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# *Intellectual Discourse*

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## **From Political Islam to Democrat Muslim: A Comparison between Rashid Ghannouchi and Anwar Ibrahim\***

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**Abstract:** The relationship between Islam with a democratic political system has been questionable at best and incompatible at worst. While countless research has been done on this issue for decades especially with the rise of Islamist apologists in the years following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, this paper proposes that it is time we understand the role of Islam through the lenses of democrat Muslims. Democrat Muslims are those who seek to preserve and promote the five major qualities in human life with values that surpass simply protecting the people's political, social and economic life. By comparing Rashid al-Ghannouchi and Anwar Ibrahim, this paper traces their evolution to come to a similar conclusion that is applicable to most Muslim societies. Using the dissonant politics theory, this paper suggests that local developments were taken into high consideration when these two figures decided to conceptualize what is known today as Democrat Muslims.

**Keywords:** ABIM, Anwar Ibrahim, Ennahda Party, Malaysia, Democrat Muslim, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Political Islam, Rashid Ghannouchi, Tunisia

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**Abstrak:** Perhubungan antara Islam dengan sistem politik berdemokrasi telah dipersoalkan dengan baik sekali ataupun sebaliknya. Walaupun terdapat banyak penyelidikan yang telah dilaksanakan terhadap isu yang telah berpuluh-puluh tahun lalu terutamanya melalui kebangkitan ulama' Islam dalam tahun-tahun selepas penaklukan Iraq pada tahun 2003, kertas kerja ini mencadangkan bahawa sudah tiba masanya untuk memahami peranan Islam melalui lensa umat Islam yang demokratik. Umat Islam yang demokratik ini merupakan mereka yang berusaha untuk mengekalkan dan mempromosikan lima sifat utama dalam kehidupan manusia dengan nilai-nilai tertentu untuk melindungi kehidupan politik, sosial dan ekonomi rakyat. Dengan membuat satu perbandingan antara Rashid al-Ghannouchi dengan Anwar Ibrahim, kertas kerja ini mengesan perkembangan mereka untuk mencapai kesimpulan yang sama yang turut menyerupai kebanyakan masyarakat Islam. Dengan menggunakan teori politik yang terasing, kertas kerja ini mencadangkan bahawa pembangunan setempat telah diutamakan apabila kedua-dua tokoh tersebut memutuskan untuk menkonseptualisasikan apa yang dikatakan sekarang sebagai orang Islam yang Demokrat.

**Kata kunci:** ABIM, Anwar Ibrahim, Parti Ennahda, Malaysia, umat Islam yang Demokrat, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Politik Islam, Rashid Ghannouchi, Tunisia

## Introduction

Unlike other contemporary major religions, Islam is considered more political than the others because of its history and tradition which allow practitioners to interpret a reading of religious corpus in various political viewpoints. According to Cook (2014) this vast resources that do not have an answer regarding the definite manifestation of an Islamic political life provide Muslims with the opportunity to create and re-create an understanding of Islam that fits into their political agenda. This is especially pertinent when Muslims began to suggest the need for their societies to have their own political system unique from the West. Since Islam is believed to encompass more than just religious observances, it becomes only natural for Muslims to claim that Islam has its own version of democracy and that modern democracy may have even been born out of the Islamic concept of *shūrā* (consultation).

While many fundamentalists would disagree, there is nothing said about the Islamic state in the Quran (Ayoob, 2008; Ahmad, 2009). In fact, in what he coined as the 'anti-fusion framework', Ahmad (2009:

S146) argued that if the state and Islam are inseparable, the Quran would have delineated the form of an Islamic state in some general but clear outlines. Regardless, throughout Islamic history, religion has long been mixed with politics and governance. This is not hard to understand as Rashid Rida, the twentieth century Islamic reformer, said Islam was the 'religion of innate disposition' (Wood, 2008: 39). The ability of Islam to reverberate so strongly with the population through works of leaders such as Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, Hassan al-Banna, Mawdudi and Sayid Qutb can be traced to the seventh century, during the time of Prophet Muhammad.

Unlike Jesus or even Abraham, Prophet Muhammad was more than just a theologian, but a successful state-builder in the city of Medina. Since then, Muslims have always believed in the inseparable relationship between the state and religion. As Noah Feldman (2008) described in *The Rise and Fall of the Islamic State*, under the Islamic Caliphate, a ruler's legitimacy depends on the approval of the 'ulamā, or religious scholar. Even though the caliph has the power to dismiss the *ulama*, doing so would cause the loss of legitimacy on his part. It is easy to see how Muslim leaders practiced democratic checks and balances during the Islamic Caliphate. Therefore, it should not be surprising that Muslim leaders have been defending and justifying Islam's own version of democracy which goes back to centuries before the nationalist movement that swept the Muslim world.

The focus of this paper is on two leading figures who are known for their departure from the conventional political Islam, into what they called as 'Democrat Muslim' in contemporary Muslim political world, Rashid al-Ghannouchi of Tunisia and Anwar Ibrahim of Malaysia. While they come from different background and societies, their conception of Islam in politics has interestingly evolved in a similar trajectory. From defending the uniqueness of Islam in a modern democratic system, these two thinkers are now proponents of the concept of a democrat Muslim. By applying the dissonant politics theory, this paper shows that both Ghannouchi and Anwar developed a new modern idea of Islamic politics that cater to a diverse and modern society. Muslims are not a monolithic group of people and therefore require a political system that guarantees their rights and freedom according to *Maqāṣid Sharī'ah*.

### **Reproducing an Old Identity**

Even though Olivier Roy had already published a book called the *Failure of Political Islam* in 1994, it did not stop political scientists from debating the possibility of political Islam to exist harmoniously within a democratic framework. Furthermore, scholars (Wickham, 2004; Schwedler, 2006; Bayat, 2007; Turam, 2007) have tried to understand how political Islam can be tamed, or a term that is often used, moderated. The main debate among scholars is whether the supposed moderation by Islamists (whether as a group or an individual) are only behavioural or do they internalize the moderation ideologically. This is an important distinction to make because scholars have viewed the moderation of Islamists in scepticism. There is a fear that Islamists are hiding their true intention to create a theocracy through their participation in the democratic process.

According to Schwedler (2011), the ideological moderation, or evolution, of individuals such as Ghannouchi and Anwar may be the result of political learning, in which the state allows for greater inclusivity and thus political opportunities for Muslims to be part of a democratic system. Political learning could also happen from observing other political actors such as the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) which has increased its rhetoric on human rights and less so on religion in the first few years of the AKP regime (Mohamad Shukri & Hossain, 2017). The gradual transformation from political Islam to democrat Muslims necessitate an ideological as well as a behavioural shift since it is akin to a transformation from simply having democratic institutions to becoming a liberal democratic country with full respect of the law, freedom, equality and justice.

This article, however, does not seek to test the inclusion-moderation hypothesis of Islamist movements set forth by previous academics, but to incorporate Brumberg's (2001) dissonant politics theory in explaining the shift from political Islam to the ideology of democrat Muslims among postmodern Muslim leaders. In a dissonant state, there are multiple competing paths that create a space for elites to redefine the political community. Unlike state incorporation, a dissonant state encourages institutionalization of different authorities in the form of a flourishing civil society.

With the lack of political hegemony, Muslims can create and re-create the symbols and meanings that fit a particular society. This allows them to create a new ideological approach that is revolutionary yet grounded in Islamic tradition. As a result, there is no reason to maintain Islam's unique role in politics when multiple viewpoints on Islam becomes the norm and as democrat Muslims, both Ghannouchi and Anwar are moving away from discussing the coherence of piety and pluralism towards celebrating diversity. One of the main conclusions by Brumberg (2001: 409) is that postmodern Islamists

offer ideological amalgams of contending symbols and traditions, some of which are indigenous, while others have been absorbed from the West. This does not mean that local cultural traditions are necessarily antagonistic to democracy. On the contrary, liberals...have turned to local forms of Islamic mysticism to defend pluralism.

Wickham (2004) also discusses a similar theory that involves the appropriation of cultural issues and the changing strategies by Islamists in a political arena that features people with conflicting ideologies. With no opportunity to participate in the electoral process, Islamists in Egypt were able to successfully mobilise the people by appropriating Islamic culture so that the people are aware of what they are missing in the current system. In other words, Wickham is arguing against the dominant idea in social movement theory that individuals are only concerned with their well-being, and if a political movement is not capable of improving their living condition, it is very likely for the people to abandon a movement's objectives.

Based on her research in Egypt, Wickham argues that ideas of religiosity could move a society as long as the proponents are viewed highly by the people and that the ideas resonate with the movement's intended supporters, advocated by charismatic leaders, and has the active participation of small-groups, then it is not unlikely for a social movement to gain traction even in the absence of the ability to push for drastic changes under a suppressive regime. As the rest of the article will show, Ghannouchi and Anwar are able to set forth their political ideas due to their position in society and the level of support they garner.

Even though democracy was an alien concept to Muslims prior to the independence of their states, it has not deterred Muslim thinkers from

putting forth concepts found in Islamic history to represent a model of democracy that is familiar to the people in the twentieth century. Hamid (2016) even argued that Muslims today do not have to choose between modernity and Islam, because within Islam's legal tradition, there have been instances of modern ideas, such as social justice, rule of law, and democratic politics. The most famous concept, *shūrā*, is a consultation among members of a community before they can decide on anything, which in theory is similar to a modern-day assembly of representation.

Echoing the prominent Algerian thinker, Malek Bennabi, Ghannouchi stressed that a comprehensive understanding of the essence of Islam will lead towards the appreciation of democracy (al-Ghannouchi, 1993; 2000; 2009; 2012). Democracy, with an Islamic element, would endow men with a value that surpasses merely political or social value, and that is a value that honours the dignity of human being. Additionally, according to Ghannouchi, democracy is but the upshot of a far-reaching historical evolution that the Europeans benefitted from Islamic civilization in creating profoundly enlightened conceptions of social values whose fruit was the emergence of liberal democracy (Tamimi, 2001).

In the 90s, few Asian leaders came out with the idea of the incompatibility of democracy with Asian values since Western philosophy of liberal freedom, which is the core foundation of democracy, can be considered as the source of sexism, racism and imperialism (Bonnett, 2004; Robison, 1996: 310-1; Hofstede and Bond, 1998:8). Anwar (1996) refuted this 'Asian Values' excuse that he claims is just an excuse by the autocratic leaders of Asian countries to justify their undemocratic governance. He suggests that Asians need to acknowledge universal values without compromising their own Asian values.

Similar to Anwar's idea on the harmonization between Asian values and democracy, Amartya Sen (1999: 234) insists that Confucius allowed freedom of speech and the struggle against injustice. More than that, Confucius also did not recommend blind allegiance to the state. Sen also points out the example of the non-Confucius style of Asian values, which reflects non-authoritarian rulings such as those of Ashoka and Kautilya from India, and the Muslim Akbar, the Moghul. Sen points out



that Asian values should never be an excuse for regimes and autocrats to legitimize their injustice.

This call for greater freedom and better governance among Muslim and Asian countries against authoritarian leaders came to a peak at the beginning of the Jasmine Revolution in 2011. However, Esposito, Sonn and Voll (2015) argued the uprisings are just one event in a chain of struggles by Muslims to regain control of their state from the hands of corrupt leaders who have put constraints on the political opportunity of Islamists. Moreover, Esposito, Sonn and Voll argued it was not a shock that Arab youths were demanding for democracy, as there is nothing intrinsic about Islam and Arabs that do not agree with democracy.

This struggle will continue for decades, and whether the Islamists will come out as the victor is yet to be seen and it depends heavily on the ability and willingness of Muslim leaders to adopt the approach of a democrat Muslim. Therefore, the main debate that should occupy Muslim politicians today is the form of liberal democracy to be practiced in an Islamic state, and not the compatibility between Islam and democracy. Since Islam is so entrenched in the people's identity and the role it plays in mobilizing the people, we should no longer talk about Islamists moderating and adapting to the West. It is time for Muslim leaders to look for a more sustainable option to uphold liberal democratic values in parallel with *Maqāṣid Sharī'ah*.

### **Ghannouchi's Political Approach**

Ghannouchi has been globally acknowledged as the "intellectual leader" and ideologue of Tunisia's Ennahda Party. He is considered as one of the world's leading figures in the area of contemporary Islamic thought. His ideas on the issues of Islam and modernity, democracy and secularism, relations between East and West, human rights and civil society have been quoted by Islamists, Muslim intellectuals and activists around the world (al-Tawwab, 2011).

The Jasmine revolution of 2010, which brought the first spark of the current ongoing Arab Spring throughout the Middle East, created a new meaning to Tunisians' life. However, the path is not easy. The counter-revolution movements that happened mainly in Egypt have some effects on Tunisia too. Ennahda believed that this revolution was a gift and also a responsibility for all Tunisians. In achieving it, Ennahda believed that

Tunisians must come together; and thus, national unity should be the main priority in maintaining the revolution (Lynch, 2011). Ennahda was aware of the size of the mess caused not only by the two dictators (Habib Bourguiba, Zainel Abiden Ben Ali), but also by their predecessor, the French colonial power (Abrams, 2011).

Ennahda's commitment in assuring unity and democracy in Tunisia could be seen in their actions. After the first ever democratic public election, Ennahda had won majority of the votes, but refused to stand alone as the winner (Abrams, 2011). Instead, Ennahda established the "Troika" coalition with the alMuktamar party or *Congrès pour la République* (CPR) led by Moncef Marzouq who was later elected as the first Tunisian president in the postrevolution period, on 12 December 2011, and with alTakattol party or *démocratique pour le travail et les libertés* (FTDL) led by Mustapha Ben Jaafar. The fact that CPR won 29 seats and FTDL won only 20 seats did not prevent Ennahda to leverage the power to be shared with them (Mzioudet, 2011). It was believed that most of the decisions taken by Ennahda was due to the approach inspired by Ghannouchi's thoughts and insights. As he continued to reiterate, Ghannouchi based most of his ideas on the foundations of *Maqāṣid Shari'ah*, the contextualization of Islamic thoughts, human dignity (*Karāmah Insāniyyah*) and *ijtihād* (reasoning) (Malik, 2014).

Ennahda adheres to the concept of *Maqāṣid Shari'ah* (higher objectives of Shari'ah) that was extensively developed by Abu Ishaq alShatibi, one of the scholars of the *alMaghreb al'Arabi* (Western Arabian region, i.e., the Northern African region) and the author of a great treaty, *al Muwafaqāt*. The theory of *Maqāṣid* was then enshrined and translated into modern application by the late great Tunisian scholar of *Usūl alFiqh*, Syeikh Tahir Ibn Ashur. According to the understanding of *Maqāṣid Shari'ah* any act, ruling or policy undertaken or adopted by Muslims must be in accordance with the highest aims of Shari'ah that are exemplified in the preservation and promotion of five major qualities in human life i.e. life (and quality of life), religion or belief, mind or intellectuality, wealth and progeny (Ibn Ashur, 2006).

Ibn Ashur added three more qualities: freedom (*alHurriyyah*), justice (*al 'Adalah*) and equality (*alMusawah*) (al-Ghannouchi, 1993). Whatever decisions taken by Ennahda are in compliance with this vision. For this *Maqāṣid* approach to be enshrined in the party's

approach, Ennahda has to abide by the rule of gradual process (*sunnah altadarruj*) typical in a moderation-inclusion hypothesis and the rule of priorities (*fiqh alAwlawiyāt*) (Malik, 2016: 115-120).

It is based on this consideration that Ennahda believes that the preservation and maintenance of freedom and justice, which were the direct results of the Jasmine revolution, should be top of the list of its priorities now and in the years to come. Ennahda also believes that it cannot deliver this responsibility alone (Lynch, 2011). However, Ennahda does not wish to establish an Islamic republic or an emirate, nor does it wish to implement a certain set of criminal punishments at this moment and in the near future (Momin, 2012; Shadid, 2012).

As the leader cum ideologue of Ennahda, Ghannouchi strongly adheres to the approach of *Maqasid* in whatever decisions taken and to be taken by the party. Ghannouchi always assures that Ennahda must serve the Tunisians based on the firm ground that Tunisia is for all Tunisians and not for Muslims only or anybody else. In achieving that, Ghannouchi makes sure that Ennahda will always firmly adhere to the principles of freedom of politics, freedom of speech, freedom of ideas and all other values that constitute a civilized country (Muasher, 2011). Ghannouchi stressed that an Islamic model of democracy would not be restricted to granting man with political or social rights but would endow him with a value where the divine element within man is taken into consideration and not just the human or social aspect as in the other models (Al-Ghannouchi, 1993a; 1993b: 56).

The central theme in Ghannouchi's thought is that democracy is compatible with Islam, and that Muslims need to incorporate it into their political thought to institutionalize the concept of *shūrā* (al-Ghannouchi: 1993a). However, Ghannouchi asserted that more importantly, the inherent values of democracy as depicted during the time of the Prophet and his companions are implemented based on the principles, and not the model itself. He claimed that democracy is a Western version of Islam's *shura* that had been suspended since the era of the rightly guided Caliphs which succeeded the Prophet until modern times (al-Ghannouchi, 1993b: 56).

In emphasizing the idea of *muwatanah* (citizenship) for all in a Muslim country (al-Ghannouchi, 2012: 182-87, Ghannouchi insisted that the classical demarcation between Muslims and non-Muslims in

a country is no longer applicable in modern nation-states. Hence, in explaining Ennahda's approach to politics in Tunisia, Ghannouchi in many of his interviews emphasized that inclusivity, democracy and openness are the main principles the party adhere to (Momin, 2012; Shadid, 2012; Lynch, 2011).

He refused to be associated with radicalism, conservatism and any vision to establish a theocratic state in Tunisia. In contrast, he insisted on the need for power-sharing and collective leadership to bring the country forward instead of monopoly or domination of power by any single party or movement that will eventually lead to dictatorship and autocracy (Lynch, 2011; Muasher, 2011; Abrams, 2011). Dictatorship and any attempt at monopolizing power in Tunisia, according to Ghannouchi, are not only against the aspiration of the Tunisian people who brought down Ben Ali's regime through the Jasmine Revolution, but they also contradict Islam.

He insisted that power-sharing and political plurality are the ideal model for modern Muslim states (al-Turki, 2011; Lynch, 2011; The Majalla, 2011; Momin, 2012). In justifying his position on political plurality, Ghannouchi said that it is in alignment with the spirit of the Medina Charter initiated by Prophet Muhammad when he first arrived at Medina to establish the first Islamic state in Muslim history which comprised not only Muslims and the people of Medina, but also non-Muslims and non-Medinan people (Al-Ghannouchi, 2012: 187).

### **Departing from Political Islam to Democrat Muslim**

Ennahda was formed as an Islamic party in 1981 under the name *Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique* (MIT) (Religious Renewal Movement). It was established with the aim to defend Tunisia's Islamic identity against the secular policies of state founder Bourguiba and his successor Ben Ali. Under Ben Ali, Ennahda was banned, and most of its leaders had either been sent to prison or left the country, escaping the death sentence (Munson Jr, 1986: 3-4). The ban continued until the eruption of the Jasmine Revolution in 2011 that witnessed the collapse of Ben Ali's regime. It was then when Ennahda leaders were able to return to Tunisia and bring the party back into the folds of the country's political process.

Due to the long stay outside of Tunisia, most Ennahda leaders have evolved in their thinking and mindset, especially its leader and founder, Rashid al-Ghannouchi (Cesari, 2014: 189). Consequently, Ennahda rose again in Tunisia, no longer as a conservative Islamic party, but as a more inclusive and semi-secular political party with an Islamic identity. Ghannouchi emphasized at Ennahda's 10th Party Conference in 2016 that 'Tunisia is more important than Ennahda', hence it is imperative for Tunisia to form a united front in the fight against terrorism and to rebuild its economy (al-Jazeera, 2016).

The call for the separation between religious outreach (*da'wah*) activities from its political activities started since 2014 by Ghannouchi himself but was not seriously brought into the internal debates of the party until 2015 when Ghannouchi's political advisor, the UK-educated Loutfi Zitoun, in his interview with the Tunisian French journal '*La Presse*', insisted the need for separation between religion and politics in Tunisia. The interview had drawn critiques from the party's grassroots and the conservative elements within it, who feared that such separation will dilute the party's Islamic identity. The debate on the topic continued until finally a consensus emerged which the party refers to as 'specialization': not a splitting up of the movement, but more of a division of labour. With this new approach, members of the party were urged to participate in social, cultural or religious organizations in civil society that are independent of the party, since the party will solely concentrate on politics (Lubben, 2016).

In its new outlook, Ennahda departs from the concept of its conventional image of political Islam, which carries negative connotations in the modern world. Instead, the party defines itself as a 'democratic political party with an Islamic frame of reference and a national platform'. The party justifies its Islamic position by claiming that it is highly committed to a more comprehensive embracement of a broader Islamic concept on the basis of the so-called '*maqasid*' (the higher objectives of Shari'ah law) which guides the party.

Another important part of Ghannouchi's political thoughts, which was crystallized in the political decisions made by Ennahda, is 'political inclusion' and consensus democracy instead of majority democracy. Ghannouchi, through Ennahda, has been consistently adhering towards such approach to ensure that the post-revolution Tunisia would not

be dominated by one single power, which eventually will lead to dictatorship; hence repeating the dark days of Bourghaba and Ben Ali. Political inclusion too is highly regarded by Ghannouchi and Ennahda leaders as a tool to reinforce democratic institutions; hence they relentlessly call for unity and inclusion (Ounissi, 2016: 5-7).

### **Critiques on Ghannouchi and Ennahda**

However, Ghannouchi's thoughts and Ennahda's position are not always welcomed and celebrated by all. Different parties from both secularists and Islamists spectra have criticized Ghannouchi's idea from different angles and viewpoints. Some interpreted Ghannouchi's approach with suspicion and consider the so-called 'rethinking Islamism' of Ennahda is but another political manoeuvre in a more defensive strategy, while looking at a long-term, gradual project to eventually turn Tunisia into an Islamic conservative state akin to other Islamists (Malik, 2017).

This is mainly the case of Tunisian secularists and leftists who always look at any Islamists in general with scepticism. The basis of their suspicion against Ennahda is actually derived from the very root of the party. Ennahda was viewed by the Tunisian secularists as an 'illiberal party, imported franchise of Egypt's 'conservative' Muslim Brotherhood (MB) which aimed to quite literally 're-orient' Tunisia towards the conservative Arab world and away from its relative openness to Europe and regionally progressive stances on women's rights' (Marks, 2015:2).

However, according to Marks (2015), her research on Ennahda had proven otherwise. Many of Ennahda leaders and activists view themselves ideologically and politically beyond and above the Egyptian MB, and rather look up to the Turkish AKP as their model than the MB. Ghannouchi's consensus-based approach in dealing with political issues and in dealing with Ennahda's political rivals further ensures the consistency of Ennahda in its new position. Furthermore, Ennahda has compromised in many issues to maintain the unity of the people even at the expense of their power and position in the government thus managing to prove their sceptics wrong, at least at the present moment.

On the other hand, Ounissi (2016) insisted that Ennahda's references as adopted by Ghannouchi surpass MB's, but still strongly adhere to the local context according to the dissonant politics theory, which emphasize on '*Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*'. As for the issue of women's

rights, Ennahda is known as the only party in Tunisia with the most women representatives in parliament, including those who do not wear hijab. Furthermore, Ennahda's support to the idea of 'equality' between men and women in the new constitution proves its commitment towards ensuring women's rights.

Based on the in-depth analysis of Ghannouchism, it has emerged quite strongly that ideological debates which occurred between Ennahda's leaders and members have contributed to shape it, especially in the case of Ennahda's political decisions during the period of political crisis involving the party post-Jasmine Revolution. In sum, Ghannouchism could be perceived as the product of an important evolution that has taken place through the rethinking of religious categories in the face of multiple sources of religious legitimacy and that is based on a solid and long tradition of Islamic scholarship of the Maghreb which emphasizes a lot on the principles of *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* (Malik, 2017).

### **Anwar Ibrahim, from Islamist to Democrat Muslim**

Islam was identified as one of the leading factors of social changes in Malaysian society beginning in the early 1970s due to the rise of the *da'wah* movement during that period spearheaded by Muslim students in universities and Islamic-oriented Muslim intellectuals in the society (Manan, 2009: 2). Researchers also coined this *da'wah* phenomenon as 'Islamic revivalism'. Muzaffar and Amin (1988: 2) define Islamic revivalism as the struggle to revive the Islamic values, Islamic practices, Islamic institutions, Islamic laws and Islam itself as a complete way of life (*Syumuliyah*).

It was Anwar Ibrahim, who was holding the main leadership of Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar Islam Malaysia (PKPIM) or National Union of Malaysian Muslim Students, himself a University of Malaya student, who was the main figure behind this resurgence (Manan, 2009: 16). He relentlessly promoted the 'Islamic way of life' ideology and struggled to alleviate poverty and illiteracy among the people especially in rural areas. He propagated the idea of change through Islam, to live by the rules of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad. Later, Anwar Ibrahim became the founder of ABIM, one of the most influential Islamic NGOs during the 70s (Nagata, 1980: 410).

In achieving its aim to promote Islam in its comprehensive understanding and implementation in the life of Malaysian Muslims,



ABIM formulated its mission under two main Islamic principles: *tajdīd* (renewal) and *Islāh* (reform) of the Muslim society by imparting *da'wah* (call to Islam) and *tarbiyah* (process of education). ABIM activists picked up these ideals through their interaction with MB leaders, activists, and through ABIM activists who were educated abroad and had been exposed to MB's educational system. Due to ABIM's inclusivity, ABIM too had managed to introduce other Islamic thoughts from various non-MB figures and sources such as Syed Naquib al-Attas, Ismail al-Faruqi, Ali Shariati, Malik Bennabi, Muhammad al-Ghazali, Yusuf al-Qaradawi and others (Personal communication with Siddiq Fadzil, 1 June 2013).

However, ABIM's acceptance of different Islamic views from the Middle East and the Sub-Continent was not in a wholesale manner. ABIM had been emphasizing on the need for contextualizing the Islamic method of change (Malik, 2017:31-34). ABIM thus, as early as the 80s, had been calling for the embracement of '*Manhaj Malizi*' (the Malaysian method of change) (Shahran, 2007). *Manhaj Malizi* was the effective strategy for ABIM in getting its Islamic message across to Malay Muslims in Malaysia without introducing something radically different and at the expense of local cultures and traditions (Siddiq Fadzil, 1989:4, 1992:4).<sup>1</sup>

Anwar Ibrahim, the president of ABIM then, joined the ruling party, UMNO, on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1982 (Kamaruddin Jaafar, 1982: 20) effectively leaving his post in ABIM. Many analysts view Anwar's affiliation with UMNO as mutually benefitting both Anwar and Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, and has boosted the Islamization agenda to the whole nation (Wain, 2012: 196-97; Badaruddin, 2017: 65-68) Under the pretext of the Islamization project initiated by the government, led by Mahathir, Islamists within the government managed to implement their Islamization agenda in many fields such as education, economic, administration and others (Personal communication with Siddiq Fadzil, 1 June 2013; Jomo & Ahmad Shabery, 1988: 843-868; Stark, 2004: 115-131).

However, Anwar's honeymoon period in the government did not last long. Alas, in 1997, amid the Asian economic crisis, leadership struggle happened within UMNO between Mahathir and Anwar (Hwang, 2003: 279-96). This resulted in Anwar's dismissal from his cabinet posts as Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister and his suspension from



UMNO in September 1998 (Derichs, 2003). Anwar took his challenge demanding the resignation of Mahathir throughout the country. He formed the *Reformasi* movement, which comprised of oppositions and NGOs to challenge the leadership of Mahathir and his party (Weiss, 2003: 88-95).

Because of his *Reformasi* movement, on September 20, 1998, Anwar was detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) and a few days later he was held on criminal charges. In 1998, he was tried on four counts of corruptions - allegedly having instructed police officials to conceal evidence of his sexual misconduct and in 1999 for sodomy. Both trials resulted in conviction and prison sentences. Each was widely criticized for failing to conform to fair trial standards. The mass dissatisfaction amongst people for the mistreatment on Anwar had pushed many NGOs such as ABIM, JIM, Suaram and others to the streets with other political parties and civil movements demanding justice for Anwar (Hasan, 2002: 14; Kaneko, 2002: 196).

Anwar's imprisonment was seen as a 'tipping-point' for the opposition to gain its momentum to bring down the ruling government which consequentially caused a big win for the opposition in the 1999 general election. Oppositions then were united under the banner of a coalition called Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front) which was formed before the 1999 election by the parties to impose a direct challenge to the ruling coalition government. Barisan Alternatif consists of four major opposition parties: PAS, KeAdilan, Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM).

In September 2004, Anwar was released from prison after serving nearly six years of sentence behind bars. Anwar's presence as the opposition leader brought a new momentum for the opposition (Baharudin, 2016: 70) after their big lost in Malaysia's 2004 general election which was led by the then Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. Under Anwar's leadership, the opposition made its biggest inroad in Malaysia's 2008 general election, in which it managed to deny the ruling government its two third majority in parliament and capturing five states in the Peninsular of Malaysia (Syed Husin Ali, 2017: 43-44). While in Malaysia's 2013 general election, Anwar has led the opposition coalition to win nearly 52% of the popular vote, but only managed to secure 89 seats compared to the ruling Barisan Nasional which won

133 seats in the 222-seat parliament despite their 48% popular votes (The Star, 12 April 2014) due to the First-Past-the-Post election system practiced in Malaysia.

### **Anwar Ibrahim's Islamic and Political Thoughts**

In describing Anwar Ibrahim, his lifetime intellectual companion, Siddiq Fadzil (Anuar Tahir, 2017:21) who succeeded him as the president of ABIM after he left the organization for UMNO, explains that Anwar is a politician unlike any other politicians: he is a thinker and an icon of humanity. He based his argument on evidences from Anwar's writings. Fadzil (2017:32) points out amongst the grandiose ideas proposed by Anwar since his younger days until today are: New Islamic Revivalism (*Wawasan Kebangkitan Islam*), Asian Renaissance (*Nahdah Kebangkitan Asia*), humane economy (*Ekonomi Manusiawi*), humanistic education (*Pendidikan Insaniyah*), Madani society (*Masyarakat Madani*), and the latest one is 'World Forum for Muslim Democrats'.

However, according to Anuar Tahir, (2017: 20) and Mustafa Kamil, (2004) the real major thoughts of Anwar that will always carry his trademark were the '*Masyarakat Madani*' (Madani Society), as an Islamic version of civil society. Madani society was introduced since he was the Deputy Prime Minister. The idea was not really popular in Malaysia but became debated and popularized in Indonesia after his speech in 'Festival Istiqlal' (Istiqlal Festival) in the year 1991 in Jakarta.

Anwar too in more recent years is known for his 'Democrat Muslim' idea (Allers, 2014; Abd Rahman, 2017; Shamsul Iskandar, 2017; Mohd Fauzan, 2017). Democracy with an Islamic element, according to Anwar, would endow men with a value that surpasses the political or social value, a value that honours the dignity of human being. Similar to Ghannouchi, the central theme in Anwar's thought is that democracy is compatible with Islam, and that Muslims need to incorporate it into their political thought (Anwar, 2014).

The need to learn from each other is the key concept towards what he calls the 'Asian Renaissance'. Anwar states in his book 'The Asian Renaissance' (1996:18-9) that freedom is not uniquely a Western ideal but instead is part of a universal value system. However, Anwar does draw the demarcation between his proposals for 'Asian Renaissance'

with the European values when it comes to religion. He asserts that if the European Renaissance was the final declaration on the death of God and the burial of the church's role in private life, the Asian position is the opposite. Asian man, he claims 'at heart is *persona religiousus*'.

In responding towards the nature of multi-cultural and multi-religious Malaysia and Asia, Anwar has proposed a new 'Convivencia', referring to the model of co-existence in Andalusia during the Islamic rule in Spain (Anwar, 1996: 44). Under the *La Convivencia*, the spirit of mutual respect and recognition did not only boost the Islamic civilisation, but also enhanced the Christian and Jewish intellectual and cultural environments. According to Anwar, peaceful co-existence with the other and a culture of tolerance are integral parts of Southeast Asian Islam, and he emphasizes on the necessity of dialogue between the east and the west as part of the Asian Renaissance (Anwar, 1996: 45, 123). Anwar suggests that Asia has its own uniqueness where no single religion, culture or civilization is dominating others. Hence the peaceful co-existence he proposes is not solely confined to Muslims, but to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

According to Anwar, the pertinent role of democrat Muslims as he proclaims himself to be one, are to be the agents of peace and to counter the rising force of religious fanaticism espousing violence to achieve its goals (Anwar, 2006), as well as the rise of Islamophobia and Islamistphobia (Anwar, 2014). When Anwar was asked about his position as an 'Islamist', he claimed that his intonation was more neutral and was not solely 'Islamist' (Personal communication with Anwar Ibrahim, 13 June 2014.). This fact was mentioned by the late Abdel Wahab el-Messiri in 2003 when Anwar was quoted as the epitome of one of the new Islamists who represented a generation to change the old and reaction-based Islamist thoughts and discourse. This is where he chose to be known as a democrat Muslim rather than as an 'Islamist' (Anwar, 2006).

### **Critiques on Anwar's Political Thoughts**

As a leading figure with a controversial past in Malaysia, Anwar's position now as the face for human rights and multiculturalism may invite question. It is not necessarily his ideas per se, but due to his background, his commitment to the democrat Muslim project has been questioned. The greatest criticism on Anwar is that his new definition of

a democrat Muslim acts as nothing more but a cover to bring together political parties from various ideologies into one banner so that he can finally defeat Barisan Nasional and achieve his final aim: Putrajaya.

Unlike Ghannouchism, criticism on Anwar's new approach to Islam and politics has little to do with the possibility of Malaysia turning into a conservative state under his possible leadership. Instead, the main criticism on Anwar is whether he would go right back into the fold of the corrupt establishment. His supposed opportunism can be seen during the 'Kajang Move' in 2014 when PKR assemblyperson Lee Chin Cheh quit to make way for Anwar to compete in a by-election and thus allow him to take over Khalid Ibrahim as the Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) of the state of Selangor. It has been proposed that if he wanted to prove his ability as a capable leader, why not win over the northern state of Kelantan instead of the richest state in Malaysia? (Huan, 2014)

While Anwar has had experiences with organizations such as ABIM before ascending the ranks in UMNO and the government, his critics still consider him part of the machinery that was complicit with Mahathir's many shortcomings (Allers, 2013). Anwar is thus not seen as a revolutionary thinker, but as an opportunist that has changed his discourse on democracy and freedom over the years to fit his political agenda (Nagata, 1980). It is not necessarily a cause for concern as experience and time, especially jail time, may possibly change a person. However, no one can tell what his true intention would be if he ever becomes Malaysia's premier (Mauzy & Milne, 1983-1984).

Nevertheless, it is not entirely wrong to claim that there is consistency in Anwar's ideology and political actions that are beyond personal gains. There has been no doubt that Anwar's main concern since the 1960s is the fight against economic inequalities, social injustices and the fight for greater civil liberties (Khoo, 2001). Anwar's approach to dealing with these issues may have changed from fighting the establishment to working within it, but the aim is still consistent. Similarly, while leading the opposition coalition during the *Reformasi* period and beyond, he has continued to speak on lessening the burdens for poor Malaysians who have been the loser under Malaysia's practice of nepotism and kleptocracy.

It has also been shown that Anwar's role in bringing together different parties with different racial and ideological backgrounds is due to the

available space afforded him by Malaysia's dissonant politics. In other words, while Mahathir's brand of Islamization is one effort to empower Muslims, Anwar attempted to fill the gap by emphasizing '*Manhaj Malizi*' and his concept of a 'Madani society'. Malaysia is different from Tunisia in that while Muslims make up a majority, they still make up less than two-thirds of the population. Therefore, for Malaysia to move forward as a nation, a democrat Muslim would have to respect the demands of multiple strands of society without compromising the ideals of a liberal democratic nation.

This analysis has shown that the experiences faced by Anwar throughout his colourful past has not only strengthen his desire for a free and fair Malaysia but has changed the man from being the face of political Islam in Southeast Asia (Kloos & Berenschot, 2017) to be a democrat Muslim that seeks to implement democracy that goes beyond simply social, political or economic values. Anwar's ideological evolution is the result of him being outside of the establishment and making use of the opportunities afforded to critical voices within Malaysia's limited democracy. From being inside to being outside the establishment, Anwar came to realize that it is the people that shape the idea of religious identity within a country. A democrat Muslim recognizes that it is imperative for every country to create its own discourse and find a leader that could put the ideas into practice.

### **A Comparison between Democrat Muslims**

The main similarity between Ghannouchi and Anwar, which is the subject of this article, is the shift or evolution of both men from the idea of political Islam to democrat Muslim. To understand the position of a new democrat Muslim, one needs to understand the notion of 'ideological evolution'. A normal ideological evolution is normally derived when a new paradigm within a certain ideology shifts from its initial fundamental principles while maintaining its references and epistemological references with a degree of ideological coherence with the former. Both men had undergone an evolution that is not necessarily an ideological moderation as discussed earlier, but a change in perspective of what it entails to be a Muslim in a modern democratic country. The difference is that moderation would mean that Ghannouchi and Anwar started as an extremist or fundamentalist. As this paper has

shown, they are neither; nevertheless, their understanding of politics has changed due to the circumstances they were in.

Looking at Ghannouchi's political thoughts, exemplified by Ennahda's, the possibility and potential for ideological evolution has forcefully emerged when rethinking Islamist politics and the ideology of political Islam. This evolution happened during his time outside of the country in self-exile. With his return to Tunisia in 2011, Ghannouchi brought a new set of ideas that are more inclusive and proposed Ennahda to become a semi-secular political party with an Islamic identity. Similarly, Anwar's time outside of the government, and during his first stint in jail from 1998 until 2004 changed his outlook on how best to organize politics within a multi-racial society without abandoning Islamic principles. While they both started as idealists, reality sets in that the way forward for a Muslim society is to implement liberal democracy that considers other members of society that do not subscribe to conservative Islam.

The next main similarity between the two is that their perspective depends heavily on the local context they are in. Ideologies are not fixed, and they constantly interact with the context, either it is political, economic, or in many instances, the social environment within which they are produced and reproduced; suggesting that dogmatic and static adherence is often an exception, even in the supposedly dogmatic-based religious ideologies. Therefore, based on the dissonant politics theory, it should not be surprising that the ideas and languages adopted by them can be easily understood by the people of their respective countries. As political leaders, it is neither manipulative nor hypocritical to use symbols and ideas that resonate with the people.

These circumstances are also one of the differences between the two. Tunisia is made up of an overwhelming majority of Muslims. However, the Muslim population is divided among secularists and Islamists. Ghannouchi's proposition for the new Ennahda is to make the party inclusive of both groups. In his actions, he allowed Moncef Marzouq to become the first Tunisian president post-Jasmine Revolution even though he does not come from Ennahda. Anwar, on the other hand, speaks to a multicultural society. The main contention in Malaysia's politics is between the various races. As a democrat Muslim, he sought to bring together diverse parties into a coalition, a la the government's

coalition, but one which purports to defend the weak and oppressed against the government's injustice.

Furthermore, what makes Ghannouchi and Anwar a good comparison is the fact that their idea on what makes someone a democrat Muslim is the same. They are not arguing for Islam's right to create its own brand of mass participation in the political process, but for Muslims to be at the forefront of liberal democratic ideals that goes beyond simply protecting social, political and economic rights of the people. Instead, it is time for Muslims to be the voice that push for further freedom that guarantees human dignity as part of *Maqasid Shari'ah*. From the previous analysis it has been shown that while they may begin on a different path, with different circumstances, their evolution has brought Ghannouchi and Anwar to the same destination which is the idea of justice, freedom and liberty for all irrespective of ideology or race.

It has to be noted that while the ideological shift is similar, the recent experiences of Ghannouchi and Anwar are different. While Ghannouchi and Ennahda has participated in and won a free and fair election, the same cannot be said of Anwar and his ever-changing political pacts. Ennahda's short experience in the government may have had a different impact on Ghannouchi's future ideology. As understood from the dissonant politics theory, shifts in ideology is ongoing and it is non-linear. Frustration or exuberance may have unexpected consequences on a person's perspective. Unlike Ghannouchi, while Anwar and Malaysia's opposition pact has made relative inroads in past general elections and won several states, they have yet to replace the Barisan Nasional regime. As such, Anwar's view for the moment is still dependent on the possibility of the opposition pact to win in the next general election. Thus, while this article has provided in-depth analysis on the ideological evolution of Ghannouchi and Anwar, no one is to say that they will remain on the same trajectory in the future.

## **Conclusion**

It is prudent to question in an article such as this the relentless need for a Muslim leader to add a suffix to the term democrat. While it is understood that Anwar and Ghannouchi are two democratic leaders who happen to be Muslims and lead Muslim societies, why can't they make the final leap and move away from having religion denoted as part of their ideology altogether? This is a major criticism on the



ideological evolution of Ghannouchi and Anwar specifically, and the historical development of Islam and politics generally. Calling someone a democrat Muslim is a redundancy as Muslims are supposed to believe in all and every aspect of democracy that seeks to protect and promote human dignity and liberalism. If great leaders such as Ghannouchi and Anwar are unable to get out of that mindset and simply begin calling themselves *democrats*, what chance is there for the rest of the Muslim population to internalize the very essence of what makes them a Muslim? By calling themselves democrat Muslims, Ghannouchi and Anwar continue to indirectly acknowledge the distinction between Islam and the rest of the world and thus bring us back to square one.

### EndNotes

1. In explaining the importance of Manhaj Malizi, the former president of ABIM, Dr Siddiq Fadzil (1992: 4) said: “Realizing that Malaysia is not Egypt, neither is it Pakistan or Iran or any other countries in the world, rather Malaysia is Malaysia with its unique characteristics, we are convinced that Malaysian problems should be solved through the experience of Malaysia.”

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