malaysia as a country.

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Notes

Note 1. These thinkers were regarded as the modern manifestation of earlier Islamic reformists such as Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Redha whose influence had made an impact on Islamic reformist movements in many Muslim states during the colonial period (Zainal, 2006, p. 181).

Note 2. Mahathir in mid 1980s oversaw the Islamisation of the Malaysian polity and bureaucracy, major facet of which was an initiative to construct an Islamic work ethic that could underpin the industrialisation of the country. Termed '*Penerapan Nilai-nilai Islam*', this policy effectively formed the base for his developmental and modernisation strategies. A decade later, Anwar coined the term '*Masyarakat Madani*' to describe his own vision of Muslim governance in Malaysia, one that would be inclusive, just and democratic (Osman, Mahmood and Liow, 2008, p. 15).