ISLAMIC REVIVALISM IN HARMONY AND CONFLICT

The Experience in Sri Lanka and Malaysia

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The recent upsurge of Islamic revivalism that has swept through the Muslim world has added more to the latter's problems than it has provided solutions to those already existing. The problems it created, and in fact the nature and origins of the revivalist movement itself, have varied from country to country depending on political, economic, and social conditions. This article intends to examine the shape of Islamic revivalism and its consequences in two countries, Sri Lanka and Malaysia, which offer several contrasting structural differences.

The Environment—A Contrast

In terms of its economic resources and per capita GNP, Sri Lanka is one of the poorer nations in the contemporary Third World. With tea as its major export, accounting for more than 50% of the export revenue; without any significant mineral or oil deposits; and with a total population of nearly 15 million people, increasing annually at the rate of about 2%, the island's economy is in dire straits. The World Bank estimates Sri Lanka's per capita GNP for 1981 at $230, and according to another survey the country ranks 116th of 145 countries in terms of per capita GNP. If the current inflation rate of 45% and the unemployment rate of 15% are added to this gloomy picture, Sri Lanka's economic difficulties become clearly evident.

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On the other hand, Malaysia is one of the richer countries in the Third World. With a population of nearly 14 million and a per capita GNP of $1370, it ranks 65th in the survey mentioned above. It has a diversified export sector based chiefly on rubber, palm oil, tin, timber, and petroleum. The low unemployment rate of 5.3% in 1980 and its lower rate of inflation than Sri Lanka—23% as reflected by the consumer price index between 1975 and 1980—are further indications of Malaysia’s comparative economic strength.

Both countries have a multiracial and multireligious society, but while the Muslims in Sri Lanka form only about 7% of the country’s population, their counterparts in Malaysia add up to between 44% and 54%. The religio-ethnic distribution of the Malaysian population is not clearly defined. The official view is that all Malays are Muslims, and since the latter make up about 54% of the population, it is claimed that Malaysia is a Muslim majority country. But in practice all Malays are not Muslims. There are a considerable number of animists among the Malays who can be called at best statistical Muslims. Nevertheless, what is important for our purpose is that the Muslims are a ruling community in Malaysia with Islam as the state religion. In Sri Lanka, on the other hand, Muslims are a subject community without any special constitutional status accorded to their religion. Both groups adhere to the Shafiite school of the Sunni sect.

There is yet another difference between the two groups with regard to religion that plays a crucial role in the revivalist movement. While the sources of religious inspiration and influence in Malaysia come mostly from the Arab Middle East and neighboring Indonesia, and least of all from the Indian subcontinent, the order is reversed for Sri Lanka, which receives most of its inspiration from neighboring South India, a modicum from the Middle East, and none at all from Indonesia. In other words, a ruling religion in the Middle East and Indonesia interacts with a ruling religion in Malaysia, and a subject religion in India interacts with a subject religion in Sri Lanka. Naturally, the force of that interaction has to be different in the two countries.

There is also a political difference that determines the shape of Islamic revivalism between the two countries. Since the Muslims in Sri Lanka are a minority scattered over all parts of the island, there is less possibility of that community organizing itself into a single political group to fight for its rights or for a particular share of the country’s economic cake. The fact

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that there has been no Muslim political party in Sri Lanka illustrates this argument. The strategy the community has adopted so far has been to join hands with the majority parties to try to win concessions from whichever government comes to power. They live more by their privileges than by their rights. The position is reversed in Malaysia. The Malays, according to Mohamad Mahathir, the present Prime Minister, are the “definitive people,” and “if citizenship is conferred on races other than Malays, it is because Malays consent to this. That consent is conditional.” Thus, having established Islam as the state religion and having defined the Malays/Muslims as the only definitive people, one cannot then stop a group of Muslims from entering the political arena with the sole intention of shaping the society’s political and economic structure on religious principles.

Finally, the difference between temperament and character of the two groups of Muslims should not be ignored in discussing environmental factors. In Sri Lanka the Muslims are noted for their entrepreneurship and hard work, and are considered to be the most business-minded community in the country. Consequently, they prefer a free-market capitalist economy to one that is state controlled or socialistic. This explains their traditional support to the ruling United National Party, which believes in the superiority of the capitalist system and uses all its endeavors to implement it. In Malaysia, on the other hand, the Malays are considered to be less enterprising, and therefore economically retarded and far behind the other races in terms of economic achievements (Mahathir attributes this to the Malay ethnic trait). This means that in a free enterprise system the Muslims stand to lose in Malaysia. Even though the Malaysian government publicly announces its commitment to free enterprise, in practice it adopts a mixed economic model in which an increasing role is reserved to the state.

Thus the recent revivalist movements in Sri Lanka and Malaysia have emerged in the context of two contrasting political, economic, and socio-cultural environments. In the former it was a movement within a minority community without organized political parties, living in a poor economy with a strong preference for operating under a capitalist economic framework; whereas in the latter, it is a movement within the ruling community, politically organized into several groupings and living in a rich economy but within a state-controlled structure. These environmental factors play a crucial role in shaping the character of the revivalist movement in both countries.

The Nature of the Islamic Revivalism: A General Picture

The Islamic revival that ushered in the 1970s was a combined product of three events of great significance: the partial victory of Egypt in the 1973 war with Israel, the formation of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) with its Arab members forming a subgroup (OAPEC), and the success of the Iranian revolution in 1979. All of these events contained in common an element of aggression. Nevertheless, the revivalist movement that emerged out of them developed into two contrasting types, the *iman*-centered and the *umma*-centered movements, each in turn taking either a radical or a moderate image depending on the particular socio-political environment in which it operated.

The ideal of the *iman*-centered movement is simply the self-purification of the Muslims both spiritually and temporally so as to build up a stronger *iman* or faith. According to this view, the summation of all purified souls will lead to a purified society. This approach to social change is akin to the philosophy of the Benthamites who also believed that the greatest happiness of the greatest number could be achieved through the pursuit of individual happiness. If the existing Muslim state is corrupt or unislamic, the way to change it is not through organized revolution but through a change in the character of its subjects. Once the people become true Muslims, Allah will cause the downfall of the corrupt.

This philosophy of *iman*-centered revivalism determines the nature of its activities. Its followers are chiefly engaged in *tabligh* (missionary work) in which they are less interested in winning new converts to Islam than in making the existing members of the faith more Islamic. Instructing the *umma* (community) to follow strictly the five pillars of Islam, teaching the young the basic principles of the religion, constructing mosques and establishing *madrasas* (Quran schools), and endeavoring to change the curriculum in schools to incorporate a bias towards religion are some of the activities of this group. They lead a simple life with little desire for material advancement, and their movement is essentially non-political in character.

In contrast, the ideal of the *umma*-centered movement is not only the self-purification of Muslims as individuals but also the purification of the society as an organized unit and of its supreme organ, the state. The organizational transformation should go hand in hand with individual change rather than the other way round. According to this view, an inappropriate or unislamic environment is an impediment to the development of a strong *iman*. This philosophy thus leads naturally to organized action to change the environment. Islam in the hands of this
group becomes a serious socioeconomic alternative to the Western and Marxist development strategies. The activities of the umma-centered group turn out to be political in nature, and they do not necessarily confine themselves to peaceful changes through parliamentary tactics, but even extend their strategy to include the violent overthrow of existing regimes. To these radicals the end justifies the means.

Even though both groups derive their ideological strength and arguments from the holy scriptures, depending on how one interprets their content, on the Muslim international front the sympathies and support for their cause come from different groups of countries and organizations. Generally speaking, Libya, Iran, Syria, and the PLO support the umma-centered movement, while Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and the Rabita (an organization funded mainly by Saudi Arabia that functions to propagate the message of Islam throughout the world) support the iman-centered. While the type of support to both groups takes the form of finance, educational scholarships, and technological equipment, support to the umma-centered groups goes as far as including armaments.

The Revivalist Movement in Sri Lanka

Islamic revivalism in Sri Lanka requires a definition. Historically, one can speak of a Muslim revivalist movement in that country as far back as the closing decades of the nineteenth century. In fact it was that movement that was partly responsible for the first major racial riot in Sri Lanka in 1915. Although that particular episode has long been forgotten, the Muslim community in Sri Lanka has continued to preserve the essence of that revivalist movement—namely, the desire to safeguard the religious and cultural identity of Muslims. The international events of the 1970s discussed in the preceding section therefore did not initiate a new revivalist movement in Sri Lanka; instead, it added a fresh momentum to the already existing religious awareness of the Muslim community and made religion its permanent preoccupation. It is the nature of this preoccupation and the problems arising out of it that is termed the revivalist movement in Sri Lanka.

Constrained by the smallness of their number and their scattered settlements, the Muslims of Sri Lanka realize that any endeavor to transform the entire Sri Lankan society into the Islamic ideal is a utopian dream. Naturally, therefore, the revivalist movement is of a conservative nature. All that they can hope to achieve is to make the Muslims live a true Islamic life and to win occasionally through spiritual persuasion some new converts to the faith. The tabligh movement, which has its headquarters in New Delhi, has been very active in the country since the
1960s and has attracted activists from a variety of people ranging from school children to businessmen, magistrates, doctors, and engineers. The enthusiasm and the dedication of these followers sometimes earn the envy of other communities, particularly the majority Buddhists. But this envy rarely manifests itself in open enmity towards Islam or the Muslims; instead, it generates criticisms of the inaction of the Buddhist leaders to propagate their own religion. The annual tablīgh ijtima (conference) that takes place in various parts of the country, the grand 1980 celebrations of the 1400th year of Hijra (the Prophet Muhammad's flight to Medina from Mecca), and the International Muslim Conferences held in Colombo are all in a sense the outcome of the revivalist fervor in Sri Lanka, and it kindles feelings of frustration among the Buddhists. In fact such feelings were expressed in the country's legislature soon after the International Muslim Cultural Conference held in Colombo in March 1982.

Nevertheless, both the Buddhist community and the government, which recognizes only Buddhism as a state religion, have tolerated the activities of the Muslim activists. More significantly, the government of Sri Lanka has been magnanimous in acceding to several of the Muslim community's demands. The following are some of the facilities currently enjoyed by the Muslim community in Sri Lanka:

1. If more than 50% of the total student enrollment in a government school consists of Muslim students, then that school is considered to be a Muslim school that can have a Muslim name and in which the majority of teachers will be Muslims. (It should be remembered that the government of Sri Lanka, having nationalized most of the private schools and having done away with the denominational system in the 1960s, continues to operate separate Muslim schools almost exclusively for Muslim children.)

2. Muslim schools have Muslim inspectors to supervise their work. (During the SLFP regime of Mrs. Bandaranaike, there was even a Muslim Director of Education in charge of all Muslim schools.)

3. Islam is a subject in the curriculum of all Muslim schools, and Muslim Civilization is a subject that can be offered at the G.C.E. Ordinary Level and Advanced Level examinations. Arabic is another subject taught in all Muslim schools.

4. Even though all Muslim schools have opted for Tamil as the medium of instruction, in teaching Tamil literature they have excluded from use all the famous Tamil texts in preference to those written by Muslims with an Islamic content. The reason for this exclusion is that the popular Tamil texts have a Hindu content.
5. The Muslims have requested and have obtained the government’s authority to keep their children, especially the girls, from studying subjects such as music, art, dancing, and sculpture. The reason given is that these subjects could lead Muslim children astray.

6. All Muslim schools have a separate calendar that enables them to have their term holidays during periods of religious importance. For example, all Muslim schools remain closed during the fasting month of Ramadhan.

7. The Sri Lankan National Radio Service has allocated at least an hour a day for the exclusive use of the Muslims—a facility not enjoyed by nearly 100 million Muslims in India.

From this sample of facilities, it may appear that the government of Sri Lanka is genuinely concerned with the spiritual development of the Muslim community. The Muslim leaders in the country even cite these facilities as the index of Muslim cultural welfare in Sri Lanka. But there are other and more important reasons for the government’s generosity and concern towards the Muslims. Attention was drawn earlier in this article to the state of Sri Lanka’s economy. With the increase in oil prices and the resulting affluence of the Muslim Middle East, Sri Lanka has tried to earn the friendship of the Arab countries to gain some economic advantage. The closure of the Israeli embassy and the appointment of a Muslim as the Minister of Education during the SLFP regime (1970–77), and the appointment of a Muslim as the Minister of Foreign Affairs by the ruling UNP were all aimed at presenting an appropriate image to the Arab nations. The publicity and the extraordinary reception accorded to the Arab leaders during the Non-Aligned Conference in Colombo in 1976 were also intended to advance this image. The government’s favored treatment of the Muslims in Sri Lanka is thus a part of this strategy to win Arab favors. This approach has yielded three types of economic return: bilateral aid from Arab nations, a sizable export market for Sri Lankan products in the Middle East, and job opportunities for tens of thousands of Sri Lankans in that part of the world. According to the provisional figures supplied by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka for 1980, the Arab countries contributed a total of Rs. 317 million to the country’s foreign assistance receipts that year. The Middle East, including Libya, accounts for more than 50% of Sri Lanka’s tea exports both in terms of volume and value. According to the same source, between 1978 and 1980 nearly 75,000 Sri Lankans migrated in search of employment abroad, and of these the majority went to the Middle East.5

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In addition, there are internal political reasons why the government is so generous towards the Muslim community. These arise out of the ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka. The position of the Tamil United Front (TULF) that it speaks for all the Tamil-speaking people of Sri Lanka is discredited by the refusal of the Muslim community, whose members also speak Tamil as their mother tongue, to join the party’s ranks. In fact, the strength of the TULF would be greatly enhanced if the Muslims who live in the Eastern Province and who form nearly one-third of the island’s Muslim population were to join the TULF. Thus, while the Sinhalese political parties try to keep the Muslims within the Sinhalese camp, the Muslims have come to realize that by playing politics between the two major communities and between major parties they can achieve maximum benefits.

Finally, the nonpolitical nature of the Muslim religious ferment in Sri Lanka has led the ruling governments to extend not only their toleration but also their support. From the government’s point of view, the Muslims are not engaged in any organized political activity; they do not put forward any hard demands and all they ask for is the freedom to educate their children in the way they want, to practice their religion wherever they live, and to earn their living through their own enterprise and effort. To a government that believes in the capitalist philosophy, no community can give less trouble than the Muslims. By tolerating the Muslims and keeping them satisfied, the government stands to gain politically and the country economically. Muslim revivalism in Sri Lanka thus operates in harmony within the country’s environment.

But there is a dilemma. It is a dilemma confronting not the government of Sri Lanka or the country but the Muslim community itself. It arises out of the shortsightedness of the revivalist movement and the generosity of the Sri Lankan government. The Muslim community has overplayed its religious enthusiasm by giving a religious color to all its activities, and it is ignoring long-term dangers in favor of short-term advantages. Consider, for example, the curriculum of the Muslim schools. The language policy of the country dictates that children should study in their mother tongue—i.e., either Sinhalese or Tamil. To a Sinhalese or a Tamil child, the choice is simple. They study in one of those languages and choose English as their second language in order to further their higher education and take advantage of future job opportunities. But to a Muslim child that choice is not so simple. Since the Muslims have openly opted to study Sinhalese as well as their mother tongue, and since the Islamic fervor dictates that Arabic should also be studied, all Muslim children learn three languages in their schools; when the desire to study English is added the total becomes four. It is not uncommon to
see children in Muslim primary schools spending more than half their school hours studying languages. In addition, Islam is also taught as a separate subject. One can easily imagine the problems this creates in the intellectual development of a Muslim child. At a mid-1982 Muslim educational conference in Colombo, some Muslim leaders expressed their concern over the low admission rate of Muslim students to Sri Lankan universities. They seemed to imply that there was open discrimination by the Education authorities to shut out Muslims from the universities. But when one considers the curriculum in Muslim schools, one is not surprised at the high rate of failure of the Muslim students in the university entrance examination. The Muslims are solely to be blamed for this sad consequence.

A further shortcoming has to do with the Muslim school calendar. Since the “fasting” month comes at varying periods each year, Muslim schools remain closed for their holidays accordingly. It so happens almost every year that when the majority of schools in the island are open, the Muslim schools are closed, and vice versa. This creates a major administrative problem since the Education Department functions to suit the needs of the majority of schools and thereby the needs of the Muslim schools tend to be neglected. Muslim teachers often lose the opportunities to participate in teacher refresher courses generally conducted during school holidays by the Education Department. Likewise, Muslim teachers also miss opportunities to earn additional income by supervising and proctoring at public examinations, which are also held during school holidays. To overcome this disadvantage, the government decided to close all schools during the examination weeks. But the Muslim schools will have to make up the loss of school hours by conducting classes on Saturdays. School discipline, administration, and teaching content all stand to suffer simply because of the Muslim desire to close their schools during Ramadhan. Whether this is the correct way of observing the fast or not does not matter here. What matters from the point of view of this discussion is that the Muslims ask something from the government in the name of their religion, and that the government, without seriously considering whether that particular demand is in the true spirit of Islam or not, or whether it is to the real advantage of the community, readily grants it. All the government wants are Muslim votes with which to win the next election and the community’s contentment to be put on display to the outside world. And it appears that the current Islamic trend in Sri Lanka operates to the long-term detriment of the Muslim community in that island, not to its advantage.
The Malaysian Islamic Revival

Malaysia is a country with a shaky religious balance. As mentioned earlier it is difficult to get a clear picture of the religious distribution of its population. However, from the proselytizing activities of Perkim, a Muslim welfare organization estimated to have converted nearly 160,000 Malaysians to Islam since independence, and from the attitude of the Malaysian government, which willingly accommodated 120,000 Muslim refugees from the Philippines and another 3,000 such refugees from Kampuchea (while threatening to “shoot... on sight” any refugees from Vietnam simply because they are not Muslims), one can visualize the government’s desperation to raise the Muslim ratio in the population to a substantial height. Sri Lanka made Buddhism the state religion because more than 65% of its population are Buddhists, but Malaysia has made Islam its state religion with a Muslim population of between 44% and 54%.

The importance of this population balance between the Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia cannot be underrated since it acts as a powerful impetus to the growth and development of Islamic organizations in that country. Moreover, Malaysia has a need to increase its Muslim majority, and there is a danger of losing some existing Muslims to other religions or isms if the spirit of Islam is allowed to fade away. Thus the government itself has established organizations that are involved in missionary activities. Perkim and the Yayasan Dakwah Islamiyah Malaysia are the more important of such organizations. Before independence in 1957, there were no dakwah groups in Malaysia except individual preachers. The first known dakwah group appears to be the Badan Dakwah ar-Rahmaniyyah formed in 1963 by some students and intellectuals. Since then such groups have mushroomed all over Malaysia, and their activities have extended from passive preaching to active and violent politics. The Islamic fervor in Malaysia, unlike in Sri Lanka, seems to have been initiated by the government.

Once the government had set the tune, it was left to the citizens to write the song. The Islamization of the Malays gradually led to the growth of fundamentalism in Malaysia. The activities of four organizations deserve consideration in this context. The first two are the Darul Arqam and the Tabligh. Darul Arqam, based in Trengganu, conducts regular classes for the young and for adults, and its supporters wear green

7. Asia Week, August 1, 1980.
robes and turbans. It is reported that they encourage their members to throw away their television sets and not even to sit in chairs.\(^8\) The Tabligh, as in Sri Lanka, has its headquarters in New Delhi and is quite powerful among the Indian Muslims in Malaysia. Its members wear white robes and turbans and are generally withdrawn from day-to-day life.\(^9\) These two groups are considered extremely fanatical about their beliefs and were held responsible for the temple breaking incident in 1978 at Kerling in Kuala Lumpur that led to the death of four. Some of them were even reported to have been involved in desecrating 28 Hindu temples in Peninsular Malaysia.\(^10\)

The third group is the Anakatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, under its charismatic leader Anwar Ibrahim. This movement is estimated to have a membership of between 30,000 and 50,000 young Malays including university students. Its leader was arrested and jailed in 1974 for participating in the student demonstrations organized in support of the peasants in Baling who complained about their economic hardships.\(^11\) Even though ABIM is anti-Marxist, its ideology demonstrates a mixture of Islam and Marxism. “We think,” said Ibrahim, “that Islam should be viewed as a means of salving the evils in society—corruption, exploitations of the poor and so on. . . . To be fundamentalist doesn’t mean to be antagonistic.”\(^12\) ABIM also has outside connections, especially with Gadaffi’s Libya.

The fourth group is a fundamentalist political party, the Pan Malay Islamic Party (PAS), under the leadership of Haji Mohamed Asri. This party is particularly powerful in the states of Trengganu, Kedah, Kelantan, and Pahang. The 1978 election manifesto of this party emphasized “the role that Islam should play in the country, the sovereignty of the Malay rulers, the guarantee of bumiputra political powers in the constitution and the need to replace the current Western-oriented judicial system with Islamic laws.”\(^13\) Asri, in his introduction, described the manifesto as “our struggle, which spelt out a heavy responsibility to save our religion, nation and country from falling into the canyon of destruction and from breaking into pieces on deadly rocks.”\(^14\)

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\(^9\) Ibid.

\(^10\) Ibid.

\(^11\) Ibid.

\(^12\) Ibid. Also, *Asiaweek*, August 1, 1980.


\(^14\) Ibid.
Of these four groups, the first two are overtly fanatical in their spiritual convictions, and they seem to attach only secondary importance to more mundane affairs of life. They are religious zealots with a crusading spirit. But the latter two are a mixture of religion and politics. There are a number of other *dakwah* groups that may fall under either category, but a discussion of them will only add details and therefore can be omitted.

Given the context of the Malaysian political, economic, and social environment, what are the problems these two groups create, particularly for the government in power? How does the government respond to their challenge? To answer these questions, another crucial variable in the Malaysian political structure needs to be examined, the New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced by the Malaysian government soon after the racial riots (Malay vs. Chinese) of May 1969. Just after these riots, Mohamad Mahathir, the present Prime Minister of Malaysia, published his *Malay Dilemma*, which aimed "to identify and analyze the . . . causes which contribute[d] towards putting the Malays in the peculiar position in which they" found themselves.\textsuperscript{15} "If no impediment at all is placed in the way of total Chinese domination of the economy of Malaysia," he wrote, "the country would certainly be prosperous. The Malay dilemma is whether they should be proud to be the poor citizens of a prosperous country or whether they should try to get at some of the riches that this country boasts of, even if it blurs the economic picture of Malaysia a little."\textsuperscript{16} The NEP, introduced in 1970, was in a sense designed to solve this dilemma. The policy was aimed at giving the Malays at least 30% of all the employment and assets in the country within twenty years. In spite of the country's commitment to a free enterprise economy, the NEP has increased the role of the government in economic affairs, much to the resentment of the Indians and Chinese. The NEP was the answer to Mahathir's call to the Malays "to assert their rights and arrogate to themselves what they consider to be theirs."\textsuperscript{17} There are only six years left for the NEP to fulfill its targets, and already it is lagging behind. In fact the economic feasibility of the NEP targets has been questioned by several experts.\textsuperscript{18}

The government's commitment to the NEP and the fear of a repetition of May 1969 are two factors that influence its reaction to Islamic revivalism in Malaysia. If revivalism of the al-Arqam and Tabligh models

\textsuperscript{15} Mahathir bin Mohamad, *The Malay Dilemma*, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 61.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 3.
turn the people's attention away from this life towards the hereafter, particularly at a time when they should work harder to achieve government-set targets, it will eventuate in a backward turn to pre-1969 days. This view has been expressed publicly by government authorities. Hussain Onn, the former Prime Minister, said in describing these backward-looking revivalists that Islam has been "misinterpreted and exploited by ill-informed, misguided and unscrupulous people."19 While Mahathir is calling on the Malays to look East to Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore,20 the revivalists are teaching them to look towards the heaven and the sky. Naturally, the government is viewing this brand of religious revivalism as unpatriotic and as a force for sabotage.

But the challenge posed by the PAS and the ABIM are of a different sort. Since they are political groups with an Islamic color, the government views them primarily as political enemies. In the 1978 general elections, the PAS captured five seats in the National Parliament with 15.5% of the total number of valid votes polled, and in the 1982 elections it maintained the same number of seats but increased its percentage of total valid votes to 16.4%. In the state legislatures, although its seats were reduced from 43 in 1974 to 11 in 1978, it increased that number to 18 in 1982. And even though Asri lost his own seat, his party is still a challenge to the ruling National Front Coalition headed by the United Malay National Organization (UMNO). "This five year term will give us more chances for a bigger come back," said Asri. "We should not look at PAS as a former ruling party, but as an underdog which within a short period should be able to play the role of a healthy opposition. The battle has just begun."21

The PAS fights its election on the platform of religion and culture. Realizing the potential appeal that religion will have for voters, the UMNO is forced to counter the PAS propaganda with an equally religious-oriented campaign. The UMNO leaders had to prove to the public that the PAS accusation that its members are unislamic is totally false. One way of doing this is to show publicly an increasing interest in religion. Hussain Onn aptly summed up the government's dilemma in the following words: "You may wonder why we spend so much money on Islam. You may think it is a waste of money. If we don't we face two major problems. First, Party Islam will get at us. The party will, and does claim we are not religious and the people will lose faith. Second, we have to strengthen the faith of the people, which is another way to fight against

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19. Rodney Tasker, "Explosive Mix."
The political fight between the PAS and UMNO at home indirectly adds strength to the fervor of Islamic revivalism. Just as the government fears losing votes to the PAS, so also it sees the danger of possible youth unrest and an eventual breakdown of racial harmony if the activities of the ABIM were to go unchecked. In the 1970s the government suspected that ABIM had links both with the radical forces abroad and the PAS at home. And the government was taken aback by an event in 1980 in which a group of extremists attacked a police station in Batu Pahat and caused 23 deaths. ABIM was not involved in this incident, but it signaled the direction in which the religious and radical forces were moving in the country. The government soon began to make its moves. ABIM's activities were closely screened, and it was asked to dissociate itself from all external connections. All *dakwah* groups and other societies were required to register themselves with the Registrar of Societies, and their activities came under thorough scrutiny. Above all, by labeling the religious opponents as "deviationists," the government tactfully sanctioned only those religious activities permitted by the National Council of Islamic Affairs—a body consisting of theologians and religious leaders from various states in Malaysia all chosen by the government. Whether the government's interpretation of religious issues is the true Islamic version and whether its view on a particular issue will provoke opposition from other Muslim countries did not matter. Unlike Sri Lanka, Malaysia is not a poor country dependent on external support for its economic survival, and therefore the reaction of the Arab countries to Malaysian decisions on religious affairs is not a matter of great concern to the Malaysian government.

These several measures adopted by the government appear to have made some breakthrough in the attempt to contain religious ferment. A notable achievement in this respect is the joining of ABIM with the UMNO-led National Front coalition. They fought together in the general elections of 1982 against the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the PAS, securing a total of 132 of the 154 seats in the national parliament, and Anwar Ibrahim, the leader of the ABIM, was appointed as a Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's department. Before the elections the government's opinion about ABIM was that it was a group of deviationists, extremists, and fanatics, but after the elections, ABIM has become a group of "misled" youths and "at the very least, did not know what they did."  

22. Rodney Tasker, "Explosive Mix."
ABIM will continue is anyone's guess. But it is reasonable to predict that any disenchantment between the two will enhance the popularity of PAS, the other fundamentalist political group.

Apart from internal political and ethnic problems, there is also an external factor that makes revivalism in Malaysia a sensitive issue. This point raises an interesting contrast between the situation in Sri Lanka and that in Malaysia. Throughout history Sri Lanka has been at the receiving end of events happening outside its shores. It responds to the challenges and shocks generated from outside, rather than producing any from inside. Its proximity to India, its small size, and the relative insignificance of its economy to the outside world may have determined this one-way phenomenon. It is logical, therefore, that the Islamic revivalism in Sri Lanka should also have had hardly any impact on the Muslims outside the island. But Malaysia is a different case. Its economic resources and strategic location—e.g., astride the Straits of Malacca—have given it a status of great geopolitical and economic significance within the Southeast Asian region. It is also, in addition, a leading member of the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Given that it has a Muslim-dominated government and Islam is its state religion, and that over 55% of the ASEAN population are Muslims, it is no surprise that Malaysia should be looked upon as an epicenter of Islamic activities in the ASEAN region. The fate of Islamic revivalism in that country will therefore be felt within the ASEAN circle.

In neighboring Indonesia the Muslim United Development Party (PPP), a conglomeration of all the Islamic groups created by Suharto in 1977 in order to control them, was defeated by the government-backed Golkar party in the May 1982 general elections and is placed in the same position as the PAS in Malaysia. While the PAS was able to capture only a little more than 15% of the votes in Malaysia, the PPP in Indonesia won 28% in that country. Nevertheless, both parties have more or less the same objectives and both are in close touch with each other. The governments of both countries are aware of the potential threat posed by their opponents, and naturally those governments are monitoring their rivals' activities. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that a change of fortunes away from any of the governments towards its respective opposition is bound to enhance the strength of the rival of its counterpart.

The Pattani Muslim separatist movement in Thailand has also brought Islam into political conflict in order to win support from Muslim coun-

25. Ibid.
tries and organizations. In relation to Malaysia, given that the Pattanis are of Malay origin, that their guerrillas operate in the Thai-Malaysian border jungles, and that the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO) has links with the Malayan Peoples Liberation Army (MPLA), the military wing of the banned Communist Party of Malaysia (CPM), the Thai-Malaysian border problem is a complex one. The PULO appears to have mustered some support in Kelantan, a stronghold of the Malaysian PAS and other fanatical groups. It thus becomes obvious that the success of Islamic fundamentalism in Malaysia will cause the Thai authorities great concern and may even strain Thai-Malaysian relationships. The Malaysian government is aware of this and this explains why at the 1977 Islamic foreign ministers conference at Tripoli, Malaysia joined Indonesia in preventing representation at the conference of Muslims from Thailand.

The Moro problem is another issue that is political in essence but religious in appearance. Malaysian sympathy towards the Moros was demonstrated by the earlier reference in this article to the 120,000 Muslim refugees from the Philippines who were given asylum in Malaysia. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Bangsa Moro Liberation Organization (BMLO) receive aid from several Muslim sources including Malaysia, and “until 1975, arms and aid came through Sabah, and Tun Mustapha Harun, the Sabah Chief Minister served as a conduit for outside aid before his fall from power.” It appears that Harun dreamt of leading Sabah out of the Malaysian Federation and annexing the Southern Philippines to form a new state with himself as Sultan. The government of Malaysia, however, is extremely cautious in its attitude towards the Moro problem. It knows that the issue can whip up religious fervor and enhance the strength of the fundamentalists. This explains why Malaysia attempted to tone down a resolution condemning the Philippines on the Moro problem at the 1977 Tripoli conference.

Given the complex politics of the ASEAN region, Islamic fundamentalism in Malaysia can become a danger to ASEAN unity. This factor compounds the dilemma for Malaysian authorities.

29. Ibid.
Conclusion

This article aimed at analyzing the contrast between Sri Lanka and Malaysia with respect to the nature and problems of Islamic revivalism in those countries. In doing so it highlighted the significance of the economic, political, and demographic variables that determined this contrast. The most important outcome of this exercise is the irony that Muslim religious fundamentalism found a harmonious environment in a non-Muslim country whereas it created an environment of conflict within a Muslim country.

From this contrast and from the nature of the politics of Islamic revivalism, some generalizations can be made. For this purpose the nature of Islamic revivalism is summarized in Table 1.

Depending on the strength of the Muslim population in the society (i.e., whether they are a ruling group or a subject group), the fortunes of each of the revivalist categories will vary. In both types of societies, the first category of revivalism will not be tolerated. It poses a threat to the maintenance of law and order. Had the Tabligh in Sri Lanka behaved like its counterpart the Darul Arqam in Malaysia and engaged in breaking temples, the harmonious existence of Islam in Sri Lanka would have come to an end long ago. The Muslims of Sri Lanka have been pragmatic enough, at least since 1915, not to allow their religious enthusiasm to become overtly aggressive. Even if the Muslims are a ruling community as in Malaysia, iman-centered radicalism, because of its fanaticism and intolerance, endangers social amity. The Malaysian government’s tough attitude towards Al-Arqam, Tabligh, and other fanatical religious movements is therefore understandable and is based primarily upon this factor.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substance</th>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Effect</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>iman-centered</td>
<td>radical</td>
<td>fanatical, aggressive, and socially intolerant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iman-centered</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>passive, voluntary withdrawal, and socially harmless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>umma-centered</td>
<td>radical</td>
<td>politically militant and socially divisive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>umma-centered</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>politically gradualist and socially accommodative</td>
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</table>
On the other hand, if the iman-centered revivalism is moderate and passive and concentrates its activities within the Muslim community, it not only survives without any serious objections from the other communities in a multiracial society, but it may also, depending on the economic situation of the country, receive the blessings of the ruling government. The Sri Lankan case demonstrates this point very well. It may appear that this particular point is valid only in countries like Sri Lanka where the Muslims are a minority, but that is not necessarily so. Even in a Muslim majority country, if an organized movement can consciously and successfully divert the attention of the masses away from the affairs of this world and towards those of the "other world," then at least from the point of view of the interests of the ruling classes that movement will be performing a worthy function. It will be interesting to examine this hypothesis in the context of the state's attitude towards religion in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. However, if the government in power is genuinely interested in improving the economic and social well-being of its people, as appears to be the case in Malaysia, iman-centered revivalism, even if it is moderate, will not be encouraged. At best it will be left to survive on its own.

Unlike the iman-centered group, umma-centered revivalism creates political problems within and outside a country. It was the radical version of the latter that overthrew the Shah's regime in Iran and destabilized the international political status quo in that region. Similarly, a victory in the future of an umma-centered radical Islamic party in Malaysia (or Indonesia) will not only upset the internal class structure of the society but also the international political power balance in Southeast Asia. Islamic revivalism is therefore a source of conflict in this region. The UMNO and the PAS, and the Golkar and the PPP, all reflect the different sides of this conflict and not its ultimate solution.