

Trendsetters of Islam

Examining emerging mediums of religious exchange

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Over the last decade, Islam in Southeast Asia has encountered significant changes. The impact of radicalism from the global ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) movement attracted some sympathizers from the region. However, aside from the security lens, there are other aspects from which Islam in Southeast Asia can be analyzed. Various trends have emerged which call for a different approach to studying developments in the region. First, the use of social media and the Internet for Islamic preaching has become common, transcending traditional mediums such as mosques and madrasahs. COVID-19, which led to lockdowns and mosque closures, forced religious classes to shift to online domains. Second, middle-class Muslims are also emerging and making their voices heard on Islamic matters, challenging the authority of traditional *ulama*. Third, Islamic NGOs are also losing their monopoly in representing Muslims. They have been overtaken by popular preachers who do not require institutional resources and backing to present their thoughts in the public sphere.

Focusing on these emerging trends, the Regional Social and Cultural Studies programme at ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute has embarked on a study of trendsetters of Islam in Southeast Asia, examining emerging mediums of religious exchanges, popular religious personalities, and contemporary Islamic discourses

beyond terrorism. The articles below are some of the research outputs of ISEAS fellows working on these topics, and the ones selected here focus on how personalities impact politics, religion, and society. The articles were originally published in *Fulcrum*, an opinion-editorial website run by ISEAS to showcase

commentaries on current events. The articles selected discuss case studies from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand

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Anwar Ibrahim Welcomes Abdul Somad to Putrajaya: What Gives?

Mohd Faizal Musa and Afra Alatas

On 13 July 2023, Indonesian preacher Abdul Somad Batubara visited Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and apparently stayed for an hour's conversation.¹ Commonly referred to as Ustaz Abdul Somad (or UAS), the controversial preacher has been barred from entering several countries, including being denied entry into Singapore on 16 May 2022.² This is due to his extremist views, which include espousing physical violence and animosity towards non-Muslims.³

While the Singapore government's actions were perceived by some Muslims as Islamophobic,⁴ other countries including Hong Kong, Timor Leste, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Switzerland, have also barred Abdul Somad from crossing their borders.⁵ This reflects the wariness with which several governments regard his questionable teachings and views.

Views such as Abdul Somad's should be antithetical to a multi-religious society like Malaysia. It is thus surprising that

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim so warmly welcomed such a controversial preacher to Putrajaya. In our view, this incident can be seen as a self-inflicted shot in the foot to Anwar's framework of Malaysia Madani, which he has touted as the foundation for a more progressive Malaysia that embraces diversity and respect for all, among other core principles.

What is more, Malaysia seemingly welcomed Abdul Somad with open arms. Not only did he go straight from the airport

to Putrajaya to meet Anwar, posting on social media about how he spent an hour with Anwar in his office,⁶ but Abdul Somad also made a courtesy call to Malacca Governor Mohd Ali Rustam.⁷ He stayed on to lecture at Dataran Sejarah, Ayer Keroh, at a celebration commemorating the Islamic new year. Abdul Somad's presence was said to have triggered a "tsunami of believers," pulling in about 50,000 attendees.⁸ In the same audience were Mohd Ali Rustam, other state government officials, and local preachers.

It was not the first time that Abdul Somad visited Malaysia. In 2019, he visited Kelantan, Kuala Lumpur, and Negeri Sembilan in February, and Sabah in September. A quick survey of comments on his Instagram posts about this year's visit shows his followers in Indonesia lamenting that he is poorly received in his own country but treated with respect and admiration elsewhere. The fact that Indonesia's government views one of its own citizens with some suspicion should speak for itself.

On 14 July, Abdul Somad lectured at Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah Mosque in Shah Alam, Selangor. In the audience was Tengku Permaisuri Hajah Norashikin, the queen consort of the Sultan of Selangor. Preachers, whether local or foreign, are required to obtain a licence from a state's Islamic Religious Council, which is headed by the Malay ruler before they can preach in a given state. Thus, this lecture was clearly sanctioned by the top state leadership.

Abdul Somad also visited a naval fleet in Lumut, Perak, gave an evening lecture to 36,000 people at a stadium in Perak and delivered another lecture in one of the state's mosques. Upon his return to Kuala Lumpur on 15 July, he gave an evening lecture at Dataran Merdeka dressed in traditional Malay gear. The symbolism of the traditional dress (*tanjak*) may be interpreted by some as a nod to more conservative or even right-wing groups in Malaysia.

Fig. 1: Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim welcomes Ustaz Abdul Somad at Putrajaya. (Photo from Anwar Ibrahim/Facebook)

Abdul Somad's time in Malaysia was a grand affair from start to end. He met not just the foremost Malaysian leader but even royalty and other politicians. On the day of his departure, 16 July, Abdul Somad received a grand farewell, leaving on a private jet arranged by a Malaysian aviation firm.

Reflecting on his meeting with Abdul Somad, Anwar stated that they "agreed on the importance of preaching about Islam in a manner that is based on moderation and wisdom."⁹ However, Anwar's emphasis on "moderation" is clearly at odds with the well-known extremist views Abdul Somad espouses.

It is highly unlikely that Anwar is ignorant about the controversy that surrounds Abdul Somad. Aside from legitimising the use of violence against and referring to non-Muslims as infidels (a derogatory usage of *kafir*), Abdul Somad's other views include supporting an Islamic caliphate and the implementation of hudud law, prohibiting Muslims from wishing Christians a "Merry Christmas," and dismissing dialogue between Sunnis and Shi'as as void due to the perceived fundamental differences between the sects.¹⁰

The six core principles of Malaysia Madani are sustainability, prosperity, innovation, respect, trust, and compassion. These are useful guiding principles, but other aspects of the framework might be inaccessible to the Malay/Muslim masses. For example, the Majlis Ilmu Madani lecture series, aimed at explaining the meaning of a Madani nation to the Malaysian masses, is spearheaded by international Islamic scholars who are almost unknown to the audience. The ideas in these lectures run contrary to more conservative ideas which have taken root in local discourses, which belies the lectures' effectiveness.

Ironically, with his open welcome to Abdul Somad, Anwar might have further jeopardised the strength and popularity of his Madani framework. By embracing a preacher whose values are starkly opposed to the values that Malaysia Madani promotes – and one whose speech and sermons lack religious depth but encourage inter-religious conflict – Anwar might be playing with fire. It is a puzzle that Malaysia's prime minister seemingly endorsed this preacher, even if Abdul Somad may have ardent followers among certain segments of the country's Muslim population.

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Trendy Indonesian Habib Rides the Waves Online

Ahmad Muhajir and Norshahril Saat

Podcasts and online videos constitute the modern currency for religious conversations in Indonesia today, and a young Indonesian preacher has been banking on these platforms effectively to reach out to the young. *Merdeka.com*, an online news portal in the country, has dubbed Habib Husein bin Ja'far al-Hadar "the *habib* for the millennials." The story of the 35-year-old may inspire other *habaib* to alter their preaching strategy.

The *habaib* (plural for *habib*) pride themselves as members of the Prophet Muhammad's household. They are generally traditional in outlook, dress, and mannerisms. But some among them, including Habib Hussein, are breaking ranks with their community to appeal to younger audiences, thwart conservatism online, and reclaim the discursive space for moderates.

Muslims regard the *habaib* as conveyors of the Prophet's "blue blood." The men carry the term "Syed" or "the honourable" in front of their names, while women use "Sharifah." The preachers among the *habaib* usually wear long garments, robes, and the *serban* (turban), demonstrating their Arabic identity and keeping with the Prophet's tradition. The *habaib* are generally non-political, preferring to congregate in their reading circles, reciting praises to the Divine and the Prophet, and discussing topics on spirituality and rituals. However, some notable *habaib* in Indonesia do not conform to this moderate and quietist image. One example is Habib Rizieq Shihab of the violent and conservative Islamic Defender's Front (FPI).

While remaining steadfast in keeping with the non-combative *habaib* tradition, Habib Hussein has repackaged his sermons through comedy and effective use of social media. He attenuates his persona as an Islamic scholar and broaches religious and non-religious topics, including pop culture, in his talks on YouTube.

Other notable Indonesian *habaib* such as Habib Rizieq Shihab from Jakarta and Habib Syech from Solo continue to don the traditional dressing, but Habib Husein

prefers to show up in *baju koko* or *batik*, combined with a sarong, demonstrating Javanese identity.

Habib Husein's online push and appeal to the young happened by chance. He ventured into online spaces after feeling that Indonesian mosques did not give him enough space. He posits that it is instructive for contemporary preachers to populate YouTube with positive religious content. In an interview with podcaster and celebrity Helmi Yahya in August 2021, he added that the medium for *da'wah* (the preaching of Islam and exhortation to submit to Allah) in the past had been either "*khitobi* [oratory] or *kitab* [through writing]. Now, there is a third, *YouTuby*, meaning using social media".

Habib Husein has garnered 1.08 million subscribers for his first YouTube channel, 'Jeda Nulis' (A Break from Writing), which he started in May 2018. He has created and co-created more than 600 videos across three YouTube channels, cumulatively attracting 134.5 million views.

But the significance of Habib Husein lies not only in his family lineage, active collaboration with celebrities, and online presence, but also in his moderate outlook. He is slow to pass judgement on non-practising Muslims, agnostic individuals, and people of other religions. Comparing *da'wah* to Google Maps, he contends that "[Google Maps] shows you one possible direction to your destination, but if you do not follow it, it will show you alternative routes."

Habib Husein also prefers dialogue, and he is never forceful in pushing his point of view. "We differ but can co-exist" is the underlying philosophy of his thinking. He would rather seek common ground than sharpen differences. Importantly, rather than keeping himself in the company of other *habaib*, Habib Husein readily shares the same stage with celebrities on and off camera. He is also known for entertaining quirky questions in jest.

Recently, Habib Husein and two stand-up comedians, Coki Pardede and Tretan Muslim, collaborated to develop a YouTube channel to discuss questions many other preachers might consider insensitive. The two stand-up

Fig. 1: Habib Husein in a YouTube interview, speaking about the benefits of preaching through digital mediums. (Photo from Husein Ja'far Al Hadar/Instagram)

comedians have an extensive fan base. The programme has wide outreach, with the final 24 latest episodes attracting more than 34 million views. Some questions raised during the programme did not irk him: In the Hereafter, could the people in heaven Whatsapp the people in hell? If someone is called *habib* because he has the Prophet's bloodline, would an ordinary person become *habib* after getting a blood transfusion from one? If the animals sacrificed during Eid Adha will be our rides to paradise, can we choose the fast runner like a cheetah, instead of cows and lambs?

Habib Husein feels that through comedy, he can make his points of view clearly to the young, and Muslim preachers should not be seen as attacking other religions. Interestingly, one of the comedians is a self-proclaimed agnostic who thinks that life would be wonderful if more people tuned in to listen to Habib Husein's views about differences.

Habib Husein is a sterling example of a young preacher willing to go beyond the confines of identity-conscious *habaib* traditions. In this day and age, the medium of religious propagation and the appeal of the preacher cannot be separated from the quality of content. In Indonesia, humour, the arts, and culture are part and parcel of social and community life. But moderate *habaib* must also venture out of their quietist cocoons to wrestle back Islam from the conservatives. Preachers should not limit themselves to the confines of organisational and institutional structures, and they should be prepared to go solo.

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Wan Nor: Hero from the Deep South but Not the Saviour of Thai Democracy

Daungyewa Utarasint

22 May 2023 was a symbolic day for Thai politics because it marked the ninth anniversary of the 2014 coup d'état.¹ In the hope of restoring democracy, eight political parties jointly signed a 23-point memorandum of understanding (MOU).² That same day, at the MOU's signing, Wan Muhammad Noor Matha (hereafter Wan Nor), the veteran Muslim politician of Yala province and leader of the Prachachart Party, gave a powerful speech.³ He wished to see change in Thailand, begging the "powerful and mighty ones" to "use your power and your mighty strength to help those who want to work for their people...let them work for their people" (author's translation). His inspirational speech was powerful and went viral; Wan Nor's political star was burnished overnight.

On 4 July, Wan Nor gained more fame when he was appointed as the compromise choice for Thailand's House Speaker. People in the southernmost provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat celebrated this news with tremendous joy. The symbolism of a politician from Thailand's Muslim-majority "Deep South" being the Buddhist kingdom's peacemaker led to netizens flooding social media platforms with their selfies or pictures with Wan Nor. For some, Wan Nor can now claim to be the saviour and pride of Thailand's Malay-Muslims, but the key question now is, can he mend a divided parliament in Bangkok?

A former deputy prime minister (under then PM Thaksin Shinawatra), Wan Nor had previously served as House Speaker between 1996 and 2000, under then PM Chuan Leekpai. Wan Nor is the first Muslim to hold such high positions in Thai government. Hailed for his calm demeanour and deliberate conscientiousness, he is considered by his generation as one of the most respectable Thai politicians. However, Wan Nor can be considered a public figure who may inspire 'love' or 'hate' depending on one's religious or political affiliation. Many Malay-Muslims would view him as their most reputable representative. However, from the author's recent interviews with Buddhist elements in Yala, some Buddhist extremists have associated Wan Nor and Prachachart with the Muslim separatist movement. They have even pejoratively labelled Prachachart a "Party of Thugs."

While a deep dive into the longstanding conflict in Thailand's South is beyond the scope of this commentary, the conflict in part derives from the 2004 Narathiwat military camp rampage.⁴ When the state authorities alleged that Wan Nor's team members were the masterminds behind the violence, Wan Nor took no action. Later that year, a clash between Malay-Muslims and the Thai state authorities at Kruesae Mosque and Takbai claimed nearly 120 Malay-Muslim lives.⁵ Again, Wan Nor remained silent. In retaliation, the southernmost constituencies punished Wan Nor in the 2005 general election: he and all his team members failed to be re-elected.

After a time in the political wilderness, Wan Nor sprang back into politics in 2018 with the help of Police Colonel Tawee Sodsong, the former director of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre. Together they formed a new political party, Prachachart (which means "Ummah" or Muslim community in Thai). Speculation exists that Tawee and Wan Nor still have close ties with Thaksin Shinawatra, though both men have denied this. Whatever the case, the catastrophic incidents of Kruesae and Takbai during Thaksin's premiership caused Thaksin's party to lose its popularity in the deep south. Wan Nor's Prachachart is thus seen as a rebranded party. Now,



Figures 1-2 (above and below): Wan Nor, the first Muslim to hold the high position of House Speaker in the Thai government. (Photos from Prachachart Party's Facebook page)

people are curious whether Wan Nor will steer Prachachart closer towards Pheu Thai's lead or continue to protect the interests of Malay-Muslims.

The 2023 general election results showed that Prachachart still won most of their seats in the deep south. In 13 constituencies, they secured seven seats plus two from the party-list. Some argue that Prachachart's success was due to Wan Nor's close connection with Islamic religious leaders from both the reformist (*khana mai*) and the traditionalist (*khana kao*) camps. However, politicians from various camps who spoke to the author criticised Prachachart for stirring up identity politics to attack his opponents. Whatever was the case, the campaign successfully kept Prachachart's rival parties at arm's length.

Nonetheless, Wan Nor has not translated this stellar performance into success within the national legislative assembly. His position as House Speaker was put to the test on 19 July, when he was criticised for his inability to control the House during the second round of voting for Move Forward

candidate Pita Limjaroenrat's nomination for prime minister.⁶ The pro-military parties essentially argued, on a technicality, that Pita's renomination was a motion and that resubmitting a failed motion was against parliamentary regulation 41.⁷ (Pita's supporters counter-argued that renominating Pita was not a general motion and hence would not be subject to that parliamentary regulation.) Wan Nor eventually allowed the vote on the logic that resubmitting the same name for the nomination was a motion – that is, subject to the regulation. Thus, those opposed to Pita's nomination won by a majority and defeated Pita's bid.

On 7 June, at Prince of Songkhla University in Pattani, students held a seminar on the right to self-determination and Patani peace.⁸ They held a mock referendum on self-rule, leading Thai security authorities to accuse the organisers and panelists of promoting a separatist agenda. In response, Wan Nor said in an interview that Prachachart would never endorse such an activity.⁹ Students

interviewed by the author in mid-July expressed disappointment at Wan Nor's reaction. This incident illustrates how Wan Nor must now carefully navigate between his main constituency – Malay-Muslims in the south – and the heavy demands of his Speaker role. He needs to convince his southern support base that he is not trying to please Pheu Thai (and its partners) and Thai security officials at the expense of the former's long-term interests. Saving Thai democracy, however, might be a shot too long even for this veteran of Thai politics.

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