

Was Darul Arqam¹ a potential threat to the Malaysian state?

In 1994 Al-Arqam, a Sufi-revivalist movement, was disbanded and some of its members arrested and interned under the ISA (Internal Security Act) in Malaysia. This harsh treatment of a hitherto respected dakwah² organisation caused outcries and confusion as to what the government's, above all the prime minister at the time, Dr. Mahatir's, policy towards Islamic revivalism was. The government justified its actions by stating that Al-Arqam was a security threat and thus had to be contained and ultimately banned. This essay will investigate the nature of the state's allegations and argue that Al-Arqam was indeed a potential threat to the state of Malaysia, but more so Al-Arqam was a direct threat to the government and its ruling party UMNO (United Malays National Organisation). The essay will give a very brief historical outline of Al-Arqam's rise and fall, before covering the most pertinent potential threats Al-Arqam posed in the religious, political and economic sphere.

The co-option of PAS (Parti Islam Se Malaysia) into the Barisan Nasional, the ruling coalition, in 1973 left a void for other Islamic opposition, which was quickly filled by the rising tide of dakwah movements such as ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement) and Al-Arqam. These dakwah organisations soon competed against each other, because they had similar constituencies, increasingly the well educated young elites, students and urban professionals. The government soon initiated its own dakwah to counteract and take up some of the original dakwah's momentum, culminating in the "official declaration of [the] Islamization of government machinery" (Mutalib 1990b:889). The government has persistently pursued a tactic of co-option and marginalisation of various dakwah movements at different times, for instance ABIM was co-opted into the government, when its power rose and it became a

¹ The name Darul Arqam ("house of al-Arqam") originates from the Prophet Muhammad's companion al-Arqam, in whose house the first Muslim community held its clandestine meetings; in this essay I will refer to the group as simply "Al-Arqam", to avoid confusion with another unrelated dakwah group called "Darul Arqam", which is a missionary group in Singapore.

² Dakwah ("calling") is a term used to describe the Islamic revivalism starting in the 1970s; in the Malaysian context it is mainly concerned with missionary work among Muslims, to "invite" Muslims back to Islam and enhance their Islamicity (Mutalib 1990: 74)

viable competition to the government. PAS on the other hand has been discredited and had members and leaders imprisoned at various times. Since its inception by disillusioned PAS members around Ashaari, a Malay cleric, in 1968 Al-Arqam kept to itself and stayed for the most part an apolitical tariqa, or Sufi order. As such it was never under the yoke of the 1981 Societies Act, which gave the government control over many dakwah activities. Although under government surveillance, it flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, and rose to economic prominence in the 1990s. Just before its disbandment Al-Arqam was said to have around 10.000 members worldwide and possibly ten times that figure in supporters, concentrated in South East Asia (Shenon 1994:4).

This sort of pan-south East Asian support base worried the authorities and subsequently the six ASEAN countries co-operated in a concerted action against Al-Arqam (Rubenstein 2000). However, the arrest of the sect's leader Ashaari, his wife, 6-month old daughter and an aide was viewed critically by the Thai broadsheets, arguing that the arrests displayed how the Thai government was helping authoritarian states (namely Indonesia and Malaysia) perpetrate human rights abuses under the pretext of ASEAN solidarity (Asiaweek 1994). Indonesia also did not follow the Malaysian all out ban of Al-Arqam, with Muslim groups arguing for religious pluralism. For the most contentious issue surrounding the Al-Arqam affair seemed to be its following of the doctrine of the by then deceased Indonesian cleric Sheik As-Suhaimi, also referred to as *Aurad Muhammadiyah*. This included the belief in the return of as As-Suhaimi as the Imam Mahdi and the belief that As-Suhaimi had communicated directly with the prophet Muhammad. This belief was seen to be heretical by the Malaysian Islamic council.³ In 1979 Al-Arqam had run into trouble with the authorities over this issue, but a talk between Ashaari and the then deputy prime-minister Mahatir about Al-Arqam activities resulted in Mahatir giving the organisation his approval (Hamid 1998: 206). In 1986 claims resurfaced that Ashaari was still following the doctrine of As-Suhaimi, now classed a devianist teaching, which is illegal (Meuleman 1996: 52). Islamic deviancies are not looked upon lightly in Malaysia, a plural country, where Islam is the national religion.

Rumours also speculated that the state intervened, because of Ashaari's deviant sexual practices - allegations of keeping women as sex slaves and illegally divorcing his

³ In Malaysia each state has an Islamic council (except Johor), which controls the interpretation of Islam; within the government, the Prime Minister office, has another council to keep a federal check on Islamic activities.

first wife to remarry were making the rounds – were breaking the law and would not be tolerated by the government (Bousfield 1993: 342; Peletz 2002: 261). Such sex allegations, be they about group sex, as in this case, or sodomy, as in the Anwar case,⁴ is seen as subversive and has the effect of not only enabling the government to prosecute formally, but also causing a public outcry on the part of most of the Muslim constituents and causing a trial by media. The Malaysian state has upped the pace in defining Islam for its citizens and of its attempts of homogenization. These moves are as much aimed at achieving internal order as it is an attack at outside influences such as Shi'ite doctrines, of which Al-Arqam was one example (Peletz 1997: 238). Thus it seems that the Malaysian state pulled all the stops in an effort to reign in Al-Arqam's members and sympathisers to the accepted and state sanctioned Islam. Multiculturalism is a given in Malaysia, but it seems the state does not want too much inner fragmentation of these ethno-religious groupings. For Islamic pluralism has the potential to split the Malays (and UMNO) and thus diminish their power. Thus a means of self-protection is to keep the Malay identity and its Islamic interpretations as homogenous as possible. Debate on religious pluralism is thus stifled (cf. Meuleman 1996: 56).

The religious arguments, although poignant do not warrant the scale of the Malaysian clamp down.⁵ Thus many commentators point to the political threat Al-Arqam was posing to the establishment, especially the ruling elite. One early attack against Al-Arqam was its ties to Iran. The Iranian revolution brought a shockwave through the Islamic world, especially harbouring fear in the ruling elites that internal Islamic dissidence may also go revolutionary. Although Al-Arqam was quick to issue a statement after Ashaari's return from Iran that he had not brought the revolution with him, scepticism as to what the links were rebounded. On several occasions Ashaari denounced the Iranian revolution as a mere Shi'ite revolt, seemingly holding out a hand to the government and actively seeking dialogue with the government (Jomo and Cheek 1992: 84). However, such statements can also be read in a different light when put into context of Ashaari's interpretation of Islam and its implementation. He wanted Al-Arqam to return to the roots of Islam and create an Islamic state of mind in the people, then

⁴ Anwar was one of the co-opted dakwah leaders, who made it to deputy prime minister, before his political ambitions were cut off in 1998 by allegations of sexual misconduct and corruption, which later resulted in his arrest, conviction on both charges and a sentence of 15 years imprisonment

⁵ When Al-Arqam was finally dismantled in 1996, all assets (approximately \$ 120 million) were frozen and turned over to the state, imprisonment and house arrests followed for the key governing member of Al-Arqam

extend this to villages and ultimately the state (Hamid 1998: 267f). This philosophy was not often voiced for fear of government reaction, but was the long-term strategy Ashaari had. The apolitical outward appearance and inward looking tariqa set-up facilitated a positive media image most of the time. However, increasingly Al-Arqam's attempts at creating a state within the state along ethnic lines for Muslim Malays displayed a clear anti-UMNO sentiment, anti co-option and anti-inclusion of other ethnic groups and the assertion of a Malay/ Muslim supremacy (Nagata 1984: 191). This sentiment was actively exaggerated by the government, although Ashaari claimed that Buddhists and other ethnic groups were involved in Al-Arqam business activities and free to join. Yet such chauvinistic associations were disdained by Chinese and Indians, who were increasingly becoming important swing voters and a basis to UMNO's political power.

At the same time Ashaari allegedly also stated that he would be the next Malaysian prime minister and plans for an Islamic utopian state, spanning the South East Asian peninsular surfaced (Hamid 1998: 209). Such hubris was new to a political system where there are many parties, but UMNO usually won. All these statements came a year prior to the elections and Ashaari seemed to challenge the ruling elites in the wake of his entrance to the political forum. Calling the governing elites "thieves and robbers" certainly caused a stir, but did not help his cause (Shenon 1994:4). The government was shocked at the new face Al-Arqam was showing and revised their strategy. Simultaneously Al-Arqam had secured some high profile conversions of politicians, especially UMNO members, and civil servants. Around seven thousand government employees were said to have joined Al-Arqam, sparking worries about an internal threat of a walk through the institutions. The government responded with threats of disciplinary actions against employees, if they did not quit Al-Arqam (New Straits Times 1994: 2). Mahatir was becoming increasingly concerned about his hold on power (Hamid 1998: 248). The elections were also approaching – they were finally called for 1995 - and Al-Arqam deemed themselves ready to move their struggle for an Islamic society to the state level (Hamid 1998: 268). Previous to Al-Arqam's "coming out" into the political domain they had used their well placed contacts, informants and insiders to modify and soften its "militant anti-government policies" (Nagata 1984:151). However, although the penetration of government and the civil service in particular was apparent, the reason was not that the Al-Arqam leadership was actively trying to undermine the existing political sphere, but because so many civil servants had become disillusioned with the

state of affairs and joined Al-Arqam. Thus Camroux suggests that the main reason for Al-Arqam's ban was their appeal to the Malay urban professionals (1996: 864) and others affirm that "in Darul Arqam probably lay a nascent yet autonomous and dissenting Malay middle-class." (Maznah 2001).

The government clearly needed a more clearly stated offence by Al-Arqam to clamp down on them and found it in a veiled military threat. Rumours about a militia trained in Southern Thailand, ready to infiltrate Malaysia, circulated and there was even talk of a "suicide army" (Hamid 1998: 227). Malaysia's minister for religious affairs Othman quickly called Al-Arqam the biggest security threat to the Malaysian state since the communist insurgency. It is interesting to note that most of the military allegations came from the state-run Islamic councils. No proof was ever brought forward, in fact the whole rumour was based on a single photograph of people wearing Al-Arqam robes and holding guns. Yet these allegations sufficed to use the ISA to intern Al-Arqam members. It is also important to note Al-Arqam's reaction to their ban and clampdown. Instead of a much feared Waco scenario⁶, its members stayed calm after the arrests and chose not cause a stir, rather following the legal route. Even when their whole organisation was being taken apart by the state apparatus, they did not rise, nor did the supposedly trained militias in Southern Thailand attack. In fact the dissolution of Al-Arqam was most peaceful and no fight was put up.⁷

Al-Arqam's seclusion and economic self-sufficiency was, in the beginning, seen as an oddity, but only developed into a threat when the numbers of followers increased to a level, where one could talk about the creation of an alternative economic development programme. Members of Al-Arqam were not relying on the patronage of the state and especially the ruling party UMNO anymore. Al-Arqam showed the bumiputera ("sons of the earth") that the New Economic Policy was not the panacea⁸, there were other ways of achieving economic self-determination and more so in a pure

⁶ Ashaari was often likened to David Koresh, due to the sex allegations and the seclusion of both sects.

⁷ After the disbandment of Al-Arqam its former leader Ashaari and his top echelon of power were rehabilitated by the state and are now (again) involved in various business interest in Malaysia (Metzger 1996: 123f, 126). There seems to have been a tacit agreement between them and the government that in return for the peaceful dissolution of Al-Arqam and the promise to stay away from such religious endeavours in future, the government would leave Ashaari and his inner circle to pursue their lives in relative freedom. Reports suggest that they are still under supervision by government agencies.

⁸ The government has in place the New Economic Policy (NEP), a form of affirmative action to support ethnic Malays in setting up businesses and generally increasing their economic clout vis-à-vis the economically dominant Chinese community.

Islamic way (cf. Camroux 1996: 864f). Al-Arqam was often seen as backward; the return to the time of the Prophet Mohammad was not only enacted spiritually but also practically by wearing Arabic dress and renouncing some modern commodities like television sets and radios (Peletz 2002: 225). A large part of Al-Arqam's rise in members was based on their villagization projects⁹. Al-Arqam strived for the implementation of their ideals and visions not through a top-down conversion, as Islam or instance was introduced to the region, but opted for the bottom-up, grassroots approach. This way Al-Arqam hoped to gain popular support from their villagization projects at a grassroots level, which invariably would spread to ever higher echelons, until an over-arching Islamic state could be created (Ashaari 1988:90f, 94, 99 quoted in Salleh 1991: 250). These grassroots rural development projects of Al-Arqam could be both seen as challenging the government in its own domain (Nagata 1984: 113), and as complementing the government's efforts to meliorate the Malays' economic position (Salleh 1991: 251f). As demonstrated above, UMNO had become increasingly weary of Al-Arqam as a political threat to its power and this power also lay with the rural Malays and their votes. As Islamic fundamentalism was emerging as an issue in world politics, Mahatir was also inclined to offer reassurance to potential investors abroad with a show of force against Al-Arqam that Islamic fanaticism will not be tolerated (Watson 1995: 16).

The question remains as to what is deemed fanaticism and who defines the deviant. In political terms UMNO had consolidated its position, seeing that Tabligh posed no real political challenge and is largely marginal in its effect and having neutralised PAS on a federal level at least, it seems that Al-Arqam was the last potential threat to UMNO primacy and due to its economic resources and committed members Al-Arqam was seen as a thorn in the otherwise safe political UMNO landscape. Thus some foreign observers were commenting that Ashaari might well have become a viable political rival to Dr. Mahatir, which is the 'real' reason for the crackdown on Al-Arqam (Shenon 1994: 4). Ashaari's proclamations and attacks against Mahatir and his increasing unpredictability must have made Mahatir move swiftly to eliminate the possible contender well before any real damage to him and UMNO could be done. Al-Arqam posed a threat in that it offered a social and economic alternative to Mahatir's Agenda 2020, Al-Arqam's vision and practice was the antidote to progress and Western notions of modernisations. Their way was not only shown to work, with their successful

⁹ Villagization was the attempt of Al-Arqam to spread their influence into rural Malaysia and create Muslim enclaves, which would be independent of the state and form a pure Islamic state within the state

establishment of several villages and grassroots development projects, but was above all a venture based on a purer and thus superior understanding of the Prophet's ways and Islam as a whole. The moderate UMNO was being beaten on two fronts, the religious, where contests were common, by PAS and before the co-opted ABIM, but more importantly the economic, where a viable alternative was spreading into the rural UMNO strongholds.

Ashaari and some of his followers were allegedly trying to revive Al-Arqam in 1996. The government acted swiftly and decisively and cracked down on these remnants and Metzger argues that this shows that the Malaysian government must stay vigilant and had acted properly in 1994 (Metzger 1998: 66f). A multi-cultural society like Malaysia will always face the problem of ethno-religious groups pushing the limits of what the state can and cannot tolerate. The difficulty will always be with the state apparatus, as to when and with which gravity it will intervene. Human rights groups have thus condemned the harsh treatment of the Al-Arqam leaders. The state as an institution, bequeathed with the upkeep of order and stability will invariably continue to be challenged.

Bibliography

“Action only after second circular on Al-Arqam membership”, *The New Straits Times* Thursday, July 7, 1994: 2 available online at <<http://www.hamline.edu/apakabar/basisdata/1994/08/03/0006.html>>, last accessed on November 26th

“Al-Arqam; Its Leader's Arrest Sparks Debate in Two Countries”, *Asiaweek*, September 14, 1994, p. 31.

Ashaari, M. (1988) *Kenapa Salahkan Musuh?*, Kuala Lumpur: Penerangan Al Arqam.

Bousfield, J. (1993) “Adventures and Misadventures of the New Sufis: Islamic Spiritual Groups in Contemporary Malaysia”, *SOJOURN*, 8 (2): 328-360.

Camroux, D. (1996) “State Responses to Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia: Accommodation, Co-Option, and Confrontation”, *Asian Survey*, 36 (9): 852-868.

Hamid, A. F. B. A. (1998) *Islamic Resurgence in the Periphery: a Study of Political Islam in Contemporary Malaysia with Special Reference to the Darul Arqam Movement 1968-1996*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

- Jomo, K.S. and Cheek, A. S. (1988) "The Politics of Malaysia's Islamic Resurgence", *Third World Quarterly*, 10 (2): 843-68.
- Jomo, K.S. and Cheek, A. S. (1992) "Malaysia's Islamic Movements", In Kahn, J. and Wah, F.L.K. (eds.) *Fragmented Vision, Culture and politics in contemporary Malaysia*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Maznah, M. (2001) "PAS vs UMNO: Who will win the 'Malay consensus' and more?", *Aliran Monthly*, available online at <<http://www.malaysia.net/aliran/monthly/2001/4d.html>>, last accessed on December 1st
- Metzger, L. (1996) *Stratégie Islamique en Malaisie (1975-1995)*, Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Metzger, L. (1998) "Islam Observed: The Case of Contemporary Malaysia", *Studia Islamika*, 5 (2): 49-76.
- Meuleman, J.H. (1996) "Reactions and Attitudes Towards the Darul Arqam Movement in Southeast Asia", *Studia Islamika*, 3 (1): 43-78.
- Mutalib, H. (1990a) *Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics*, Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Mutalib, H. (1990b) "Islamic Revivalism in ASEAN States: Political Implications", *Asian Survey*, 30 (9): 877-891.
- Nagata J. (1984) *Reflowering of Malaysian Islam*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Peletz, M. (1997) "'Ordinary Muslims' and Muslim Resurgents in Contemporary Malaysia", in Hefner, R. and Horvatic, P. (eds.), *Islam in an Era of Nation-States* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 231-273.
- Peletz, M. (2002) *Islamic Modern: Religious Courts and Cultural Politics in Malaysia*, Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Rubenstein C. (2000) "The role of Islam in contemporary South East Asian Politics", *Jerusalem Letter* 436: August, available online at <<http://www.jcpa.org/jl/jl436.htm>>, last accessed on November 26th
- Salleh, M. S. (1991) *An Islamic Approach to Rural Development – The Arqam Way*. Ph.D. Thesis, School of Geography, University of Oxford.
- Salleh, M. S. (1995) "Dar Ul Arqam", in Esposito, J. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 339-341.
- Shenon, P. (1994). "Sungai Penchala Journal; A Malay Plot? Or Just a Well-Meaning Commune?", *The New York Times*, October 10, p. 4.
- Watson, C.W. (1995) "Tiger burning bright", *Times Higher Education Supplement*, July 21, p. 16.