Political Islam in Malaysia:
The Rise and Fall of Al Arqam

Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan

Introducton

Islamic resurgence of the 1970s was undeniably an important force that generated new currents of political Islam in Malaysia. New Islamist organisations that were critical of the West and existing political status quo emerged on the political landscape calling for the construction of a new social order based on Islamic morality and laws. Although they shared the common belief that the Quran, *hadith* and Islamic theological treatises could provide the necessary guidelines to build such a society, these organisations differed markedly in their answers to the question of what constituted a contemporary Islamic society and the strategies they adopted for the realisation of that society. The strategies ranged from the construction of Islamic perspectives to comprehend reality and human problems to the formation of loosely structured congregational groups or *jemaah* to help forge moral solidarity among Muslims in and outside Malaysia. On the Malaysian political scene, these organisations vied with two Malay dominated political parties, the United Malays National Organisation or UMNO and the Islamic Party of Malaysia (*Parti Islam Se Malaysia)* or PAS which had been championing Islam in the country. The competition was not without consequences for their role, identity and survival as political actors. Some organisations rose to become influential pressure groups while others were forced out of the political arena.

One of the new Islamist organisations that met a sad ending was Jemaah Darul Arqam or Al Arqam, in short. Al Arqam emerged in 1968 as a small community of purified Muslims that sought to resurrect the classical Islamic society that existed in seventh century Medina, Saudi Arabia. Over the years, Al Arqam grew in size, membership and popularity and became quite a formidable force in Malaysian politics questioning the political system and arguing for the establishment of an Islamic theocracy. The movement did not get to realise its political agenda because in 1994 that is after twenty six years in existence the Malaysian government decided to ban it on charges that Al Arqam's messianic messages about the coming of a messiah called Imam Mahdi, deviated grossly from established beliefs.

Now Al Arqam's experience raises interesting questions about the potentials and limits of Islamist organisations to spread Islam and to realise their political agenda given that in Malaysia, the state reserves the right to determine the parameters of Islamic orthodoxy and to apprehend individuals and groups who promote unorthodox ways of comprehending the divine. Unfortunately past studies on Islamic resurgence offer very

little information about this matter. Most of them merely suggest various approaches to understanding Islamic movements, Al Arqam included,[1] and do not consider changes in terms of ideological propagation and strategies of mass mobilisation as Al Arqam responded to developments within the movement itself and the changing political scenario.

What these changes were and how they affected the survival of Al Arqam as a political actor in Malaysia will be made clear in this essay. This essay is divided into three parts. The first part provides an overview of the expressions of political Islam before and after Malaysia became an independent nation state. The second part describes the history, structural organisation and ideological basis of Al Arqam with a view of making apparent some of the defining features of the movement. The third and final part analyses changes in Al Arqam's stance with regards to issues of political engagement as the movement strove to develop, sustain and defend itself as a *dakwah* organisation in light of changing political scenario in Malaysia.

Political Islam in Malaysia: An Overview

Malaysia is a multi-racial and multi-religious country with a population of about 22 million. One of the distinctive features of the Malaysian social system is the close link between Islam and the culture and politics of the Malays who happen to be the most culturally and politically dominant ethnic group in the country. Islam was introduced into the country in the fifteenth century by Arab and Indian traders. Despite its alien origin, the religion gradually replaced indigenous beliefs and traditions as the most critical component of Malay identity and became a potent organising force in Malay society. Islam was also instrumental in bringing the Malays into the cultural orbit of the Islamic world which has as its centre, Mekka in Saudi Arabia through the *hajj* institution and the vast teacher-student networks that the religion was well known for. As such, happenings in other parts of the Islamic world were and still are likely to have an impact in a big or small way on Muslims in Malaysia too.

Malaysia first witnessed the upsurge of Islam in the 1920s when the country, then called Malaya, was still under British rule. During that time, a small group of religious scholars or *ulamak* who were modernist in their thinking emerged on the cultural landscape of the country calling on Muslims to purify Islam of indigenous accretions, reject traditionalist interpretations of Islam, and exercise *ijtihad*[2] so they could empathise with Western rationalism, science and technology. Some of their fellow *ulamak* responded to the reformers' call by restructuring their own *pondok*[3] to become modern Islamic schools or *madrasah* while those who were close to the centre of power put pressure on British administrators to give Malay religious elite more space in the state's bureaucracy. As a result, by 1930, *madrasah* replaced *pondok* as the key Islamic socialising agents in all the states. The Islamic bureaucracy in each state was also expanded to include within it the Council of Islam and Malay Customs, the Department of Islamic Religious Affairs, religious offices and a system of Shari'ah courts.[4]

In the 1940s, Islam re-asserted itself this time on the political landscape of the country. Signs of this reassertion of Islam could be seen in the establishment of Islamic political parties, the Hizbul Muslimin in 1941 and the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (*Parti Islam Se Tanah Melayu* or PAS) in 1951.[5] The objectives of political Islam at that time were to

mobilise Malays to fight against British colonialism for independence and to establish the Islamic state (*Darul Islam*) through the democratic process. Indeed after Malaysia became a nation state, PAS committed itself to parliamentary democracy and participated in the general elections gaining support mainly from rural Malays in the northern Malay states of Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah and Perlis.

The 1970s saw another wave of political Islam in Malaysia this time in the form of several Islamist organisations that were committed to bringing back Islam to the centre stage of public life and rebuilding Malaysian society along Islamic lines. The most notable of these organisations were the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (*Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* or ABIM), Jemaah Tabligh, Islamic Republic Group and Al Arqam. It was the proselytisation activities of these groups on the campuses of local universities and urban neighbourhoods in the city of Kuala Lumpur that constituted what local people described as the *dakwah* phenomenon or Islamic resurgence. Actually the term '*dakwah*' means 'to invite one to Islam' but in the 1970s, it had quite a foreboding tone. This is because *dakwah* as expressed by the religious activists denoted a challenge to the state, political elite and religious authority with respect to their role and effectiveness in strengthening Malaysia's identity as an Islamic country in the face of the modernisation challenge.

If in the 1940s political Islam emerged to protest against British domination, in the 1970s it resurfaced to address and formulate responses to social issues that arose as Malaysia intensified its modernisation and industrialisation programmes. After achieving independence in 1957, Malaysia continued the pattern of industrial production that the British set in motion when it ruled the country. Capitalist-based development projects were implemented resulting in the expansion of domestic and international trade, greater urbanisation and the improvement of the country's educational, transport and communication systems. No doubt Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product grew but economic development also had undesirable effects on the lives on the people. Among other things, the process generated economic and cultural disparities between the haves and the have-nots and caused a breakdown of the traditional family institution. It also ushered in new lifestyles that celebrated values of individualism and materialism that were alien to the local people. In the political realm, the institutionalisation of representative democracy had been successful in increasing public participation in decision making but the process also encouraged communal politics, thereby intensifying the racial divide between Malays and non-Malays. So looking at societal development in the years between 1957 and 1970, two things became apparent. One, not all segments of Malaysia's population had been able to reap the benefit of modernisation and industrialisation; and two, that the state still lacked the ability to provide a single frame of reference or an ideological focus in terms of which to develop the country.

It was against this economic and political background that political Islam resurfaced demanding the state and society to source Islamic philosophy and teachings to rebuild society. The Islamists call for a re-islamisation of Malaysian society proceeded from a criticism of the West, its institutions, practices and those secular ideologies such as socialism, communism and nationalism that it produced. The Islamists located the root causes of rural poverty, ethnic polarisation, loss of religiosity, marginalisation of Islam and the breakdown of family values to Malaysia's dependence on the West. They wanted the

westernisation and secularisation of Malaysia to be halted and the masses to regulate their social life according to Islamic laws, rules and norms. Interestingly, none of the Islamist organisations or *dakwah* groups as they were popularly called, pushed for the establishment of an Islamic state like PAS did in the 1950s although the setting up of theocracy did later loom on the political agenda of one of the organisations. These organisations too did not involve themselves in partisan politics and constituted an important sector of the civil society.

Another fascinating feature of this new wave of political Islam concerns its actors. Most of them were young men and women in the mid-twenties thirties and forties. They were members of the urban-based Malay middle class and though highly educated did not possess formal training in the Islamic religious sciences. In short, the *dakwah* people were not religious experts but ordinary men and women who ordinarily were not expected to be in the forefront of an Islamic reform movement. Yet this time, it was them not the religious scholars who came forward to organise Muslims for religious and political change. They accomplished this not through elaborate theological discourses but through simple observance of Islamic rules governing Muslim dress code, dietary habits and devotional acts. Regardless of the methods used, the *dakwah* people were quite effective in getting Malays to demonstrate their Muslimness by regularly attending study groups or *usrah* to discuss the Quran, avoiding those food items that contained alcohol and products derived from pigs, and saying *assalamu'alaikum* instead of the usual 'good morning' when greeting one another.

The third intriguing feature of political Islam of the 1970s was that it first emerged in the city, more specifically in Kuala Lumpur, before spreading into the rural areas. This should not come as a big surprise considering that Kuala Lumpur was the only city in Malaysia that was greatly affected by the development trends discussed above. Originally a Chinese dominated town, Kuala Lumpur started to admit a large number of Malays from the rural areas that flocked to the city in search of jobs and education at the universities and other institutions of higher learning located there. These rural migrants soon found that in the urban setting, they could not easily invoke kinship bonds to help regulate their social and religious affairs as in the villages. So in the absence of kin network, many of them resorted to forming informal religious groups as a new basis for them to cooperate and to regulate their religious life. These groups later became important social contexts within which a new consciousness of Islamic philosophy, history, civilisation and politics was nourished and for the religiously motivated men and women to gather and develop initiatives that would make Islam more high profile in Malaysian society.

The Al Arqam Movement: Establishing an Organisation

Now Al Arqam originated as one of the informal religious groups mentioned above. What was striking about Al Arqam was that it developed in terms of size, membership and popularity to eventually become a major *dakwah* organisation in Malaysia. When it was still active, the movement stood out from the other *dakwah* groups because of its communal living, Middle Eastern dress forms and over glorification of the leader of the movement as a holy and saintly person. What follows is a description of how and why Al Arqam developed these distinctive characteristics.

The founder

Al Arqam was founded by Ashaari Muhammad, a religious teacher. Born in 1938 in the state of Negeri Sembilan, Ashaari attended the Madhad Hishamuddin, an Islamic college in the town of Klang in the nearby state of Selangor. He graduated from the college with a *Sijil Thanawi Khalis*, which was a certificate awarded to a student who had completed lower secondary education in the religious sciences. By today's standard, the *Sijil Thanawi Khalis* was a low qualification but in the 1950s, it helped Ashaari secure a job as a religious teacher (*ustaz*) in a nearby school. Ashaari came to maturity just as the British were about to leave Malaya and was therefore, supportive of the islamically inspired politics of dissidence of PAS. In fact, in 1958, he joined the party and was active in one of the party's branches in the state of Selangor.

He however was disillusioned with party politics and left PAS in 1968 to start his own *dakwah* group. As the first step in that direction, Ashaari conducted study circles or *usrah* sessions to discuss the Quran and Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad with his friends, neighbours and colleagues. His tactics were to win the recognition of the religious authority as an Islamic missionary or *da'i* and to develop a following from among the urban dwellers. Ashaari had little difficulty achieving both objectives because of his educational background and experience in party politics. Having secured public recognition and a small following from among members of the working class living in and around Datuk Keramat, a Malay enclave in the city of Kuala Lumpur, Ashaari decided to give a name to his group. At first, he called it *Kumpulan Rumah Putih*, literally meaning the 'White House Group' after the house where his group regularly met and which happened to be painted white. Ashaari later renamed the group *Jemaah Darul Arqam* after the name of one of Prophet Muhammad's companions, Arqam bin Abi, who bequeathed his house for the cause of Islam. By this time, Ashaari who was more captivated by the teachings of classical *ulamak* than modern Islamic thinkers, had already envisioned the restoration of the ideal Islamic society that once flourished in Medina in the seventh century. To him, islamisation of Malaysian society involved recreating this ideal society or *masyarakat salafusolleh* as he called it. So to realise his goal, in 1971 Ashaari and his followers pooled their resources and purchased a piece of land about four acres in size in Kampung Sungai Pencala, a Malay settlement about seventeen kilometres from downtown Kuala Lumpur.

The commune system

On this land, Ashaari and his followers built the first Islamic village or commune in Malaysia and called it Medina Al Arqam. Ashaari made it certain that social life in the commune was organised to reflect the egalitarian and communitarian principles held by the morally righteous people of ancient times. So in terms of attire, the female residents of Medina Al Arqam wore black gowns and face veils while the men wore green, grey or white robes (*jubbah*) and adopted turbans as their headgear. In Medina Al Arqam, families lived in small barely furnished houses which they built themselves and drew from a common pool of resources money and goods for their daily needs. Economically, Al Arqam was critical of capitalism and Malay habit of depending for subsidy from the government. So in the commune, the residents demonstrated self-reliance and economic independence by cooperating to produce vegetables, noodles, cakes and soya sauce for

sale in the open market. Consistent with Al Arqam's emphasis on frugality, simplicity and inconspicuousness, marriage ceremonies in the commune were devoid of any pomp and ceremony. For greater family bonding, men in Al Arqam commune more often than not contracted polygamous marriages while women cooperated to look after each others' children.

The core of religious life in Medina Al Arqam consisted of several ritual practices which were done on a collective basis. In addition to performing the obligatory prayers required of all Muslims, commune residents also observed the commendable prayers and organised the *mauled tahlil* twice a week to commemorate Prophet Muhammad.[6)] They also performed the *wirid* that was peculiar to *tareqat* Muhammadiyah, a Sufi order founded by Sheikh Suhaimi bin Abdullah and of which Ashaari was a member. The function of the *wirid* was for Al Arqam followers to establish mystical and spiritual bonds with deceased saints (*wali Allah*), a religious practice that Muslims in main-stream society would hardly do. By performing these rites regularly and on a collective basis, Al Arqam members believed that Medina Al Arqam would be a consecrated ground with a soul of its own. Religious talks, *usrah* sessions and consciousness raising campaigns also featured significantly in the religious life of the residents of the Islamic commune. These religious activities helped heighten the religious consciousness of the commune members as well as induce discipline among them.

Authority structure

The establishment of communes was only one aspect of the Al Arqam organisation. For the day to day administration of Al Arqam as a *dakwah* movement, Ashaari created several administrative units called *syukbah* to help regulate Al Arqam activities in the realms of religion, mission work, education, publications, public relations and business. Each *syukbah* was headed by a *sheikh* who in turn was assisted by the *naqib, mudir* and *amil*. In short, Al Arqam was also characterised by an elaborate network of authority with Ashaari as Sheikh ul-Arqam or the supreme leader. Believing strongly in social equality, Ashaari tried to minimise status differences between him and his followers by incorporating as many Al Arqam members as possible in the movement's authority structure. He gave them titles such as *khalifah, sheikh, amil,* and *mudir* and made them responsible for overseeing the affairs in the various Al Arqam communes, conducting religious consciousness raising campaigns, running the *syukbah*, coordinating Al Arqam missionary activities, organising and leading the Al Arqam choir and a host of other things. The idea was to get as many people as possible to experience being leaders so status distinctions could be played down.

Membership

Membership in Al Arqam was opened to people from all walks of life. In the initial years of its establishment, Al Arqam recruited members from among working class Malays who lived in and around Kuala Lumpur. In late 1970s, Al Arqam managed to attract university students, teachers, government officials, entrepreneurs and professionals to join it as full time or part time members. This sub-division of members into two categories was done on the basis of how much time a person worked to actualise Al Arqam's programmes. Full time members comprised of those individuals who spent full

time operating Al Arqam's institutions and business enterprises playing roles as missionaries, doctors, midwives nurses, teachers, graphic artists, choir boys, sale assistants, tailors, editors, writers and others. The part-time members on the other hand were those men and women who were employed elsewhere and contributed several hours a day or week working for Al Arqam.

Ideological basis

Al Arqam was no different from the other *dakwah* groups in attributing the disunity of the *ummah* to the eagerness of the Muslims to adopt western habits, norms and institutions and in drawing on existing Islamic doctrines and concepts to provide an ideological grounding for its members. Ashaari selected three beliefs from the Islamic cultural repertoire, reinterpreted them and made them the distinctive dogma of his movement.

The first was the belief in the need for a Muslim to purify his or her thoughts through repentance (*taubat*). The emphasis on repentance had a lot to do with Al Arqam's assumption that Muslims had not only strayed from the righteous path by adopting Western habits and norms but also allowed Satan and their baser selves (*nafsu)* to arouse their souls to worldly concerns. So to gain salvation, Al Arqam required its followers to stimulate their souls to glorify Allah and to resonate to issues that were spiritual and other-worldly. The purpose was to help a Muslim understand his inner self and come to grips with his own aptitude, character, desires and strength. It was further believed that with this knowledge, a Muslim could harness those aspects of his inner self to develop good attributes (*mahmudah*) and potentials for work. This knowledge according to Al Arqam could only be acquired if a person detached himself from mainstream society, join Al Arqam, repent and then venture forth on a spiritual quest to acquire mystical vision (*syuhud*) and enlightenment (*kasyaf*). The ultimate status that an Al Arqam member should strive to achieve was that of a *mursyid* or spiritual leader for he was one who possessed the uncanny ability to discern things secret and hidden having been endowed by Allah an unveiled vision or *mukasyaf.* This status, Al Arqam argued, could only be achieved if the seeker of the unveiled vision subjected himself to the tutelage of a Sufi *sheikh* and lived in the consecrated surroundings of the Al Arqam's communes.

The need for Muslims to *jihad* also featured significantly in Al Arqam's ideological framework. *Jihad* was initially interpreted to mean the moral struggle that an Al Arqam member would have to undertake in order to purify himself of foreign accretions, to exercise self-control (*mujahadatunnafs*) and to develop inner strength. Ashaari considered *jihad* of this nature necessary to help Malays project a new Islamic identity, become self-reliant and morally righteous. The idea was to demonstrate that *jihad* actually took many forms, not necessarily riots and armed struggle as commonly thought.

The third important belief that Al Arqam members subscribed to was the coming of the messiah, called Imam Mahdi. The Mahdi was an enlightened and well-guided religious person who would appear in the age of the great confusion to fight against the enemies of Islam and restore a reign of peace and justice. This belief had taken deep roots among Al Arqam members having been convinced by their leader that contemporary Malaysian society characterised by corruption, low moral standards and numerous malpractices by those in power, was in a state of confusion as forewarned in the Quran. As such, the Mahdi would soon appear and Al Arqam, being the only *jemaah* in

the world that adhered to the Prophet's Sunnah, would produce the calendrical renewer (*saiyidul mujaddid*) who would herald the coming of the Mahdi.

Clearly, communal living, beliefs in the importance of repentance, *jihad* the great chaos and the Mahdi, implied that Al Arqam's strategy for changing or islamising Malaysian society was to create ways to denounce that society as degenerative and to build an alternative social structure or a counter-culture. Indeed Al Arqam when it was still active did produce that counter-culture. This counter-culture was one that dearly prized a form of religious leadership that was free from state control. This form of religious leadership was not something new to the Malays. In fact, in their history, this form of leadership did exist once in pre-colonial times and was represented by itinerant religious scholars who preferred to wander around spreading Islam rather than serve the rulers. That Ashaari tried to revive this form of religious leadership and made it one of the defining features of Al Arqam could be seen from his own actions and the symbols of prestige that he used to drive home the point that he did not need state sanction or approval in whatever he did. For example, Ashaari did not bother to register Al Arqam as a non-governmental organisation and distributed without hesitation Sufi titles such as *sheikh, khalifah and imam* to his followers.

Another distinguishing feature of this counter-culture was its emphasis on boundary demarcation. Al Arqam strongly believed that it alone possessed the truth and that other people should live by that truth. One important corollary of this belief was the clear lines of social separation between Al Arqam members and non-members. At the ideological level, this line was evident from Al Arqam's message concerning the messiah while at the behavioural level, it was reflected in the Middle Eastern dress form, ritual practices and spartan lifestyle of its members. This concern with boundary maintenance and boundary demarcation served two purposes which were one, to highlight the distinctiveness and traditionalist identity of Al Arqam and two, to bring into focus those aspects of mainstream Malaysian culture namely consumerism and materialism which to Al Arqam were anathema.

Finally the counter-culture that Al Arqam generated was also one that was willing to pursue change from the current state of affairs to another. More specifically, the change that Al Arqam sought was the restoration of a god-centred and ulamak-led society. This change was anticipated in messianism when God would send the Mahdi, thereby recreating the longed for ideal situation. At the personal level, Al Arqam members anticipated that change would result from their own acts of worship as well as the concerted efforts of the movements' actions in the here and now.

The Al Arqam Movemnet: Defending the Organisation

The 1970s

In its history, the heyday day for organising, mobilising and visibility of Al Arqam were the 1970s and 1980s. In relation to this, the pivotal role played by Ashaari Muhammad as the leader of Al Arqam in attracting a following and laying the foundation of this *dakwah* organisation should be recognised. Given his experience in party politics, knowledge of Islamic religious sciences and talent at public speaking, Ashaari had little difficulty in convincing grassroots Muslims at first in Kuala Lumpur and then in other parts of Malaysia that they could assume a strong role in local economics and politics by

joining his *jemaah* and/or by making contributions in cash or in kind to the movement's *jihad* fund. Through lectures and books, Ashaari tirelessly made it known what Al Arqam's mission was. He also trained missionaries and made Islamic mysticism the defining feature of the movement and a means to forge unity among his followers. So by late 1970s, Al Arqam owed it to Ashaari to develop a missionary system as well as a close knit organisation with a culture of its own.

In the 1970s, sustaining and defending this organisation was not that difficult considering that the government was not hostile to *dakwah* groups. During that time, the issues that captured the imagination of the Malaysian government were communist insurgency and racial harmony not Islamic resurgence. Although wary of the *dakwah* groups, the Malaysian government did not attempt to suppress them. Instead it created the Dakwah Foundation of Malaysia (*Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia* or YADIM) in 1974 and assigned it the specific task of coordinating the activities of individual preachers and *dakwah* organisations in the country. This decision had positive implications for the growth and expansion of all *dakwah* groups, Al Arqam included. They were free to propagate their versions of Islam and mobilise mass support in ways they thought would best realise their agenda.

Al Arqam used this freedom to slowly build the alternative social structure described above. It also presented itself to the wider society as a self-conscious Islamic status group devoted to reliving the Islamic past through mysticism and economic radicalism. Its followers saw membership in Al Arqam as fulfilling a religious obligation to restore the Islamic golden age. Still organised as an egalitarian structure and other-worldly in orientation, Al Arqam's activism was aimed at stimulating personal transformation and developing self-reliance among its followers not encouraging them to be politically engaged. During that time, Al Arqam used the concept of *jihad* to refer to quiet perseverance not violent demonstrations or armed struggle. Its members fulfilled the need to *jihad* by expanding their efforts and money to develop Al Arqam's business enterprises, undertake mission work in and outside Malaysia, stage exhibitions, write, publish and sell books and magazines concerning Al Arqam's goals and achievements. Al Arqam had already resorted to mysticism but the latter functioned to help Al Arqam followers forged spiritual and moral bonds with saints not to impart messianic messages that could be used to organise Al Arqam members for political action. In other words, Al Arqam was non-political in the sense that it did not seek to rival with political parties and other *dakwah* groups for control of the state.

Nevertheless, tension between Al Arqam followers and other Muslims did develop from time to time. In Sungai Pencala for example, Al Arqam's followers were criticised for their holier-than-thou approach to religious matters. People speculated that Ashaari and his close followers actually used magic (*seher*) to entice people to join the movement. The unconventional lifestyle and Middle Eastern dress forms of Al Arqam members became objects of ridicule and the media carried sporadic report about how women who joined Al Arqam were married and then divorced by their husbands so other men could marry them. It was also not unknown for people to avoid befriending Al Arqam followers because the latter were quick to interpret any good gesture shown by others towards them as evidence of support for Al Arqam.[7] However, these tensions did not escalate into conflict.

The 1980s

Defending Al Arqam as a *dakwah* organisation and the new religious tradition it helped evolved proved to be quite a challenge in the years between 1980 and 1994. For one thing, Al Arqam by that time had expanded considerably in terms of membership, size and activities. The number of its members had risen from a few hundred in the 1978 to 10,000 in 1989. In 1978, Al Arqam had only five communes but in the 1980s, fifteen more were built in various parts of Malaysia making the total number of communes 23. The movement's economic and financial resources too had grown a lot as a result of Al Arqam's greater involvement in business in the fields of agriculture, education, food production, transport and publications. By 1990, Al Arqam's assets were said to be worth US $116 million and the movement had *dakwah* networks outside Malaysia in countries like Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand, Singapore and Uzbekistan. However, although Al Arqam's growth was impressive, the movement was far from being a unified and cohesive organisation as it was in the 1970s. There were signs of power struggle within the movement as more young and highly educated men joined the movement and competed with the older and less educated senior members for leadership positions. There was also growing dissatisfaction among many Al Arqam members over the way Al Arqam's funds were managed, used and distributed, Ashaari's morality with respect to women and the anti-intellectualism that had set in due to too much emphasis on mysticism. In the 1980s, there were leadership and management problems that were rather unsettling that Ashaari and Al Arqam's top echelon had to grapple with.

The 1980s also saw UMNO, PAS and other *dakwah* organisations stepping up their own islamisation programmes, thereby putting demands on Al Arqam to review its own agenda and strategies. To strike chords with the *dakwah* people and to improve its credentials as a spokesman of Islam, UMNO under Dr. Mahathir Mohammad brought in Anwar Ibrahim, the President of ABIM and university professors in the fields of Islamic studies into the state structure. The party also lost no time integrating those Islamic symbols, slogans, terminologies and concepts that were used by the *dakwah* groups into its own Islamic discourses to emphasise similarities in terms of goals and interests with the religious activists. The 1980s also saw the Malaysian government implementing various islamisation programmes that ranged from rhetorics on *nilai-nilai murni* literally meaning 'sacred values' to the creation of Islamic banking, financial and educational institutions. UMNO's opponent, PAS tried to outdo and outshine UMNO in matters pertaining to Islam by adopting a 'fundamentalist' posture and making it clear that it wanted to set up the Islamic state and implement the *hudud* law. ABIM after losing Anwar to UMNO also began expressing conditional support for the government by declaring that it was going to be 'proactive' rather than 'reactive' to the government's policies.

Sensitive of changes taking place in Malaysian politics and the conflict and squabbles within the movement, Ashaari and the top echelon of Al Arqam decided on a new trend of ideological propagation. This trend was one that called for a criticism of the state, other *dakwah* organisations, PAS and UMNO. Al Arqam continued to demonstrate a longing for the glorious Islamic past but used it this time as the focus of its emphatic messages on open antagonism against its enemies. It was during these years that Ashaari began to tell stories about the Mahdi and how to detect the great chaos that preceded the end of the world. In fact, Ashaari even published a book entitled '*Aurad Muhammadiyah Pegangan*

Darul Arqam' (translated as "Aurad Muhammadiyah as the Ideological Basis of the Jemaah Darul Arqam") to that effect. In the book, he claimed that Sheikh Suhaimi bin Abdullah, the founder of tareqat Muhammadiyah did not die and would re-emerge as the Mahdi. Ashaari did not just impart messianic messages to the people. He also criticised the religious officials, especially those who worked at the Islamic Research Centre in Kuala Lumpur, for being corrupt and interested only in material gains such as job promotion, salary increment and professional perks. In another book entitled *Ulamak Dalam Pandangan Islam* (translated as "Ulamak From the Islamic Point of View"), Ashaari labelled the religious officials as *ulamak suk* or 'bad ulamak'. PAS, UMNO and ABIM too were not spared of criticisms. Ashaari questioned the credibility of these organisations as the spokesmen of Islam. According to him, they could not and should not represent Islam because UMNO, PAS and ABIM were motivated less by a concern for the moral and spiritual well being of the *ummah* as by their own self interests.

By making the above assertions, Ashaari entered into open conflict with the state and invited more hostile feelings from PAS and ABIM. As a result, the book *Aurad Muhammadiyah Pegangan Darul Arqam'* was banned on the basis that it had damaging effects on the beliefs and faith of the Muslims. Undeterred Al Arqam members started to spin stories to emphasise Ashaari's holiness. When Ashaari fled Malaysia to take refuge in Phuket in 1986, his followers claimed that he had vanished or *ghaib*, something that only holy men could do. Then a story aimed at emphasising Ashaari's saintly status was circulated that when he visited the Cave of the Seven Sleepers in Jordan, the seven young men who were referred to as the Ashabul Kahfi, appeared and paid homage to him. In his absence, the upper echelon of Al Arqam also provided vivid accounts of how their leader managed to influence heads of states, including Dr. Mahathir and President Soeharto, to come around to his way of thinking. They also organized a special Sufi collective rite called *majlis yaqazah* to verify that the magico-mystical power (*karama*) that resided in Sheikh Suhaimi had filtered into Ashaari, thereby making him the *mujaddid.*

Then in June 1994, news had it that Ashaari had held a dialogue with Prophet Muhammad in the Kaabah in Mekka. The Prophet was said to instruct Ashaari to return to Malaysia to prepare for the arrival of Imam Mahdi. Assuming now the name of Abuya Imam Ashaari Muhammad At Tamimi and seeing himself as the *mujaddid*, Ashaari proclaimed that he would build an army called the Badr army (*Tentera Badr*). This army one day would take over Malaysia from the present government. These messianic messages notwithstanding, Ashaari also reiterated his earlier charges about the immoral practices and corruption among religious officials and politicians and through a piece of writing, even challenged Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammad to a popularity contest.[8]

It was Ashaari's messianic messages and attacks on UMNO that pushed the Malaysian government to take steps to ban Al Arqam. First, a meeting of top level officials from Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and Brunei where Al Arqam had taken roots was convened to assess the movement's activities. Then on 5 August 1994, the National Fatwa Council of Malaysia met and issued a ruling that banned Al Arqam's teachings.[9] Following the ban, the Malaysian government detained Ashaari and several top Al Arqam leaders under the Internal Security Act for a few years. When they subsequently

admitted to their mistakes, on 14 October 1994, Ashaari and his followers denounced Al Arqam publicly over the national television. They then underwent a rehabilitation programme to help them reintegrate into mainstream society. Ashaari, however was placed under 'restricted residence' for several more years. Al Arqam's communes were disbanded but arrangements were later made for some of the former members of the movement to continue operate Al Arqam's companies under the name of Rufaqa Corporation.[10]

Clearly by concentrating a lot of their actions trying to convince members of the Muslim public that Ashaari Muhammad was a saintly person and to anticipate the coming of the messiah, Arqam projected a different image in the years between 1980 to 1994. The movement was seen as sectarian, cultic, non-compliant and defiant. The Islamic identity that it produced during that time was not a desirable one from the state's point of view. It was also politically threatening and menacing. From the point of view of its adversaries, Al Arqam could no longer be dismissed as an apolitical dakwah organisation. The movement had assumed political significance for several reason. Al Arqam had been able to bring to the attention of the Malaysian public issues of corruption and social injustices that the government would not want to be highlighted. It also questioned the political system and might put a stake to militancy in order to realise its political agenda because to Al Arqam members, *jihad* now meant armed combat against unjust and oppressive leaders. Furthermore, Al Arqam's organisational discipline, economic independence and direct interaction with the grassroots through its daily economic and social dealings were potentials that the movement could tap into if it decided to be a political force.[11] All these go to show that in the 1980s, there was obvious rivalry and competition between Al Arqam, UMNO, PAS and ABIM for control over the state, the people, political space and Islamic symbols and institutions. In the competition, Al Arqam did not consider it important to forge alliances with other groups so it could negotiate better with the state. So without real support from other groups, it was relatively easy for the Al Arqam to be forced out of the political arena by the pervasive and powerful Malaysian state.

Conclusion

From the preceding discussion, three conclusions can be drawn. The first concerns the role of Al Arqam. Even though Al Arqam no longer exists, its role in highlighting the problems and social injustices suffered by the Malays as a result of the implementation of capitalist-based projects must be recognised. Second, the emergence of Al Arqam should not be seen as a sectarian movement. No doubt, by placing a great deal of stress on mysticism, messianism, *jihad* and communal living Al Arqam produced a new route to Islamic orthodoxy. However this should not be construed as a protest against the prevailing belief system only. It was also a political response to western cultural intrusions, uneven development and social injustices. Finally, it can be concluded that the experience of Al Arqam illustrates the authorities' determination to police the boundaries of Islamic religious orthodoxy and national security, thereby suppressing freedom of religion and expression. Evidently in handling Al Arqam, the state took away this freedom from Al Arqam in order to ensure that other equally prized values namely of multi-racial harmony, peace and tolerance could prevail.

Notes:

1) Researchers informed by modernization and conflict theories had invariably suggested that Islamic movement be seen as a manifestation of heightened ethnic consciousness among Malays, a form of political disaffection and a trend of political mobilisation. (see Judith Nagata, *The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1984); Chandra Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 1987); Clive S. Kessler, "Malaysia: Islamic Revivalism and Political Disaffection in a Divided Society," *Southeast Asia Chronicle*, 75, (1980), 3–11; Husin Mutalib, *Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990); A. B. Shamsul, "Religion and Ethnic Politics in Malaysia: The Significance of the Islamic Resurgence Phenomenon," C. F. Keyes, Laurell Kendall and Helen Hardacre eds., *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern State* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994); Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan, "Constructions of Islamic Identities in a Suburban Malay Community," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 25(2), (1997), 25–38).

2) The term '*ijtihad*' means 'one's own independent opinion'. In the context of Islamic reform movement of the 1920s, the term was used in opposition to the word '*taklid*' which means 'blind obedience' to the religious authority. Thus '*ijtihad*' as a symbol and slogan implied the need on the part of Muslims to be critical of those traditions and practices that constrained them from embracing those aspects of Western civilization, in particular new technology that might help them to advance. See William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1967) for a detailed analysis of the modernist movement in pre-independence times.

3) The word '*pondok*' in Malay actually means 'a hut'. It is however widely used also to refer to traditional Islamic learning centers that were found in the northern states of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu. The main building in a *pondok* establishment is the house of the principal teacher, who is an *ulamak* and who is called *tok guru*. Around his house are small one room wooden huts that belong to the students (*murid*) who usually come from far and near to study Islam with the *tok guru*. The *pondok* is considered a traditional establishment because it concentrated on teaching only Islamic religious sciences even then at a very basic level.

4) See Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan, "Towards a Syariah-based Society: Religious Rationalization and the Development of the Islamic Legal Order in Malaysia," *Jurnal Antropologi dan Sosiologi*, Vol. 18, (1990), 41–53.

5) For a detailed account of the history, growth and role of the Islamic Party of Malaysia see Farish Noor. *Islam Embedded. The Historical Develoment of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS* (1951–2003), Vol. 1 & 2, (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological research Institute (MSRI), 2004).

6) This apparently was a pre-Wahabbi ritual. In mainstream Islamic tradition in Malaysia, the *maulid* held in conjunction with the Prophet's birthday was and still is performed only once a year on the appointed day.

7) See Sharifah Zaleha Syed Haasn "Islamic Revivalism and Social Cleavages in an Urban Malay Community," *Bulletin of the Royal Institute of for Inter-Faith Studies*. 2(2), (2002) 33–48.

8) Some of the pamphlets distributed by members of Al Arqam movement which contained the prediction that all evils would be wiped out included 1415 Hijrah: Menuju Kejayaan Yang Dijanjikan (translated as "1415 Hijrah: Towards Victory As Promised") by Abuya Sheikh Imam Ashaari Muhammad At Tamimi and distributed by Majlis Syuyukh (Highest Council) Al Arqam dated 18 June 1994, Lojiknya Abuya Imam Ashaari Bakal PM (translated as "The Rationale for Abuya Imam Ashaari To Be The Next Prime Minister") dated 24 July, 1994 and Abuya Imam Ashaari vs Dr. Mahathir (undated).

9) New Straits Time, August 6, 1994, 1. For a detailed account of the positions of the governments, religious organizations and other associations in Southeast Asia see Mueleman, J. H. 1995. "Reactions and Attitudes Towards the Darul Arqam Movement in South-East Asia." Paper presented at the First EUROSEAS Conference, Leiden, 29 June–1 July.

10) Zaleha Sharifah, "Islam, state and civil society: the case of the Al Arqam," *NIAS Nytt*, December, No. 4, (2004), 8–9.

11) See Hassan Saliha, "Islamic Non-governmental Organisations," Meredith L. Weiss and Saliha Hassan, *Social Movements in Malaysia, From Moral Communities to NGOs* (London & New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 108.