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Major Trends in the Historiography of Muslim Reformism in Pre-Independent Malaysia

Hafiz Zakariya*

Abstract: Muslim reformism, which emerged in West Asia during the closing years of the nineteenth century, and the early twentieth, was spearheaded by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad ‘Abduh. It responded to the socio-economic and political challenges confronting the Muslim society. Muslim reformism was not only influential in West Asia but also in Southeast Asia. However, most studies on Muslim reform have privileged the “central Islāmic lands” at the expense of its “periphery”. As a result, Muslim reform in Malaysia has been marginalised. Thus, this article, discusses the historiography of Muslim reform in Malaya. An analysis of the major writings in English and Malay identified the major trends, issues, and gaps. It argues that the existing studies tend to focus on the intellectual history of reform, while the social history of the diffusion of reformism has not been adequately analysed. Similarly, most works on reform in Malaysia focus on its development in the country alone without embarking upon comparative analysis with other areas such as West Sumatra, Aceh and Java. Existing biographies of reformists focusing on prominent figures such as Syed Sheikh al-Hadi and Sheikh Tahir have been thoroughly examined while other reformists such as Abu Bakar Ashaari, Abdullah Maghribi, and Abu Bakar Bakir have not been adequately studied.

¹A substantially revised conference paper presented at the International Seminar on Religion and Development III, organised by Faculty of Islamic Studies, UKM, 6-7 August 2007.

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Keywords: Muslim reform, Islām in Malaysia, Kaum Muda, Iṣlāḥ in Malaysia, Malaysian historiography

Abstrak: Aliran pembaharuan Muslim yang muncul di Asia Barat pada akhir kurun ke sembilan belas dan awal kurun kedua puluh telah dipelopori oleh Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad ‘Abduh. Ia memberi tindak balas terhadap cabaran-cabaran ekonomi, sosial dan politik yang dihadapi masyarakat Muslim. Reformisme Muslim bukan sahaja berpengaruh di Asia Barat tetapi juga di Asia Tenggara. Bagaimanapun, kebanyakan kajian tentang pembaharuan umat Islam memberi tumpuan kepada perkembangan di “negara-negara Islam utama” dan mengabaikan negara yang berada di “pinggiran”. Sebagai kesannya, kajian tentang pembaharuan umat Islam di Malaysia diabaikan. Justeru itu, makalah ini membincangkan perkembangan historiografi gerakan pembaharuan umat Islam di Malaysia. Analisis terhadap kajian-kajian utama dalam Bahasa Melayu dan Bahasa Inggeris mengenalpasti perkembangan utama, isu dan ruang yang belum diisi sepenuhnya dalam kajian sedia ada. Makalah ini menegaskan bahawa kajian sedia ada menumpukan kepada sejarah intelektual gerakan Iṣlāḥ manakala sejarah sosial penyebaran pemikiran tersebut tidak dikaji secukupnya. Sedemikian juga, kebanyakan kajian sedia ada memfokuskan perkembangan Iṣlāḥ di sesebuah negara sahaja tanpa melakukan analisis perbandingan dengan perkembangan di tempat lain seperti di Sumatra Barat, Aceh dan Jawa. Arah dalam kajian biografi pula memfokuskan kepada tokoh-tokoh utama seperti Syed Sheikh al-Hadi dan Sheikh Tahir yang sudah dikaji secara mendalam manakala tokoh-tokoh lain seperti Abu Bakar Ashaari, Abdullah Maghribi, dan Abu Bakar Bakir belum dikaji secukupnya.

Kata kunci: Reformisme agama, Islam di Malaysia, Kaum Muda, Iṣlāḥ di Malaysia, historiografi Malaysia

Introduction

The internal restoration and reform are continuous features of Islāmic history since the 9th century until the contemporary era. Indeed, according to the *ḥadīth* (Prophetic tradition), “God will raise, at the head of each century a person to renew the faith and practice of Muslims” (‘As’ad, 2019). In modern scholarship, Muslim reformism primarily refers to the efforts of Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) and Rashid Rida (d. 1935) while in fact, reform (*Iṣlāḥ*) and renewal (*Tajdid*) in Islām, carry a broader meaning encompassing various groups and individuals who come into existence throughout Muslim history “to reform the socio-moral failures of the Muslim community ... All of these movements,

without exception, emphasised a ‘return’ to pristine Islām in terms of the Qur’ān and the Sunnah of the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him).” (Fazlur Rahman, 1970, p. 640). Therefore, since pre-modern time until today, there are numerous groups and individuals who have discharged the duties as specified in the above Prophetic tradition, which may be classified as reform-oriented. However, for practical purposes, Muslim reformism in this article refers to reformist ideas and practices as promoted by ‘Abduh, Rida, and their followers.

‘Abduh-led reform emerged during the late nineteenth century, to the early twentieth, as a response to the socio-economic and political degeneration of Muslim society. Against the background of colonisation, economic backwardness and intellectual stagnation, it “attempted to revitalise the conditions of Muslims – to rid the *Ummah* of intellectual stagnation; to reform the moral, social and political conditions; and to reinterpret the tradition to make it compatible with modernity” (Zakariya, 2011, p. 139). This mode of Muslim thinking not only influenced West Asia but also Southeast Asia. Thus, unsurprisingly, Muslim reformism has attracted the attention of many scholarly works. Most of the seminal studies on this topic have primarily focused on West Asia. Among these studies are those of Adams (1932), Hourani (1962), Kedourie (1966), Kerr (1966), Enayat (1982), and Keddie (1983). Concomitantly, Muslim reformism in Southeast Asia also receives the attention of modern scholarship. Among the important studies examining Muslim reformism in Indonesia are those of Mukti Ali (1975), Federspiel (1970), Abdullah (1971), Boland (1971), Noer (1973), Affandi (1976), Peacock (1978), Alfian (1989), Steenbrink (1993), and Abaza (1994). The advent and development of Muslim reform in Malaysia during the first half of the twentieth century (ca. 1900-1940) have not received the attention they deserve.¹ In view of the relative dearth of literature especially in English on this subject, this article discusses the historiography of Muslim reform in Malaysia. Though it is not an exhaustive literature survey, the review identifies the major themes, debates, and gaps on Muslim reform in Malaysia.

Terminology issue

The existing literature has used various terms to call and define the religious thinking associated with ‘Abduh. As Zakariya (2011) observes, “a controversy often arises in attaching a specific label to a particular

trend of Islāmic thought” (p. 139). Two terms have been employed to designate Muslim thought associated with ‘Abduh, Rida, and their followers—Muslim/ Islāmic modernism and Muslim/ Islāmic reformism. Charles Adams adopts the term Islāmic modernism, which he defines as “...an attempt to free the religion of Islām from the shackles of too rigid orthodoxy and to accomplish reforms which will render it adaptable to the complex demands of modern life. Its prevailing character is that of religious reform. It is inspired and dominated chiefly by theological considerations” (Adams, 1933, p. 1).

Several Muslim intellectuals objected to the term Islāmic modernism because Islām and modernism are purportedly incompatible. This line of thought assumes that modernism is founded upon Western thought that emerged out of specific Western historical experiences. Further, it is argued that modernism entails rationalism and secularism that reject or at least restrict the role of divine guidance in human life (Garaudy, 1982).

However, Deliar Noer, a prominent Indonesian scholar, does not find the term objectionable. In fact, Noer uses the term Muslim modernist in his study, *Modernist Muslim Movements in Indonesia*. Noer uses the terms reformists and modernists interchangeably. Noer contends that such usage is justifiable because the two are equivalent because the Indonesian reformists called for a return to the basic principles of Islām, which are eternal and compatible with modern demands and challenges (Zakariya, 2007a).

Fazlur Rahman provides a more detailed definition of Islāmic modernism. To Rahman, the essence of Muslim modernism is to synthesise Islāmic thought and modernity, resulting in the integration of modern institutions with the moral-social underpinnings of the Qur’ān. Rahman adds that the modernists uphold the Qur’ān and *Sunnah* as the only determinants of religious rulings. As for new problems, Muslims are responsible for finding solutions through *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) (Zakariya, 2007a). Rahman argues “the modernists championed the use of reason in a major way and even reopened to the issue of the place of reason in Islām” (Rahman, 1981, p. 29). Rahman considers Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and ‘Abduh as the Muslim modernists.

Conversely, Hisham Sharabi (1970) identifies ‘Abduh’s ideas as reformism rather than modernism. For Sharabi, “there is a fine line

between the two intellectual categories, and it is inaccurate to label Islāmic reformism as Islāmic modernism. First, reformism was at heart, tradition-bound whose major concern is to safeguard Islām, whereas modernism derived its central assumption not from Islāmic tradition but from Western thought. Second, unlike the modernists, the reformists advocated and adopted Western technology and knowledge only in a limited sense” (Zakariya, 2011).

Though Sharabi and Rahman employ different terms for ‘Abduh’s stream of thought, they concur that ‘Abduh’s reformism does not entail full adoption of the West. In addition, *ijtihād* occupies a central place in ‘Abduh’s formulation of ideas. Thus, Rahman’s and Sharabi’s choice of a label for ‘Abduh thought, “may well be a matter of individual preference rather than of substance” (Zakariya, 2011).

Three terms—Kaum Muda, Muslim/ Islāmic reformism, and Muslim/ Islāmic modernism— have been primarily used to refer to ‘Abduh-influenced Muslim intellectual trend in Malaysia. A widely used term for the reform-minded Muslims in Malaya is *Kaum Muda*. “Whereas the word *muda* denotes young, new or modern, the word *kaum*, derived from the Arabic *qawm*, means people, community. Two general meanings can be extracted from the label *kaum muda*: first, a group of people who subscribed to new, modern trends, and second a group of young people. The conventional view suggests that this group of Muslims was labeled *kaum muda* because most of its members who were relatively young in age and the principles that they stood for represented new trends that undermined the old order” (Zakariya, 2007a). It is also probable that the term *kaum muda* was used “to associate the reform-minded Muslims with the Young Turks of Turkey—whom the Malays generally perceived negatively (Zakariya, 2007a). *Kaum Muda* was a derogatory label given to the reformist Muslims by their opponents. The following statement by Sayyid Alwi al-Haddad, The Mufti of Johore, lends credence to this view. According to Syed Alwi Haddad, there is no *Kaum Tua* and *Kaum Muda* in Islām. These labels, *Qawm Atiq* (Kaum Tua) and *Qawm Jadid* (Kaum Muda) were introduced in Turkey (during the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II in the early twentieth century). *Qawm Jadid* or the Young Turks had launched an aggressive attack against religion until Islām was removed from public life (Sidek Fadzil, 1978).

As for the opponents of the reformists, they were popularly known as *kaum tua* (old faction). Unlike the Malay word *muda* (young), which can imply less favourable connotations, the word *tua* (old) is generally associated with positive characteristics such as wisdom, experience, and maturity. Furthermore, a prominent Indonesian Muslim scholar, Hamka (1958), argues that the label of *kaum tua* can be considered as the equivalent to the Arabic term *madhhab al-salaf* (the way of the virtuous ancestor). It is probable that the traditional 'Ulamā' refer to themselves as *kaum tua* as part of their strategy to support themselves in the contest for Islāmic legitimacy against the reformists. According to Hamka, those who should be called *kaum tua* are the reform-minded Muslims, not the traditional Muslims, because the reformists strove to restore the precedents of the *salaf al-ṣāliḥ* (Cited in Sidek Fadzil, 1978, p. 401).

Although different scholars have used divergent terms, they generally agree on a number of important key points embodying this Islāmic trend. For practical and consistency purposes, this study adopts the term Muslim reformism for 'Abduh-inspired intellectual orientation.

General studies on Muslim reform in pre-independent Malaysia

Muslim reform in Malaysia has attracted the attention of both local and foreign scholars since the early 1960s. These studies varied in terms of topics and approaches. Despite that, unlike West Asian/Middle East studies, Muslim reform in Malaysia remains an understudied area. Undergraduate students at the University of Malaya undertook early writings on Muslim reform in Malaya. Among the notable works are those of Marina Merican (1961) on Al-Hadi, S.H. Tan (1961) on Al-Hadi and Zabedah Awang Ngah (1960) on Za'ba. Generally, these academic exercises deal with a particular thinker/specific topic on Muslim reform and remain unpublished, thus, inaccessible to a large audience. William Roff's (1962) "Kaum Muda-Kaum Tua: Innovation and Reaction amongst the Malays, 1900-1941" provides a useful overview of the lives of major reformists such as Tahir Jalaluddin, al-Hadi, and Abbas Taha. This study also clearly describes the conflict between the reformists and traditionalists and the ways in which this tension was expressed in the Malay-Muslim context. Roff argues that the Malayan reformists were inspired by the reformist ideas of 'Abduh, and one of the most visible manifestations of the latter's influence on

the former was the publication of the Malay reformist periodical, *al-Imām*. Roff further states that although the reformists through their periodical made important contributions in creating Malays' awareness about the problems confronting them, the reformists were unable to form mass organisation capable of exercising a wider influence in the society. Roff adds that after several decades of activism, Islāmic reform slowly disappeared in the 1930s. When it was first published about four decades ago, Roff's article was considered a ground-breaking study on the little-known subject. However, by today's standard, obviously, Roff's account has left several issues unsatisfactorily answered. For example, the extent of 'Abduh's influence on Malay reformists was not fully answered. Thus, a major contribution of Roff's article is that it certainly made a strong case for the necessity of an in-depth study of Malayan Islāmic reform, and more importantly, it provided a point of departure for our understanding of Islāmic reform in Malaya (Zakariya, 2007a).

Zaki Badawi's (1965) "Modern Muslim Thought in Egypt and Its Impact on Islām in Malaya" primarily examines modern Muslim thought in Egypt with little discussion on its impact on Malaya. Badawi divides his study into two major parts. The first part, which represents the most substantial part of the work, focuses on Egyptian Muslim intellectual trends covering what he calls Reformist Islām, i.e. the ideas of al-Afghani, 'Abduh, and Rida, Revolutionary Islām and Secularist Islām. Although the title of this work indicates that the influence of Egyptian Islāmic trends on Malaya is supposed to form a significant part of the dissertation, Zaki only made references to such issues in passing. Zaki primarily deals with what he calls "modern Muslim thought" in Egypt ranging from 'Abduh and his followers to the Muslim Brothers. His analysis of Malayan reformists is too brief -- only six pages in chapter three and a few others in chapter four are devoted to the impact of Egyptian Islāmic trends on Malaya. Section two, which examines Islām in Malaya, comprises roughly 60 pages, and out of these pages, only 13 pages are devoted to the reformists (Zakariya, 2007a).

Sarim Mustajab's (1975) "*Islām dan Perkembangannya dalam Masyarakat Melayu di Semenanjung Tanah Melayu*" provides a more thorough discussion of Muslim reform in Malaysia. A thematic approach was adopted, concentrating on important events and trends pertaining to Islāmic and Malay development in Malaya from 1900 to the 1940s. In

contrast to Roff and Zaki, Sarim has provided a much more detailed account of the lives and ideas of the prominent reformists. He also examines the role of the reformist periodical, *al-Imam*, in spreading reformist ideas in Malaya and the development of Islāmic educational institutions inspired by the reformists. Sarim challenged Roff's contention that the reformists were not able to form a well-organised movement capable of creating a broad-based group sentiment. Sarim highlighted the basic flaw of Roff's argument as the assumption that the reformists only represented a passing stage in the eventual development of Malay nationalism, which was later spearheaded by secular-educated Malay elites. Sarim adds that while it is true that the reformists seemed to die out in the 1930s, reformist-minded Muslims in Malaya who formed several significant mass organisations in Malaya took up the reformist ideas and aspirations, thus, providing an outlet and continuity for Muslim reform (Zakariya, 2007a).

Sidek Hj. Fadzil's (1978) study, "Syekh Muhammad 'Abduh: A Critical Observation about his Thought and Influence among the Malay Society" provides a detailed analysis of 'Abduh's thought and devotes one chapter to his influence on Malay society. Given the nature of the study that primarily deals with the life and ideas of 'Abduh, his treatment on 'Abduh's influence in Malaya is rather brief. However, Fadzil provides important points of departure for our understanding of Islāmic reform in Malaya. He argues that 'Abduh's ideas exercised meaningful influence on an important segment of Muslim society (Zakariya, 2007a).

Abu Bakar Hamzah's (1981) *Al-Imām and Its Role in Malay Society 1906-1908*, examines a narrow topic, the reformist periodical, *Al-Imām*. It thoroughly analyses the contents of *al-Imām* and its role in Malay society. Hamzah's analysis of the periodical is thorough, which is a major merit of his study. Nevertheless, Hamzah does not adequately discuss other issues related to the reformists—ideas, major activities, and the development of reformist thought (Zakariya, 2007a).

Safie Abu Bakar's (1985) "Muslim Religious Thought in Malaya, 1930-1940" examines the broader history of Muslim religious thought in Malaya between 1930 and 1940. He focuses on legal, theological, political, social, and economic ideas of Malayan thinkers who belonged to three major groups: the traditional 'Ulamā', the reformist scholars,

and English-educated intellectuals. Safie firmly places the intellectual development within the context of historical milieu and scholars of the time. He convincingly argues that Muslim intellectual development then was primarily motivated by three major problems confronting the Malay society: Malay backwardness, the repercussions of colonial rule, and the advent of Islāmic reform (Zakariya, 2007a).

Mohd Redzuan Othman's (1994) work, "The Middle Eastern Influence on the Development of Religious and Political Thought in Malay Society, 1880-1940", has provided a thorough discussion of West Asian influence on the development of religious and political thought in Malaya for the period 1880-1940. Redzuan emphasises the role of Hijaz, Egypt, and Turkey. Redzuan argues that Hijaz played an important role through the conduct of the pilgrimage and its religious education that influenced early Malay Islāmic education. The significance of Egypt primarily derived from its position as a prominent centre of Islāmic learning. Apart from religious influence, Egypt also exercised literary and political influence in Malaya. Besides providing an analysis of the Middle Eastern influence on Malay society, Redzuan concurs with the argument that Abduh's ideas have exercised some influence on Malay society. An important indication of this influence is *al-Imām*, which translated or elaborated articles or works produced by the prominent reformists. Concerning the extent of the reformists' appeal in Malaya, Redzuan contends that despite the reformists' crucial contribution as the first exponents of the social and economic awareness in the Malay society, they were not able to fully channel this consciousness into a more concrete form of programme or organisation, which would be capable of creating mass awareness (Zakariya, 2007a).

Abdul Rahman Abdullah's (1998) *Pemikiran Islām di Malaysia: Sejarah dan Aliran*, provides an overview of the major trends of Muslim thought in Malaysia. He identifies three major categories of Muslim thought: traditionalist, modernist, and reformist. Abdul Rahman identifies the Muslims who were influenced by 'Abduh's ideas as the reformists and provided a brief history of its emergence in Malaysia. Though his account on the emergence of Muslim reformism in Malaya is not detailed, his discussion is broad as it covers its development in the Straits Settlements and various Malay states –Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Johore, Perlis, and Kelantan. Moreover, instead of limiting his discussion on religious reformists; Abdul Rahman also extends his

discussion of the reformist to include social, religious, and political organisations in Malaysia including Hizbul Muslimin (Hamim), The Pan Malayan Islāmic Party (PAS), and ABIM (The Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement).

Case studies of reform in various states

In addition to general studies on Muslim reform, a case study was adopted by several researchers. Case study is “a method of studying elements of the society through comprehensive description and analysis of a single situation or case e.g. a detailed study of an individual, setting, group, episode or event. Case study research can refer to single and multiple case studies (Zina O’Leary, 2010, p. 174). One of the first studies to adopt this approach is Abdul Aziz Mat Ton (1973) “Gerakan Ansarul Sunnah dalam kegiatan Kaum Muda di Melaka”, which examines the Kaum Muda in Malacca. The author explains that Muslim reformism in Malacca was found in the following three areas: Banda Kaba (central Malacca), Alor Gajah, and Jasin. This study provides useful information about the emergence, development, major figures, challenges, and activities of reformist in Malacca. While providing important departure point on Muslim reformism in this state, it does not provide a detailed analysis of reformist ideas.

Perlis, the smallest and northernmost state in Malaysia, has received more scholarly attention. Abdul Rahman Abdullah’s (1989) *Gerakan Işlāh di Perlis: Sejarah dan Pemikiran* discusses reformist movement in this state. Adopting the method of historical research, aided by oral history, the author traces the history and the spread of *Işlāh* in Perlis. Moreover, he discusses the impact of *Işlāh* thought on belief (*‘Aqidah*), worship (*‘Ibādah*), and funeral rites (*Janazah*).

Similarly, the development of reformism in Perlis has attracted the attention of Mohd. Radzi Othman and O.K. Rahmat (1996) *Gerakan Pembaharuan Islām: Satu kajian di negeri Perlis dan hubung kaitnya dengan Malaysia*. This study focuses on Muslim reformism in Perlis and its connection with other states and areas in Malaysia. The authors examine primary and secondary documents; utilise semi-structured interviews along with survey research involving 1028 respondents. Though reformism was widely disseminated throughout Malaysia, it is well entrenched in Perlis through the control of politics as well

as religious administration of the state. Unlike, other Malay state, the Shāfi'ī Madhhab was not well established in Perlis. This can be attributed to *Iṣlāḥ* figures' control and domination of both political and religious powers in the state.

Mohd Nasir Abd. Hamid et. al (2009) "The role of the *Iṣlāḥ* movement in the state's constitution of Perlis, Malaysia" discusses the factors for the spread of *Iṣlāḥ* ideas in Perlis. Using document analysis as well as interview with selected figures, the authors argue that the *Iṣlāḥ* movement has been successful in its contest with the traditional (Shāfi'ī) interpretation of Islām. The state has culminated with the elevation of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* as the official religious doctrine of the state without adhering to any *madhhab*. The success of the *Iṣlāḥ* movement in Perlis, over the years can be credited to the support it received from the King as well as the state administration.

More recently, Maszlee Malik and Hamidah Mat's (2017) "The historical development of the "Sunnah" reform ideology in the state of Perlis, Malaysia" traces the evolution and history of the "*Sunnah*" reform ideology in Perlis from the 1920s to 2000s. The authors state that Perlis is unique because unlike other Malay states, which have been dominated by the traditionalist version of Islām; conversely, reformist/Sunnah interpretation of Islām is well established in Perlis. They have presented nuanced information about the development of *Sunnah* ideology in Perlis into six distinct phases. The first phase is the establishment period, the 1920s-1930s; Second, stagnation period, 1941-1945; third re-enhancement period, 1945-1960s; fourth, crisis period, 1960s; fourth revival period, 1980s and fifth, the golden period, under the administration of Shahidan Kassim.

Studies on reformism in Malaysia as a whole, though providing useful light on the subject under study; have not generated nuanced discussion of Muslim reformism. Thus, the appearance of case studies is much welcome because these case studies have provided us with more in-depth information about Muslim reform in various parts of Malaysia. Overall, the number of published works, employing case studies method is still minimal. Furthermore, it does not help that most of the academic exercises and theses employing this approach remain unpublished for the benefit of the public at large.

Biographies of reformists

The existing literature does not give a balanced treatment of Malay reformists. While some reformists have received disproportionately close attention, others have been marginalised or neglected altogether. It appears that Syed Sheikh Ahmad al-Hadi has received the most significant scholarly attention from modern scholarship. Abdullah Basmih (1958) “Almarhum Sayed Shaikh al-Hadi: Pujangga dan pelopor kesedaran politik” presents Al-Hadi as a prominent reformer along with other leading Malay reformists. As mentioned previously, in the early 1960s, two B.A. honours academic exercises were written on him. Roff (1962) provides brief information about Al-Hadi’s life, career, and writings. In his short discussion about Al-Hadi, Roff clearly demonstrates the significant contributions of Al-Hadi to Muslim reformism, especially through writings and journalism.²

Ibrahim Abu Bakar (1994) presented *Islāmic Modernism in Malaya*, which focuses on the life and intellectual contributions of Sayyid Shaykh Ahmad al-Hadi. Utilising the thinker’s original writings, Abu Bakar provides a detailed analysis of al-Hadi’s life. Apart from that, he also examines al-Hadi’s thought on technical Islāmic matters, education, women, and politics. Abu Bakar’s basic argument is that al-Hadi represented a Muslim modernist figure who attempted to discover solutions to the problems confronting the Malay society based on rational Islāmic ideas of the modern *salafīyya*. Ibrahim further contends that al-Hadi’s approach to Islām emphasises the practicality, rationality, and usefulness of Islām. Moreover, al-Hadi also was receptive to the positive aspects of the progressive ideas and institutions of the West. The merit of this study is that it provides an exhaustive treatment of al-Hadi’s life and works (Zakariya, 2007a).

Another important work is an anthology edited by Alijah Gordon (1999) entitled “*The Real Cry of Syed Shaykh Ahmad al-Hadi*”. This book is the fruit of collaborative efforts by various scholars, including personal accounts by al-Hadi’s own descendants. It chronicles the life, times, and ideas of Syed Shaykh. Gordon’s introductory chapter delineates the historical milieu during the formative stage of al-Hadi’s life. This is followed by two articles by al-Hadi’s own descendants – his son, Syed Alwi, and grandson Syed Mohammad Alwi. These two chapters present a passionate version of al-Hadi’s life seen through the

eyes of his descendants. The next chapter provides an insightful analysis of al-Hadi's life, times, and contributions by Linda Tan. Perhaps a more substantial contribution of this work is a section that contains a translation of al-Hadi's selected writings into English. An edited work of this nature does not really develop a coherent theme. It appears that the common thread of the various articles in this work is the recognition of al-Hadi as an important figure that contributed to the development of Muslim society in Malaya (Zakariya, 2007a).

The continuing popularity of Al-Hadi is reflected through another anthology edited by Mohamad Mokhtar Abu Hassan and Mohd. Hanafi Ibrahim (2019) entitled *Syed Sheikh al-Hadi: Pembaharu semangat Islām dan sosial*. It examines various aspects of Al-Hadi's legacy which encompass his biography, influence, role as a printer/publisher, literary contributions, and religious thought. This work is, in fact, an anthology of different works by various authors on Al-Hadi.

Besides Al-Hadi, Tahir Jalaluddin has also received significant scholarly attention. In several general studies of Muslim reformism in Malaya, Tahir is referred to in connection with the development of Islām in Malaya. However, most of these references are made in passing. The notable exceptions are the works of Roff, Hamdan, Sarim, Sidek, Bachtiar and Hafiz. Roff's seminal article, which was mentioned earlier, only provides a brief coverage of Tahir, but it represents the first scholarly work in English that brought our attention to Tahir and made a case for the necessity of studying Tahir because, as Roff has noted, among the reformists, Tahir was probably the most notable in religious credentials and scholarly achievement (Zakariya, 2007a).

Hamdan Hassan's article (1973), "Syekh Tahir Jalaluddin: The Pioneer of Islāmic Reformist Thought in Malaysia," throws further light on Tahir's life, works, and ideas. Drawing on primary and secondary sources, Hamdan argues that Tahir represents a group of Middle Eastern-educated Malays through whom 'Abduh's ideas were transmitted to Malaya. The reformist Islām propagated by Tahir intends to call for a return to Qur'ān and *Sunnah* and to restore the pristine Islām that is free from innovations and superstitions. It appears that the basic objective of this work is to establish the prominent position of the thinker in the development of Islāmic reform in Malaya. As such, it only analyses

limited aspects of Tahir's life and ideas. Thus, it does not represent an exhaustive treatment of Tahir's life and ideas (Zakariya, 2007a).

A much more detailed study of Tahir's life is provided by Sarim Mustajab's article, "Syeikh Tahir Jalaluddin: The Pioneer of Islāmic Reform in Malaya." This study supersedes other earlier accounts on Tahir as the author utilises Tahir's personal papers more extensively than other works. This work surveys the life, activities, and certain aspects of Tahir's ideas. However, Sarim does not address Tahir's life adequately (Mustajab, 1977). For example, Sarim only makes a general reference to his religious studies and the institutions that he attended without specifying the nature of the learning that he acquired. His treatments of Tahir's ideas, though more detailed than Roff's and Hamdan's, still does not present us with an adequate account of Tahir's life and times (Zakariya, 2007a).

The most detailed study on Tahir in any language is that of Bachtiar Djamily (Djamily, 1994), *The Life and Struggles of Shaykh Tahir Jalaluddin al-Falaki*. It provides a much nuanced description of Tahir's life from his early life in Minangkabau, his sojourn years in Mecca and Cairo, and his later years in the Malay-Indonesian world. Though Bachtiar does not really utilise Tahir's personal papers extensively, he is privileged to be able to get Tahir's own reflections about his life. Furthermore, Bachtiar also managed to obtain personal recollections of Tahir's surviving elderly relative in Bukit Tinggi about the thinker. These things have enabled Bachtiar to write a nuanced description of Tahir's life in a way that many other works have not been able to do. Bachtiar formed a close relationship with Tahir in his capacity as a student during the latter part of Tahir's life. However, his close relationship with the subject has also proved to be a disadvantage for the writer. The obvious drawback of this work is the lack of a critical historical approach. Rather, it appears to represent a passionate work about Tahir as a form of a tribute from a disciple to his respected teacher (Zakariya, 2007a).

Sohaimi Abdul Aziz's (2003) *Syeikh Tahir Jalaluddin: Palikir Islām* is an edited book comprising of selected conference papers presented at the seminar organised at USM in 2003. The authors discuss various aspects of Tahir Jalaluddin's life and ideas such as his significant contributions as the pioneer of reform. Al-Afghani's and Muhammad

‘Abduh’s influence on him was also presented. Besides discussing Tahir’s contributions on religious reforms, Lubis and Abdul Aziz deal with Tahir’s contributions to Islāmic literature, which was not covered by the existing literature. Though an edited book of this nature does not have a coherent theme, it brings together useful scholarship on various aspects of Tahir’s life and ideas.

Hafiz Zakariya (2005) examines the contributions of Tahir Jalaluddin to Muslim reformism by focusing on his major writings and activities in both Malaya and West Sumatra. Tahir is widely regarded as the most eminent reformist “Ulamā” in Malaya. He emphasised on the adherence on the “pristine” teachings of Islām by referring to the Qur’ān and Sunnah. Hafiz Zakariya (2006) “The life and times of Tahir Jalaluddin” provides detailed information about Tahir Jalaluddin’s life. Besides, providing narratives about Tahir’s life and activities, this article provides a detailed account of Tahir’s ancestors and their role in reform in Minangkabau.

Most biographies of the Malay reformists tend to focus on al-Hadi and Tahir Jalaluddin. Unfortunately, minimal book-length analysis of other reformists in Malaya such as Abbas Taha, Abdullah Maghribi, Ibrahim Aqibi, Abu Bakar Al-Ashaari, and Abu Bakar al-Baqir.³ Despite his immense contributions, Abu Bakar al-Baqir received minimal attention in the existing literature. To date, there are only two book-length surveys on Abu Bakar. The first by Nabir Abdullah (1976) written more than 40 years ago on Madrasah Ihya Al-Syarif, established by the figure being studied. Nabir’s main contribution lies in his analysis of the establishment, challenges, and achievements of the Madrasah Ihya al-Syarif, 1934-1959. Through access to primary sources including interviews with Abu Bakar himself, Nabir presents a very useful account about the history of the madrasah and Abu Bakar’s role in the establishment and growth of the madrasah. As a testament to its merit, even more than 40 years after publication, Nabir Abdullah’s work *Maahad Il Ihya Assyariff Gunung Semanggol 1934-1959* remains a standard reference on the school founded by Abu Bakar. More recently, Khairul Nizam Zainal Badri (2008) has written *Ketokohan dan pemikiran Abu Bakar al-Baqir*. Relying primarily on secondary sources, this work comprises of two main sections. Part One provides useful information about Abu Bakar’s background, education, and role in the establishment of the Ihya al-Syarif madrasah. Part Two discusses

various aspects of Abu Bakar's ideas and contributions such as his philosophy of education and curriculum contents at his *madrasah*.

Another exception is Nornajwa Ghazali and Mustafa Abdullah's (2015) *Syeikh Abu Bakar Al-Ashaari: Mufasssir Işlāh penerus zaman*. Relying on the primary and secondary sources along with interviews, the authors provide detailed account about various aspects of the 'alim's life, contributions in the sciences of ḥadīth and Qur'ānic exegesis, involvement in politics, reformist ideas and contributions to society. This study makes an important contribution to the study of Abu Bakar Al-Ashaari as it probably represents the first book-length survey on this reformist scholar.

Social history: the transmission of reformism to Malaya

One of the least explored topics of Muslim reformism in Malaya is the process facilitating its transmission from the Arab world to Malaya. Most of the existing studies have made references to its transmission to the Malay world, it is unfortunate that most of these references are made in passing, without the support of more detailed studies. The notable exceptions are the works of Roff, Bluhm, Redzuan, Azra, and Zakariya.

William Roff's (1970) article entitled "Indonesian and Malay Students in Cairo in the 1920s" informs us of Cairo's significance in influencing Malay students who were sojourning there at that time. Redzuan's (Othman, 1999a) article "Call of the Azhar: The Malay Students' Sojourn in Cairo before World War II", similarly provides a penetrating analysis of Cairo's role in promoting reformist activism among Malay students in Cairo and further deepens our understanding of the subject. Analysing Indonesia, Azra in "The Transmission of *al-Manār*'s Reformism" illuminates the major means that facilitated the transmission of *al-Manār* reformist idea to the Malay-Indonesian world. This important work demonstrates that the printed media played a crucial role in the transmission of the Islāmic reform in the Archipelago. Juta Bluhm's (1983) "A preliminary statement on the dialogue established between the reform magazine, *Al-Manar* and the Malayo-Indonesian World" provides a brief but very useful account of the dialogue between the audience in the region and *al-Manar*. This work clearly indicates the importance of an in-depth study about dialogue between reformists in the Malay world and those of West Asia.

Hafiz Zakariya's (2007) "From Cairo to the Straits Settlements: Modern *salafiyah* ideas in Malay Peninsula" discusses how 'Abduh's reformism was transmitted to Malaya. Utilising both the primary as well as reliable secondary sources, he argues that the transmission of reformist ideas to Malaya was "facilitated by both "traditional" factors and new conditions associated with modernity" (p. 139). The Malay students who were in sojourn in the *haramayn* and Cairo played an important role in the transmission of reformist ideas in the Malay world. Furthermore, reformist literature was also crucial in this process.

To date, book-length surveys on the transmission of reformist ideas during the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth, from West Asia to the Malay world is lacking. It is high time to expand Azra's study on scholarly networks across the regions in earlier centuries (17th and 18th centuries) to the scholarly connections linking those associated and influenced by 'Abduh's reformism throughout the Muslim world.

Comparative analysis

While there are numerous studies examining various aspects of Muslim reformism in Malaysia, Indonesia or Egypt, there are only few works which engage in comparative studies of Muslim reformism whether it is a comparison of reformists from the same area (such as Malaya) or comparison between one area to another (such as a comparison between Malaysia and Indonesia). Such comparative analysis is significant because "it may enrich knowledge about this fascinating chapter in the modern history of the reformist movement in the Malay-Indonesian world. Perhaps it may even provide insights regarding the movement that go beyond the confines of the said period" (Eliraz, 2002, p. 52). Among the few works, a comparative approach of Islāmic reformism was adopted by Giora Eliraz (2002) who presented "The Islāmic reformist movement in the Malay-Indonesian World in the first four decades of the twentieth century: Insights gained from a comparative look at Egypt". Eliraz contends that Muslim reformism in the Malay-Indonesian world, especially in Indonesia and the British Straits Settlements was successful. Moreover, he argues that Muhammad 'Abduh's ideas exert greater influence in Indonesia than in his native country of Egypt. Eliraz cites Muhammadiyah as a story of success in Islām reformism in Indonesia. While adhering to the pristine teachings of Islām by rejecting deviated innovation (*bid'ah*) such as communal

feast for the dead, Muhammadiyah runs schools, colleges, and hospitals. Similar comparative studies on Muslim reformism in Malaysia and Indonesia or with another country in the Arab world would enrich the current body of literature.

A significant work compared the lives and contributions of the two prominent reformists from Malaysia and Indonesia. Mohamad Muzammil Mohammad Noor's (2015) *Pemikiran Politik Islām: Perbandingan antara pemikiran Dr. Burhanuddin Al-Helmi dengan Muhammad Natsir* undertakes a systematic comparison of the lives, careers, and political thoughts of both reformists. Using both primary sources and extensive secondary sources, Mohamad Muzammil concludes that both reformists who hailed from Minangkabau shared a common struggle in the name of Islāmic politics. Moreover, they shared similarities in terms of their stance towards reformism (Kaum Muda-Kaum Tua dichotomy) and political thought. Their disparity primarily lies in the details of their careers. For example, while Dr Burhanuddin served as the Member of Parliament, Muhammad Natsir was appointed as Indonesia's fifth Prime Minister. In addition, Dr Burhanuddin occupied the most important positions in various political parties; however, never founded any political party. Conversely, Muhammad Natsir founded the Indonesian Islāmic Party—Masyumi and Dewan Dakwah Islāmiah Indonesia (DDII).

Though there is a growing body of literature on various aspects of Muslim reformism in Malaya, very few analyses the Malay reformists from a comparative perspective. This is significant because though the Malay reformists share a lot of commonalities on reformism, they are not monolithic. Hafiz Zakariya (2017) examines such issue by comparing the careers and ideas of Tahir and Al-Hadi. He argues that Tahir and al-Hadi differed from each other in educational background, genre of their writing, originality of ideas and more importantly, their take on different aspects of 'Abduh's ideas. Despite such significant differences in their backgrounds, education, and intellectual approach, they collaborated very effectively through several ventures in promoting the cause of Islāmic reform. He adds that though these two Malay reformers were generally in agreement with each other in their acceptance of the religious and educational aspects of 'Abduh's ideas, they differed in their attitude towards the liberal strand of his thought. Tahir did not clearly demonstrate his attitude toward the liberal aspects of 'Abduh's

thinking regarding the relation between Islām and reason. Al-Hadi, on the other hand, fully endorsed and actively promoted liberal reformist thought. Al-Hadi emphasises on ‘Abduh’s thoughts rather than on Rida’s, as he was more impressed with ‘Abduh’s ideas. Therefore, al-Hadi may well be considered as the ‘Abduh-like reformer in Malaya, while the learned Tahir represented the conservative reformism of Rida.

Conclusion

Most studies on reform in the field of Muslim studies have privileged the “central Islāmic lands” at the expense of its “periphery”. As a result, the development of Islāmic reform in Malaysia has become comparatively marginalised. Though numerous studies have been published over the last 50 years, especially in Malay, there is still a lot more room for improvement. For example, most of the existing studies tend to be descriptive and focus on the development of the history of ideas. Few works focus on social history of Islamic reform such as the processes that facilitated the transmission of reformist ideas from Cairo to Malaya. To date, there has yet to be a book-length survey examining the Malay reformist scholarly networks with West Asian reformers. In Indonesia, Azra (1992, 2004) has produced a ground-breaking and widely acclaimed work, *The Origins of Islāmic Reformism*. Similarly, to enrich and add value for scholarly works in the field, besides using the traditional approaches, scholars should utilise new methodologies such as the post-colonial theory in the analysis of the history of ideas, thus, providing new perspectives on Muslim reformism in Malaysia.

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(Endnotes)

1 Malaysia was only officially established on the 16th September 1963. Before the formation of Malaysia, it was known as Malaya. However, in this study, the name Malaysia is used because this nomenclature is better known to most contemporary readers.

2 There are two master's on al-Hadi by Zainon Ahmad (1979) UM and Jamilah Othman (1984), NUS. There are not reviewed here due to inaccessibility.

3 Besides Tahir and Al-Hadi, two reformist intellectuals who have received a lot of scholarly attention are Za'ba and Burhanuddin Al-Helmi. They are not covered here because most of the existing studies on these two figures analyses their contributions in areas outside the focus of this article. For example, most of the literature on Za'ba discusses his contributions in enhancing the Malay language and the problems facing the society as a whole while studies on Burhanuddin Al-Helmi concentrates on his political thought and political activities.

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