

# Intellectual Discourse

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Volume 28

Number 1

2020



**International Islamic University Malaysia**  
<http://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/islam>

# *Intellectual Discourse*

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*Intellectual Discourse* is a highly respected, academic refereed journal of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). It is published twice a year by the IIUM Press, IIUM, and contains reflections, articles, research notes and review articles representing the disciplines, methods and viewpoints of the Muslim world.

*Intellectual Discourse* is abstracted in *SCOPUS*, *ProQuest*, *International Political Science Abstracts*, *Peace Research Abstracts Journal*, *Muslim World Book Review*, *Bibliography of Asian Studies*, *Index Islamicus*, *Religious and Theological Abstracts*, *ATLA Religion Database*, *MyCite*, *ISC* and *EBSCO*.

ISSN 0128-4878 (Print); ISSN 2289-5639 (Online)

<http://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/islam>

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Published by:

IIUM Press, International Islamic University Malaysia

P.O. Box 10, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Phone (+603) 6196-5014, Fax: (+603) 6196-6298

Website: <http://iiumpress.iium.edu.my/bookshop>

**Intellectual Discourse**  
**Vol. 28, No. 1, 2020**

**Contents**

***Editorial***

*Ishtiaq Hossain* 1

Pathways of Becoming Political Party Activists:  
The Experiences From Malay-Muslim Grassroots Party Activists  
*Wan Rohila A. Ganti Bt. Wan Abdul Ghapar &  
Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid* 5

Mediation and Interreligious Discourse: Prospects and  
Challenges in Resolving Interreligious Skirmishes in Malaysia  
*Haslina Ibrahim & Ainul Jaria bt. Maidin* 35

Examining the Role of ‘Ulama in the  
Islamization Process of the Malay World  
*Mohd Noh Abdul Jalil & Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor* 61

Role of Judaism, Christianity and Islam  
in Promoting Human Values in the Strife-Torn World  
*Israr Ahmad Khan* 77

Mathematics Anxiety and Performance among College Students:  
Effectiveness of Systematic Desensitization Treatment  
*Najihah Akeb-urai, Nor Ba’ Yah Abdul Kadir & Rohany Nasir* 99

Faith and Practice: Islamic Perspectives on Robert Browning  
*Rehnuma Bint Anis & Md. Mahmudul Hasan* 129

Syariah Criminal Law Enforcement in  
Hisbah Framework: Practice In Malaysia  
*Alias Azhar, Muhammad Hafiz Badarulzaman,  
Fidlizan Muhammad & Siti Zamarina Mat Zaib* 149

Imperialism, Colonialism and their Contribution to the Formation of Malay and Chinese Ethnicity: An Historical Analysis <i>Khauthar Ismail</i>	171
Removal of Despotic Political Regime: The Abū Dharr’s Legacy and Its Legitimacy <i>Mohd. Shah Jani &amp; Raudlotul Firdaus binti Fatah Yasin</i>	195
Nigeria’s Foreign Policy Goals in Peacekeeping Operations in Africa <i>Sani Safiyanu, Roy Anthony Rogers, Wan Sharina Ramlah Wan Ahmad &amp; Amin Jaffri</i>	215
Ecological Modernization in Malaysia: A Review of Pakatan Harapan’s Manifesto During the 14th General Election Within the Context of Ecological Modernization Framework <i>Noor Asyhikin Binti Abd Razak &amp; Nor Azlin Binti Tajuddin</i>	241
Education for the Production and Re-Production of Docile Civic Bodies: The Problems of Civic Education in Thailand <i>Siwach Sripokangkul</i>	261
Revisiting Southeast Asian Civil Islam: Moderate Muslims and Indonesia’s Democracy Paradox <i>M. Khusna Amal</i>	295
Conceptualizing Islamic Ethics for Contemporary Muslim Societies <i>Fethi B. Jomaa Ahmed</i>	319
<b><i>Book Reviews</i></b> States of Separation. Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East. By Laura Robson. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2017, pp. 247. ISBN 9785229215427 Reviewer: <i>Kaoutar Guediri</i>	345

Our Constitution. By Shad Saleem Faruqi. Subang Jaya,  
Malaysia: Sweet & Maxwell, 2019, pp. 425.  
ISBN 9789672187059 (paperback).  
Reviewer: *Ramizah Wan Muhammad*

349

Metodologi Penyelidikan Dalam Pendidikan:  
Amalan dan Analisis Kajian. By Ghazali Darusalam &  
Sufean Hussin. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 2019,  
pp. 630. ISBN: 978-967-488-009-5.  
Reviewer: *Khairil Husaini Bin Jamil*

353



# **Pathways of Becoming Political Party Activists: The Experience of Malay-Muslim Grassroots Party Activists**

**Wan Rohila Ganti Bt. Wan Abdul Ghapar\***  
**Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid\*\***

**Abstract:** Whilst the recent electoral performance of *Parti Islam seMalaysia* (PAS) and *Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu* (UMNO) in Terengganu has generated much interest, there are lack of studies over the involvement and motivations of the most committed party players; the grassroots party activists. PAS and UMNO are strongly supported by committed and extraordinary party members at the grassroots level who devote their time, money, effort, and energy to ensure the party they support wins elections and remains relevant. Unlike other professions, they are working for the party on a full-time basis yet receive no specific income from the party. Their uniqueness has directed this study to examine the factors which influence them to become political party activists. This study interviewed thirty-two party activists who were selected using the purposive sampling technique, and the data was then thematically analyzed through the content analysis method. Combining the Civic Voluntarism Model and the General Incentives Model into a framework to understand factors that motivate informants' political party activism. This study discovered five major factors which include the ideology of the party, religious beliefs, defending ethnic supremacy, parental influence, significant political events and educational institutions. This study also academically defies the common perception that party activists enjoy material rewards by virtue of their party activism.

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**Keywords:** Political activism, Party Activists, UMNO, PAS, Terengganu politics, Incentives

Dalam pada perkembangan politik dan pilihanraya di Terengganu sering menjadi perhatian ekoran kemenangan tipis parti pemerintah sejak Pilihanraya Umum 2008, penglibatan dan komitmen yang ditunjukkan oleh aktivis parti di peringkat akar umbi kurang diberi perhatian oleh para pengkaji politik. Berbeza dengan negeri lain, kekuatan Parti Islam seMalaysia (PAS) dan Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu (UMNO) di Terengganu didokong kuat oleh aktivis parti peringkat akar umbi. Mereka berkorban sepenuh masa, tenaga dan wang ringgit untuk memastikan parti mereka memenangi pilihanraya dan kekal relevan, tanpa menerima sebarang bayaran daripada parti. Keunikan ini memberi peluang kepada pengkaji untuk meneroka faktor yang mempengaruhi individu untuk menjadi aktivis parti sepenuh masa. Seramai tiga puluh dua informan telah dipilih menggunakan persampelan bertujuan dan ditemubual secara bersemuka. Data temubual telah dianalisis mengikut tema, dengan berpandukan kepada kerangka yang digariskan oleh Model Civic Voluntarism dan Model General Incentives. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan terdapat enam faktor utama yang mempengaruhi keputusan individu untuk menjadi aktivis parti sepenuh masa iaitu ideologi parti, ajaran agama, menjaga ketuanan bangsa, pengaruh keluarga, peristiwa politik dan pengaruh institusi pendidikan. Kajian ini secara ilmiahnya telah membuktikan persepsi negatif menyatakan bahawa individu menggunakan platform parti politik untuk mencari ganjaran material adalah tidak berbas.

**Kata Kunci:** Aktivisme politik, Aktivis Parti, UMNO, PAS, Politik Terengganu, Galakan

## 1. Introduction

Ample evidence from recent years show that party activism in many Western democracies have shrunk substantially, especially among the larger political parties (Biezen & Poguntke, 2014; Mjelde, 2015; Ponce & Scarrow, 2014; Whiteley, 2011). Among the many factors behind this decline include technological and communication innovation that have loosened social commitment among citizens (Biezen & Poguntke, 2014), inadequate incentives to promote people's participation in political parties (Whiteley, 2011); and parties beginning to outsource their key services to commercial organizations, political consultants and social media experts as parties become more professionalized, replacing the tasks once performed by activists (Biezen & Poguntke, 2014; Selle



& Svåsand, 1991). At the individual level, activists became inactive because the ideological differences between them and their party were too great (Dassonneville, Blais, & Dejaeghere, 2015). The altruistic motivated activists leave the party when they think that they have little influence on the party line. The other primary reason is they no longer receive material benefits from the party, especially when the party is no longer controlling the government.

On the contrary, other studies found that there has been a significant increase in the interest on party membership and activism. Whether focused on ordinary party members (Gallagher & Marsh, 2004; Ribeiro, 2014), young party activists (Cross & Young, 2008; Weber, 2017), the relationship between party activism and election results (André & Depauw, 2016; Fisher, Fieldhouse, & Cutts, 2014) or the factors that drive their party membership and activity (Haute & Gauja, 2015; Platt, 2008), it is proven that party membership and activism is not dead yet. The above-mentioned unsynchronized patterns of party membership have stimulated scholars to give greater attention towards questions such as why do some citizens become actively involved in political parties (Mrigendra, 2012; Whiteley & Seyd, 2002), why do they leave the party they once became very active (Dassonneville et al., 2015; Wagner, 2016) and why do a majority of citizens choose to stay on the sidelines instead of getting involved with political and party affairs (O'Toole, Marsh, & Jones, 2003).

In the context of Malaysia, its political activism showed a positive trend. The 1998 political crisis, due to Anwar Ibrahim's controversial removal from government and party posts, has opened up space for more widespread participation in politics. The *reformasi* movement headed by Anwar revitalized Malaysia's political boredom, mute disaffection and apathetic citizens into exciting gladiators (Kuttan, 2005) especially among the urban middle-class and industrial working-class (Loh, 2009). Studies on political activism in Malaysia have indirectly examined the roles of party activists in helping the party win elections (Govindasamy, 2015; Pong, 2012; Salleh, 2013), activists joining the political mainstream (Moten, 2000; Moten, 2006, 2014), and the roles of activists at the grassroots level (Jian, 2014; Mohamad, 2014; Yi, 2014). However, much less attention has focused on the reasons behind the involvement of individual grassroots party activists, especially in the context of the Malay-Muslim political paradigm.

## 2. The UMNO-PAS Rivalry

In order to answer the above research gaps, this paper explores individual reasons over their active involvement in two Malay-based political parties in Terengganu, namely Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) and Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu (UMNO). Terengganu was chosen as a case study because its arena of political contestation and politicization is highly critical, causing the high-intensity political activism among the party activists from both parties. Political party activism in Terengganu is different than other states as political, social, economic, education and cultural aspects in the state are filtered through the lens of party ideology. This is what finally led to profound disunity between the activists and supporters of the blue bloods (UMNO) and the green bloods (PAS). The gist of the UMNO-PAS rivalry in the state, especially among their staunch supporters, is over PAS as an Islamic party that fights for the establishment of a state with Islamic values and law, and UMNO as a secular-based nationalist party that fights for the cause of Malays. As a dominant Malay – Muslim state, propagating for Islam and Malay causes is arguably the most important agenda for both UMNO and PAS. In fact, the main factor that led to a PAS victory in Terengganu in the first state election in 1959 was the party's promise to bring about an Islamic order in the state.

However, PAS rule lasted only about two years. UMNO wrested the state from PAS in 1961 due to various internal and external factors that led to a vote of no confidence in the State Legislative Assembly. PAS believed that the motion was captained by UMNO (Hamdan, 2015; Kamlin, 1977). This situation worsened the perpetually intense rivalry between PAS and UMNO supporters over the infidelity (*kafir*) of UMNO supporters due to hesitation in implementing *hudud*, following the secular constitution and separating Islam and politics. There was also a strengthening in the perception among PAS supporters that UMNO is manipulative. Evidently, PAS followers had been discriminated against when it came to the provision of state assistance and subsidies (Ahmad Zaki, 2003; Mohamad, 2013). The 30 year domination of UMNO in Terengganu ended in 1999 when PAS unexpectedly won the state. Unfortunately, the Federal government cut off the oil royalty payment to the state because the federal government was worried that PAS would use the money to widen its popularity and influence (Mohammad Agus, 2004). Without the royalty payment, not much could be done as the state

depended heavily on that money. PAS lost traction, and was perceived as having failed to fulfill its promises. Eventually, PAS was ousted by UMNO in the 2004 election mainly due to the incredible increase in the number of newly registered voters allegedly spearheaded by UMNO. The significant political events and political upheaval discussed in this section have molded the perception and politicking between UMNO and PAS supporters in Terengganu.

### **3. Theoretical Overview on Motivations to Political Party Activism**

There are two theoretical approaches in explaining the factors behind individual's decisions to be active participants in political parties. The Civic Voluntarism model (CVM) predicts socio – economic resources, psychological engagement and recruitment as three important participatory factors that steer political party activism. Individuals with resources such as time to participate in political activity, money to make contributions, and civic skills to facilitate effective participation have higher probability to become political party activists (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995). The second component is the individual's sense of political efficacy that is based on his level of interest in politics, political knowledge and understanding of political developments and belief in the capacity to influence politics (Nygård & Jakobsson, 2013). Lastly, an individual is politically mobilized when there are stimulating effects that rise from interaction with other persons in social networks, such as one's affiliation with voluntary activity, religious attendance, social circles or workplace communities, family and friends.

The second approach on political activism is the General Incentives model of political participation. This approach attaches the term 'incentives' to political activism rather than 'motivations' or 'factors' because it goes beyond narrowly define resources, engagement, recruitment and cost-benefits over activism. The first incentive is selective process incentives which refers to psychological satisfaction derived from the process of participation itself. Whiteley & Seyd, (2002) explain this feeling as the entertainment value of being involved in political activities since it provides an opportunity to meet like -minded people, participate in political activities, learn about the political process first hand, and receive political information quickly and clearly. Others might become active due to benefits of group distinction and the status resulting from their involvement in the materialistic form such as

gaining politically appointed positions, developing a full-time career in party politics, and getting government projects or contracts (Weldon, 2006). The involvement in political parties is also due to collective incentives. Party activists believe and identify themselves with political ideas embraced by political parties that closely align to their own policy preferences. The party ideology, vision and direction are additional factors that have activists motivated to continue being active when compared to those who attach a lower priority to the party policies. The ideology of the party also frames individual perspectives through which the world is understood and explained.

The fifth incentive is normative incentives which forces individuals to comply with social norms and the perceived opinions of significant people whose opinions they respect and value. The pressure they receive forces them to win the respect or approval from their circles; for example having a family tradition of becoming activists, or influenced by educational institution, religious institution and peers (Back, Teorell, & Westholm, 2011). Individuals are also motivated by altruistic incentives where they have an emotional attachment to the party that has little to do with the policy positions which the party espouses; and they contribute to the party without considering the costs and benefits of their actions (Young & Cross, 2002). Finally, party activism provides activists a way of expressing loyalty to the party and the feeling of satisfaction from affirming a partisan preference. Strong party identification allows activists to publicly express their perceived psychological, ideological and moral values attached to the party without fear.

#### **4. Notes on Methodology**

While most studies on political activism are dominated by large-scale sample surveys, statistical analysis and formal modeling of the correlation of variables (Ponce & Scarrow, 2014; Roets, Cornelis, & Van Hiel, 2014; Schlozman et al., 1999; van Haute, Amjahad, Borriello, Close, & Sandri, 2012), this article departs from much of the existing literature by drawing on a qualitative research strategy through an in-depth interview technique with thirty-two party activists in order to explore why they decided to become political party activists. The qualitative approach was chosen due to the fact that human behaviours, thoughts, motivations and emotions are both complex and intricate. If studied in a symbolically deduced and statistically aggregated

quantitative form, there is a danger that conclusions may fail to fit reality, although they are statistically precise (Berg, 2001; Flick, 2009; Mahoney & Goerts, 2006). This study relies on purposive sampling by browsing both 'UMNO Terengganu' and 'PAS Terengganu' official Facebook accounts. The researcher approached the members who were active in giving comments and 'likes' over every party post, picture, and had posted their photos of joining various party programmes. Private messages were sent to them, and upon their responses to the researcher's private messages, they were briefed on the purposes of the interview. The in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews lasted for one to one hour and fifteen minutes and was held at the informants' homes and offices.

The interviews were transcribed before starting any analysis. Themes and codes were deductively derived from the data, existing literatures and theories. This study generated an initial list of themes derived from the General Incentives model and the Civic Voluntarism model. These codes were expanded during the course of the analysis as new categories emerged. New codes were created when new themes emerged and some existing codes were deleted when they were no longer deemed useful.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

All informants are full time party activists consisting of 18 males and 14 females. A majority of them are self-employed with seven of them being government servants. Their individual profession does not cease their activism with the party as party programs are held in the evening or at night, and during the weekends. Their ages range between 25 to 72 years old. All of them have been devoted in political party activism for more than five years. The experiences of these informants with regard to what triggered their involvement in their political party, and what motivated them to be politically active while others chose to stay on the side-lines are discussed under the following themes: Initial Engagement, ideology of the party, political events, education and religious belief and ethnicity.

### *5.1 Initial Engagement to Political Party Activism*

There are several factors which determine an individual's choice to be politically active. These factors might change over time due to various

political and economic events, societal situations, and idiosyncratic events that produce fluctuations over time. Literature suggests that early life experiences generally affect an individual's political engagement and awareness. The compliance to social norms and early recruitment highlight who and what influences an individual's political perceptions during childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Parents and family, civic education, peers, media, and even political events can either directly or indirectly influence, encourage, or discourage an individual's political preferences and political actions (Cross & Young, 2008; Merelman, 1969; Quintelier & Hooghe, 2012; Van Deth, Abendschön, & Vollmar, 2011). The interview data coded that the informants were initially induced by three most influential items namely parents, educational institution, and political events.

### 6.1.1 Parental Influence

Scholars have emphasized the impact of the family as the main socialization agent in the transmission of basic political orientations. The parent-child political transmission has become a heuristic cue, assisting the offspring in finding the way inside a complicated political world about which they have incomplete and inaccurate information (Ventura, 2001). Almost all informants mentioned that they had received early political exposure from home. Listening to political discussions over lunch and dinner, following parents to various political activities, meeting childhood friends (who had also followed their parents), and reading political materials read by their parents were among significant events that triggered informants' political party activism. They mentioned:

My parents are staunch PAS supporters. Since I was small, he brought us to Rusila every Friday morning to listen to Haji Hadi's morning sermon. Father has lots of cassettes of *ceramah* of PAS leaders like Haji Hadi, Mat Sabu, Tok Guru Nik Aziz, Ustaz Bunyamin and Fadzil Noor that he bought when he attended *ceramah*. So I used to listen to all these *ceramah* and I like their methods of *ceramah*, so witty. Father also never missed to buy Harakah and I read it too during my free time. Father also read a lot of thick books written al-Banna and *Mustika Hadis* and many others that I forgot their titles. **(Informant 9# PAS# male)**

All of my family members are UMNO members...my grandfather, grandmother, uncles, aunties, including my parents. Even all my neighbors in Kampung Geliga back then are UMNO supporters. I still remember during elections we the kids were asked to staple the small party posters onto the rope to be hung, wrap the paper posters with plastics and the nights where *ceramahs* were held, it was like a carnival. Since then, waiting for elections was like waiting for *Hari Raya*. I would ask my father about the name of the party based on their flags...I still remember I could recognize the flags of UMNO, PAS and Semangat46 **(Informant 7#UMNO#female)**

Literature found that parents not only transmit to their offspring a political identification label that can relate to a specific party, but also wish them to follow in their footsteps; even to be more politically successful than they are (Spellings et al., 2012; Van Deth et al., 2011; Ventura, 2001). Parents become mentors to ensure that their children succeed in politics since it is a promising career path. They expose their children to important political figures, introduce them to party leaders at different levels, guide them with organizational skills, and show them how to talk to and deal with people.

My father has master's degree. He challenged me to have PhD. He keeps mentioning to success in politics, having high level of education is very important. He always said, if he could reach this position in politics, I should go even higher than him. He encouraged me to study political related courses, but I chose to read law. I think the reason why I did not pursue my career in legal field because I want to fulfil my father's wish to see me succeed in politics **(Informant#1#UMNO#male)**

Interestingly, most PAS informants do not wish their children to follow their footsteps as activism with PAS would certainly not bring any material benefits. This might be due to their experience of the ups and downs with the party. In the context of being discriminated due to political differences, PAS activists have long experienced unequal treatment and discrimination by the ruling government such as difficulty in getting government jobs, being transferred to rural areas, and being denied welfare aid such as monthly allowances, fertilizers, seeds, and



low-cost housing (Ahmad Zaki, 2003; Huat, 2004; Mohamad, 2013; Wan Saiful, 2017).

I never force my kids to be PAS party activist. If they are interested, I will guide. So far, they are still underage. But I can see my eldest son has interest in politics, read politics on internet, like to discuss about politics with me, always want to follow party programs like BERSIH demonstration. He is now doing diploma at KUIS, and he plans to further his study in al-Azhar University. The most important, I always tell him that being PAS activist does not benefit you materially, and he seems very understanding about that. **(Informant#12# PAS# male)**

This is contrary to UMNO informants where all of them wish that their children would be more successful in politics.

### *6.1.2 Educational Institutions*

Vast literature found that education is highly correlated with political interest and political participation. It confers cognitive ability and political information, both of which enable individuals to make sense of politics and to become politically efficacious. The efficacious citizens feel that their political action has, or can have an impact upon the political process. They feel that their views, opinions, and actions are likely to influence policy outcomes; thus, they want their views be known through political activism (Fisher & Webb, 2003; McAtee & Wolak, 2011; Pattie, Seyd, & Whiteley, 2003; Ribeiro, 2015a; Spier, 2013). Important findings from Wauters (2016) and Whiteley (2009a) state that individuals who do not trust the government, together with dissatisfied party members, possess better political efficacy and are more likely to participate in direct political actions if they perceive their action bearing fruit.

Most of the informants have been found to be influenced by their educational institutions, either through taking selected courses or influenced by circle of friends. However, prior to entering university, they already have a particular political stand that was transmitted at home. The youngest informant from UMNO explained that his political interest had led him to change his course from Accountancy to Administrative studies. Personality wise, he is a socially-minded person who likes to lead, and to be recognized; he was one of the brightest



in his class. He won the campus election and was selected to be the President of the University Student Council. His position meant he was able to meet various UMNO youth leaders and high-profile government officers since he had to deal with the ruling political party for funding and support. His political worldview was initially moulded by his parents and blossomed by a great combination of political efficacy, a suitable university major, guidance from university officers, and opportunities to work with bureaucrats and politicians.

When I was voted as a President of students' representative council for my university, I became close with many important government officers and political leaders, made deals with UMNO youth and slowly they nurtured me to be young party activist. I was invited to join their symposium, programs, and because I have public speaking skills, my English is good, I rose quite fast in the party. I thank my alma mater for leadership base, where I learnt a lot from university officers, especially the Student Affairs. **(Informant#18: UMNO# male)**

Campus politics have been dominated by two proxies representing UMNO and PAS respectively: pro-Aspirasi and pro-Mahasiswa. The pro-Mahasiswa is labelled as an anti-establishment party related to PAS and the pro-Aspirasi is well known as the pro-government group. Muller (2014) exposed that PAS spreads its ideology to university students through semi-secret practices such as underground *usrah* and various religious activities conducted by pro-PAS groups on campus like Gabungan Mahasiswa Islam SeMalaysia (GAMIS), Ikatan Studi Islam (ISIUKM), and We Unite For Islam (WUFI). This has increased anti-governmental sentiments, especially among politically minded students. Most PAS informants who graduated from university mentioned their involvement with pro-Mahasiswa which led to their profound activism in PAS.

I came from a PAS family. However, my political interest was deepened when I was in Matriculation Centre. It was in 1999, with the Anwar issue, the *Reformasi*. Me and roommates were active with WUFI that had a strong PAS ideology. I cannot tell you in detail, but I underwent trainings, *tamrin* at Sungai Pisang, *usrah*, *anak angkat* program in Kelantan. I campaigned for WUFI candidates during the campus elections, distributed hand outs and bookmarks to canvass

new members. I also involved actively in Terengganu student society named Himpunan Anak Darul Iman (HADI). It was not registered though it managed to cater the welfare of Terengganu students in our University. We provided express bus to go home for *Hari Raya*, organized a talk with the then Menteri Besar, Tuan Guru at Sri Iman. **(Informant#19: PAS# female)**

It is worth noting that several staunch PAS supporters purposely sent their children to PAS-operated schools to have PAS ideology instilled in them.

After I finished primary school, I was sent to Maahad Darul Quran, Rusila. The school is operated by Tuan Guru himself. You know, only staunch PAS supporters would send their children to Rusila. Because it does not follow the national curriculum. My political view was shaped here. Then I continued my study in al-Azhar university, majoring in Syariah Islamiyyah. In Egypt, I recruited new PAS members, mobilized new PAS cadres, and I became full-time PAS activist when I came back. **(Informant#12: PAS# male)**

The PAS operated schools became a platform where cadres and future leaders could be nurtured and to mobilize an effective grassroots campaign (Farish, 2003; Liow, 2011a). The seven years of education that should ideally prepare them to be renowned religious scholars have produced prominent PAS leaders at local levels. Famous PAS-operated religious schools in Terengganu such as Maahad Darul Quran, Rusila (founded by Haji Hadi Awang), Kolej Universiti Darul Quran Islamiyyah (KUDQI), Manir (founded by Ustaz Harun Taib of Dewan Ulama' PAS) and Maahad Tahfiz wal Tarbiyyah Darul Iman (MTT), Batu Enam (founded by PAS educator, Ustaz Abu Bakar Chik) have also turned into makeshift party headquarters.

### 6.1.3 Political Events

The admiration of an individual towards the contributions of the party either to himself/herself or to the community in general, opposing the policies of rival parties, the detention of political figures, extraordinary economic scandal, uncontrollable increases in price of goods and oil, and the changing of government are examples of political events that can forge dramatically new political attitudes. It is individual interpretations and synthesize of political events that shapes ones political worldview.

Anwar's dismissal, for instance, acted as a catalyst for the expression of popular discontent and galvanized the people's awareness to be part of politics, which used to be a peculiar subject. Not only did Anwar's dismissal divide many loyal UMNO supporters, a significant number of swing votes among Malay voters had been traced to the Malay-belt states like Terengganu, Kedah, Pahang and Perlis. As a result, PAS benefitted from Anwar's dismissal when it won Terengganu in the 1999 election.

I was a strong UMNO activist, since 1990s. My families are all UMNO supporters. Kampong Binjai Kertas is known as UMNO stronghold. How much I hate PAS? I tell you, there was once Mat Sabu (famous PAS orator) gave *ceramah* in our kampong, I left the kampong that night. I could not bear the sound of his *ceramah*, I couldn't bear seeing people coming to listen to him. I couldn't mingle around with PAS people, we would end up bickering. My political stand was shaky when Anwar was sacked out from the government, but I was still with UMNO. However, seeing how he was treated, with bruised eyes, nonsense sodomy accusation, I decided to vote for PAS. Because PAS lent helping hands to Anwar and his family. In the 1999 election, I campaigned for PAS  
**(Informant# 11: PAS# male)**

The experience of Participant #11 is consistent with the literature in that political events would leave a deep impact on someone's cognitive thinking (Booyesen & Fleetwood, 1994; Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, 1988). Other informants narrated that they are unable to foresee PAS' ability in ruling the state in 1999. Initially, they were excited to see the difference between PAS and the previous UMNO administrations when the former ended the latter's 30-year domination of the state in 1999. It should have been a testing ground for PAS to propel its economic policy and demonstrate the viability of its Islamic approach, especially after they had been criticizing the UMNO administration for a long time. However, PAS' performance was frustrating.

"I came from religious school. So that was normal if I admired PAS for its determination to implement *hudud*. But when PAS ruled the state in 1999, the party failed to fulfil the promises. They promised if today they win election, *hudud* will be implemented before the cock crows tomorrow morning. It was frustrated to see PAS failed to properly

administer the state. I started to slowly become active in UMNO as I saw UMNO was more serious and experienced in managing the state and welfare of the people. PAS had really disappointed me. **(Informant#2: UMNO# female)**

Significant political events do not happen occasionally. If one should happen, it would leave a deep mark on one's cognitive rationale that would shape political support. Anwar Ibrahim's dismissal and PAS' weak performance were two significant political events that influenced the informants to become active in politics.

### *6.2 Ideology of the Party*

Scholars like Kudrnáč (2015), Leighley (1995), and Weber (2017) argued that the effects of the initial exposure to politics received by people in early life may begin to shift when an individual leaves the house, joins a workplace, meets new friends of various political and ideological backgrounds, or experiences new political events. As a result, Costantini & Valeity (1996) suggested a study to ascertain what really motivated these party activists when deciding to devote their invaluable time, resources, and energy to party membership.

Everyone subscribes to a set of political beliefs and values that guide their conscious and unconscious behaviour. An individual's political ideology is shaped by his/her socialization when helping to form the attitudes and beliefs of other party members. The type of political ideology is also commonly associated with their social classes, for example, liberalism among the middle classes, conservatism among the landed aristocracy, and socialism among the working class (Heywood, 2012). At one particular point, party ideology and the individual's political ideas meet. The 'official' political ideas and ideologies of political parties such as nationalism, modernism, communism, liberal-democracy, and Islamism attract individuals with similar ideological underpinning, which would later inspire the path to party activism (Marsh, 1990). It is also worth noting that the political position of a party member determines his/her ideological extremism, as it is understood that party activists are more extreme than both the party leadership and ordinary party supporters (May, 1972). The level of activists' attachment and loyalty to the party also determines ideological beliefs. Strongly attached activists are more ideologically driven than the weakly attached ones (Whiteley et al., 2006).

### 6.2.1 *The Ideology of UMNO*

As all informants are staunch party activists, their attachment to party ideology is extremely strong. All UMNO informants mentioned that they are attracted by UMNO's ideology to protect and empower the rights of the Malays. UMNO's ideology seems comparable with informants' political conviction to uphold the superiority of the Malays.

We got independence because of UMNO. Without UMNO, Malaysia would be destined differently. In Malaysia, even though Malays are majority, Chinese are rich. They control our economy. I am afraid they slowly want to claim their rights. I cannot imagine if UMNO is not existed, the fate of the Malays, who is going to fight for our rights? Malaysia will be Singapore. May be the 13 May riot will happen again. DAP will rule the country. At that time, serve your right, for those who support opposition **(Informant#13: UMNO# female)**

The data above yielded three glaring points. Firstly, the informants are grateful to UMNO as it had struggled for the independence of the country. The perception that all affairs related to the country's independence should be indebted to UMNO has increased the spirit of nationalism among UMNO supporters, and by doing so it indirectly belittles the supporters of other parties (Mohd Faizd et al., 2011). Secondly, UMNO envisioned a Malaysia ruled by Malays, so naturally, Malays would be granted special rights and privileges. The concept of Malay supremacy (*ketuanan Melayu*) has been manipulated by the UMNO elites to preserve the hegemony of the party and their positions in Malaysian politics. From the perspective of the Malays, the increase in Chinese electoral victories would be a disaster since they have majority control of the country's economy. Malays were not only offended, but deeply humiliated because they saw that the Chinese benefited from having equal political rights. The UMNO elites chose to capitalize on the fear that the special rights of the Malays and their religious superiority are under threat by mobilizing ethnic and religious sentiments to gain more Malay votes. UMNO precisely targets rural Malay constituencies to make use of the situation and to instil the fear of losing special rights and religious superiority among Muslim-Malays (Hamayotsu, 2013; Maznah, 2010). The third point mentioned by the informants regards Chinese domination, especially by the DAP, in the

economy and politics. UMNO's campaign narrative always emphasizes the DAP having the true power in the opposition pact and is portrayed as no more than a proxy for anti-Malay and anti-Islamic forces bent upon destroying Malay-Muslim hegemony (Ahmad Fauzi, 2007b).

Being either rational or delusional, the informants were unable to see that they are being capitalized by the UMNO elites. The informants could not resist highlighting the obvious fact that UMNO has helped the Malays economically and socially.

My parents came from Kedah. They were given FELDA land in 1974. As the eldest in the family, I knew how grateful my parents towards the government. Who dares to give the poor land and acres of palm oil? If we did not get FELDA scheme, I could say our family would not have what we have today. Because of that, they were afforded to go to *hajj*, our siblings could go to school, comfortable life I can say  
**(Informant#15: UMNO# female)**

Upon questioning their understanding of UMNO's ideology, they mentioned:

UMNO fought for country independence. UMNO fought for ABATA (*Agama, Bangsa, Tanahair*). UMNO wanted to help the Malays. We respect other races, but they have to remember that the Malays are the most superior  
**(Informant#8: UMNO#female)**

UMNO is a Malay party. The success, the prosperity and the superiority of the Malays are the main struggle of UMNO. As long as UMNO leads, Malay and Islam would be secured  
**(Informant#17: UMNO#male)**

It has been deeply embedded among the informants that UMNO is their saviour. They strongly hold on to the narratives that UMNO protects the Malays and their positions, that UMNO has developed the country, that UMNO defends the position of the Royalty, and that UMNO guarantees the position of Islam; all with the prerequisite that UMNO must lead. The complicated symbiosis among these narratives was explained well by the informants based on their understanding over the ABATA concept. The "A" denotes *Agama* (Religion i.e. Islam); the informants mentioned significant Islamic policies and programmes that UMNO formulated such as Islamic banking, systematic zakat and hajj system,

Syariah court, Islamic university, and the Islamic syllabus taught from the primary school level. The “BA” denotes *Bangsa* (Ethnicity i.e. Malay); to the informants, only UMNO is seen as seriously fighting to protect and ensure the Malays would be always be on par with their Chinese counterparts. They applauded the opportunities given by UMNO such as the Malay students’ quota in public universities, Malay quota in government sectors, businesses and the awarding of government contracts to Malay contractors, and UMNO’s efforts in alleviating poverty among the Malays. Finally, the “TA” denotes *Tanah Air* (Country i.e. Malaysia), referring to UMNO’s policies in protecting and safeguarding the country’s sovereignty. The informants were indebted to UMNO’s fighting for the country’s independence. The 13<sup>th</sup> May riot was not repeated due to the gentle, yet firm action of UMNO leaders in dealing with the conflict. Malaysia’s foreign policies, which include non-alignment to any major power bloc, the pro-Palestine and other oppressed Muslim states, and the significant roles played in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), have planted the confidence among the Malays that UMNO is more than capable of safeguarding the country.

Malaysia is well-respected by other countries. If we go to Makkah, everybody knows Malaysia. They thank Malaysia for playing big roles in helping other Muslim states like Bosnia, Palestine. We should be proud of that. The Prime Minister visited Obama, be friended with Putin, with Turkey, with Saudi. In PBB, Malaysia is respected. Tactically, our leaders do not want to have any confrontation with any countries. Imagine UMNO does not rule the country, we might be a Socialist state, may be a Republic. DAP might penetrate the Communist ideology. You see how dangerous it is **(Informant#16: UMNO)**

It has been deeply instilled in the minds of the Malays that UMNO is the protector of the Malay community; thus, unflinching loyalty from the Malays is demanded. Singh (1998) observed that the Malay identity came to be construed as an extension of UMNO. “UMNO is Malay; and Malay is UMNO” is a repetitive connotation that has become a social-belief system, indicating that Malays unite under UMNO leadership and pledge their allegiance to UMNO. Therefore, financial issues, rampant corruption, cronyism, and the mismanagement of the country’s wealth are not the main concerns of the informants. This is congruent with



several literature that conclude partisan identification and party ideology work in tandem, with voters adjusting both views to hone in on their underlying political positions while putting aside other hiccups (Chen & Goren, 2016; Meer et al., 2009). This is sensed when the informants mentioned:

For me, what matters the most is a government that is doing their work. They deserve to live a lavish life because they are running the government, as long as they help the people. Corruptions, 1MDB, it is all allegations to topple the government. No evidences. What matters the most is comfortable life, the integrity issues are being resolved  
**(Informant#17: UMNO# male)**

This is not surprising as many surveys uncovered similar findings. Bread and butter issues, along with making ends meet are more important and crucial compared to the lack of integrity, violation of human rights, jungle laws, and economic scandals (Institut Darul Ehsan, 2018; Merdeka Centre, 2015; Merdeka Centre, 2018). This mentality is an effective formula that has been used by UMNO to retain power for decades.

### 6.2.2 *The Ideology of PAS*

Similar to their UMNO counterparts, PAS informants chose to dedicate their political struggle with PAS due to its ideology. Since its inception, PAS has been consistently calling for more Islamic content in governance. Article 3 and Article 5 of the PAS constitution stipulate that the basis of the party is Islam. Its primary objective is to struggle for the implementation of Islamic values and laws in accordance with God's will in this country's government and society (Perlembagaan PAS, 2019). The informants' personal political convictions seemed to be parallel with what PAS upholds.

I have learned with respected *ulama* during my *pondok* time, we learned from the history of Prophet Muhammad, we all already know that only Islam is the best religion. Whatever you want to do, marriage, daily life, business, politics, you have to follow Islam. I wonder why many Muslims said that we cannot implement Islam because this is a multi-racial country. It affects our *akidah* when we say like that. So, in Malaysia, only PAS is putting great efforts in ruling



the country based on the Quran and *Sunnah* (**Informant#6: PAS#male**)

From the statement above, two main points are worth pondering. Firstly, PAS informants are motivated by the ideology of PAS because it is seen as making a serious effort in implementing the teachings of the Quran and *Sunnah* in the state. The informants seemed very well-versed in the discussions on the concept of secularization that separates religion and politics, and the concept of comprehensiveness of Islamic teachings that never deviates between religion and politics. This might be due to extensive *tarbiyyah* they received during *usrah* which has moulded their understanding over the concept of the Islamic state that PAS wants to establish. All of them were able to synthesize the symbiosis among electoral politics, *ibadah*, and the attainment of Allah's blessing. Secondly, they believe that their involvement and activism with PAS is to attain blessings from Allah and thus, be rewarded.

Performing daily *ibadah* like five times – a day prayer, paying zakat and performing *hajj* is relatively easy. But Islam is beyond that. It covers law, economy, politics, crime and other social systems. We need an Islamic state to ensure all these aspects are running in a way Allah orders. Only then Allah will bless us, and save us (**Informant#12: PAS#female**)

Singerman (2004) observed that Islamist movements framed their agenda around fundamental questions about the meaning of life and how the Islamic belief and practices should guide daily routines, law, morality, the economy, and governance. This framework attracted sympathetic support which include unlimited financial support, time, and energy from fellow Muslims. Issues such as dress-code, morality, marriage, celebration, entertainment, sexuality, and faith, as well as conflicts over governance and law, are closer to Muslims' daily lives even to the Muslims who are not-so-devout. Selling the notion that "Islam is the solution," Islamist parties encourage a collective identity. Since their supporters can be moved by the promise of Heaven rather than persuaded by rational arguments, religious leaders in general do not have to rely only on rational persuasion. The ability and the strength of PAS to turn a sympathizer into a party activist who is required to provide additional resources, labour, money, or facilities to the party, and to align party work as the path to Allah's blessing, are undeniable. The party's top leaders could demand obedience (*wala'*) and *thiqah*

(trust) from party members and determine what the correct party ideology (*fikrah*) should be. The data from the interviews support the view that PAS has successfully embraced the *wala'* and *thiqah* among its followers. In regards to PAS' decision to leave Pakatan Rakyat in 2015, the informants mentioned:

Of all political parties, PAS is the closest to Allah's way. PAS is the most consistent with its struggles. Be in Pakatan Rakyat made PAS closer to Putrajaya, but PAS pulled back, as it was not benefit Islam. As a grassroots, I initially felt aggrieved when our leaders decided to leave promising PR. But I always realized they know what they are doing, their decisions are not baseless. There must be reasons. I trust Tok Guru's guided reasoning. Now we see why Tok Guru decided to leave. We can see how dominant DAP is in PR. How Islam is edged in PR. Our intention, our small efforts to see Malaysia turns to be *Baldatun Tayyibatun, wa Rabbun Ghafur*, will be rewarded (**Informant# 3: PAS#female**)

Capturing political power at the state or national level to implement Islamic teachings is a mandatory responsibility of every Muslim; hence, voting for a party that upholds this is decreed as compulsory. Among PAS members, the notion that "PAS is Islam, and Islam is PAS," is due to party's solitary status in campaigning for the implementation of *Shariah* law, especially *hudud* (Wan Saiful, 2018). Crucially, it was the accusation of *takfiri* (infidelity) that deteriorated the relationship among Malay-Muslims from different political persuasions and loyalties, especially in Terengganu and Kelantan. For PAS supporters, their struggles, their donations, and their fight are considered a *jihād*, while UMNO's struggles are unrewarding and misguided since they fight for a *taghut* constitution and a secular government.

You say your *Shahadah*, you pray, you fast, you read Quran. Suddenly, when it comes to implementing the law of Allah, you give many reasons. On the basis of not suitable with modern times, Malaysia is multicultural society, country will be backward. This is clear that you do not trust on the Law of Allah. Islam cannot be taken in pieces, it has to be taken wholeheartedly (He recited verse 1:208 that means 'O ye who believe! Enter into Islam whole-heartedly'). The problem with UMNO, they feel that they are Islamic enough with Tilawah al-Quran competition every year, azan

being aired on TV, beautiful mosques are everywhere, Radio IKIM. Islam is more than that. Those are just the symbols. The substances are missing **(Informant#5: PAS#male)**

### 6.2.3 *Opposing Rival Parties*

Other than the ideology of the party which attracts individual political activism with the party, Poletti et al. (2018) argued that party supporters tend to support a particular political party to express their objection towards the policies of rival parties. The central opposing factor in Terengganu is the perpetual accusation among PAS supporters over the secularity of UMNO; while on the UMNO side, criticism revolves around the hard approach of PAS and their thinking that others who do not support them are against Islam. When asked about the reasons they criticize the rival party, the informants mentioned:

UMNO don't want Islam. They don't believe in the ability of Islamic law and regulations in governing the country. They trust on secular and Western constitution. Their Islam is just on the surface, just cosmetics. Their definition of Islam is praying and going to mosque. They do not put real efforts on real substance of Islamic state. When everything related to religion is cosmetics, other problems of corruption, cronyism, and stealing people's money will never be solved **(Informant#3: PAS#female)**

Simply calling people *kafir* just because they are not with your party is such a heavy accusation. And so far, Haji Hadi has never apologized over his hurtful remarks. And we all know the impact of his remarks that disunited the society for a very long time. It involves our *akidah*. I really cannot accept such accusation being thrown to a fellow Muslim. The biggest problem with PAS is the holier-than-thou attitude. They equalize political party as religion. I don't have problem with their intention to establish Islamic state. but I can say, they actually don't know what the blueprint of that Islamic state is. just see how they failed to manage Kelantan and Terengganu **(Informant#27: UMNO#male)**

From the two statements above, it is obvious that the UMNO informants are hurt by PAS labelling them as *kafir*, and that such a heavy accusation has never been retracted by any PAS leader. As Muslims, they also want

Malaysia to be a role model of a progressive Islamic state that does not only focus on *hudud* but also on bigger and visionary aspects.

I am also Muslim. I also dream Malaysia will be a model of true Islamic state. And that is what Malaysia is heading now. We are a respected Islamic country. Islamic state is not rigid to *hudud*, cutting hands only. It is beyond that. The PAS Islamic state I think will turn Malaysia to backward, may be to be like failed Muslim countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan **(Informant#16: UMNO#female)**

Similarly, the PAS informants oppose UMNO's policies as well as the flip-flopping in implementing *Syariah* laws in the state and their belittling the capability of those laws in developing a better and safer nation. They mentioned that PAS' desire to implement Islamic laws in the state does not mean the automatic rejection of any material development. However, development under UMNO is widening the gap between the rich and the poor by making the rich even richer, and vice versa. Conversely, PAS informants were asked if the opposing party, specifically UMNO, changed its party ideology and agreed to implement *Syariah* laws in the country, and was serious in championing the causes of Islam, would they then support UMNO? The informants mentioned:

Tok Guru Nik Aziz always said, the day UMNO changed its party principle from secular to Islam, that day PAS would be resolved. There is no need for two similar Malay parties that fight for the implementation of Islamic laws. But, you know, UMNO is UMNO. That cannot be trusted. Personally, I will never believe UMNO change its party policies. But if that happens, I think there is no need for two parties. But it is almost impossible **(Informant#25: PAS#female)**

The same question was asked to UMNO informants on the possibility of them supporting PAS and its Islamic state if the party retracted the allegation of *kafir* towards them.

It has been decades my family members have been alleged as *kafir*. I know PAS members very well. They feel that they are 'most' Islamic, the closest to Allah. Others are less Islamic, not good, sinner. They are arrogant, that is why it is difficult for them to mingle around with other people. They are with their *jamaah* only. If Haji Hadi wants to apologize, many UMNO supporters have died, how does he ask for apology?

I personally cannot see any positive development between UMNO and PAS. Yes, many want to see UMNO – PAS unite as one, but it is simply very difficult. It is such a long history  
**(Informant# 15: UMNO#female)**

Analysis of the above passage shows there being a lack of trust since UMNO informants do not trust PAS' sincerity in accepting and neutralizing their political lens on UMNO members. On the other hand, PAS informants do not trust UMNO's genuineness in implementing *Syariah* laws. The issue of trust, if not resolved, would be cancerous to Malay-Muslims in the future. However, there is one common understanding between the informants of both parties. Both have suspicions over the hidden agenda of the DAP, another rival party. It has been the often-repeated narrative from UMNO-PAS and their spokespersons that further empowering the predominantly Chinese DAP will threaten the position of the Malays and Islam in Malaysia. The Malay establishment has a deep fear of the DAP, whom many view as Chinese chauvinists who would destroy *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) and *Ketuanan Islam* (Islam supremacy) should they win government.

Fadzil Noor's decision to team up with the DAP after Anwar was sacked surprised me. I know from the beginning, this coalition would not last longer due to their different political ideologies. Plus, DAP is untrusted, and they would lead the coalition. You see PAS had to follow the DAP. It should be PAS to lead the coalition as PAS has more than 60 years of experience. Unlike MCA and MIC in BN, it is UMNO who leads the coalition. So, there is no problem. They do not touch on Malay sensitivity, the position of Islam **(Informant 16#UMNO#male)**

Among UMNO-PAS supporters, the most frightening aspects is DAP's relentless fight for a truly secular Malaysia with equality for all, and tackling corruption through eliminating the lucrative no-bidding government contracts given via Malay special rights; thus Malays would be forced to compete for business. PAS supporters have mentioned that Islam would be abolished as the country's official religion and the rights and supremacy of Muslims would be put in the side lines should the DAP rule the country since the party has never been known for its interest in Islam. Since its establishment, there has been a perception that the DAP would be willing to do anything, including sucking up to

the *ulama*, to achieve their desire to rule the country by using Malays as a proxy.

## 7. Conclusion

Conceptually, this study on factors influencing the decisions of an individual to be politically active was built on two frequently cited theories of political participation, namely the Civic Voluntarism Model and the General Incentives Model. After combining all attributes of factors to political party activism derived from those theories, five factors emerged. These factors include the ideology of the party, parental influence, influence from educational institutions, religious beliefs, upholding ethnic supremacy, and significant political events. Party ideology becomes the major factor, as every individual is looking for a suitable political platform to manifest their personal political conviction. UMNO was chosen as political platform by those who wish to see Malay supremacy is upheld and the welfare of the Malays are well cared for. Meanwhile, PAS becomes the platform for individuals who seeks a platform to materialize the implementation of *Syariah* laws in the country and to propagate the premise that the world would be a better place when Islam leads. Contrary to popular opinion that an individual's primary intention to be involved in politics is to gain material rewards and promising careers, this study discovered that the ultimate motivation towards political party activism among PAS and UMNO activists in Terengganu was the ideology of the party. Party activists ranked at the lowest level of the party hierarchy, yet they are the most committed and devoted to the principles of the party. They are more concerned with ideological purity than electoral popularity. As politics in Terengganu is shaped by two intertwined variables, namely Malay and Islam, it has led to the emergence of popular opinion that PAS supporters are those who want to establish an Islamic state and implement Islamic law. On the other hand, UMNO supporters are seen as Malay ultra nationalist. This study indicated that the popular opinion is reliable when all PAS informants mentioned their ultimate aim, as party activists, is to see Malaysia as a model of a modern Islamic state that fully implements *Shariah*-based laws. On the other hand, the UMNO informants believed that only UMNO could be trusted in protecting and defending Malay supremacy and upholding the dignity of the Malays. Interestingly, while both parties are Malay-Muslim based political parties, all informants did not trust PAS to protect the Malays nor the sincerity of UMNO to

establish an Islamic state and implement *hudud*. However, they are all agreed that the emergence of the DAP was very worrisome.

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# In This Issue

## *Editorial*

## *Articles*

### **Wan Rohila A. Ganti Bt. Wan Abdul Ghapar & Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid**

Pathways of Becoming Political Party Activists: The Experiences From Malay-Muslim Grassroots Party Activists

### **Haslina Ibrahim & Ainul Jaria bt. Maidin**

Mediation and Interreligious Discourse: Prospects and Challenges in Resolving Interreligious Skirmishes in Malaysia

### **Mohd Noh Abdul Jalil & Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor**

Examining the Role of 'Ulama in the Islamization Process of the Malay World

### **Israr Ahmad Khan**

Role of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Promoting Human Values in the Strife-Torn World

### **Najihah Akeb-urai, Nor Ba' Yah Abdul Kadir & Rohany Nasir**

Mathematics Anxiety and Performance among College Students: Effectiveness of Systematic Desensitization Treatment

### **Rehnuma Bint Anis & Md. Mahmudul Hasan**

Faith and Practice: Islamic Perspectives on Robert Browning

### **Alias Azhar, Muhammad Hafiz Badarulzaman, Fidlizan Muhammad & Siti Zamarina Mat Zaib**

Syariah Criminal Law Enforcement in Hisbah Framework: Practice In Malaysia

### **Khauthar Ismail**

Imperialism, Colonialism and their Contribution to the Formation of Malay and Chinese Ethnicity: An Historical Analysis

### **Mohd. Shah Jani & Raudlotul Firdaus binti Fatah Yasin**

Removal of Despotic Political Regime: The Abū Dharr's Legacy and Its Legitimacy

### **Sani Safiyanu, Roy Anthony Rogers & Wan Sharina Ramlah Wan Ahmad Amin Jaffri**

Nigeria's Foreign Policy Goals in Peacekeeping Operations in Africa

### **Noor Asyhikin Binti Abd Razak & Nor Azlin Binti Tajuddin**

Ecological Modernization in Malaysia: A Review of Pakatan Harapan's Manifesto During the 14th General Election Within the Context of Ecological Modernization Framework

### **Siwach Sripokangkul**

Education for the Production and Re-Production of Docile Civic Bodies: The Problems of Civic Education in Thailand

### **M. Khusna Amal**

Revisiting Southeast Asian Civil Islam: Moderate Muslims and Indonesia's Democracy Paradox

### **Fethi B. Jomaa Ahmed**

Conceptualizing Islamic Ethics for Contemporary Muslim Societies

## *Book Reviews*

ISSN 0128-4878 (Print)

ISSN 2289-5639 (Online)

