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Peculiar Politics in Malaysia: A Queer Perspective on Non-Heteronormative Malay-Muslim Men

Joseph N. Goh

Abstract
In this chapter, I postulate that the adamant insistence by Islamic and civil authorities on specific performativities of masculinity and sexuality to the extent of persecuting non-heteronormative Malay-Muslim men underwrites the pursuit of an image of Malay-Muslim cohesiveness. This politically motivated antagonism, in turn, secures the maintenance of political power. I further argue that heteronormative forms of masculinity and sexuality which claim the endorsement of institutional Islam are further fortified by their intersectionalities with categories of ethnicity, heteropatriarchy and citizenship. I first draw attention to the bid for greater Islamic moral authority between two political parties – the United Malays National Organisation and Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party – by imposing particular norms of heteropatriarchy, masculinity, ethnicity, religiosity and citizenship on Malaysian Malay-Muslim men. Thereafter I briefly discuss how non-heteronormative Malaysian persons who are perceived as transgressing such norms meet with civil and religious condemnations, threats of corporeal punishments and anti-LGBT programmes. My focus is on non-heteronormative Malaysian Malay-Muslim men, notably writer Azwan Ismail who publicly disclosed his sexuality, and Ariff Alfian Rosh, a Malaysian student who was exposed in the media for undergoing a same-sex civil partnership in Ireland. Vitriolic attitudes towards non-heteronormative men are justified by perceptions of a contradiction of norms that have been sanctioned by institutional Islam and advocated by certain Malaysian politicians. My queering project thus demonstrates how non-heteronormative Malay-Muslim men such as Azwan and Ariff become agents of effrontery and dislodgement who expose insidious political agendas that feed off heteronormative categories of masculinity and sexuality, and their multiple intersectionalities with religion, ethnicity, heteropatriarchy and citizenship.

Key Words: Citizenship, ethnicity, heteropatriarchy, Islam, politics, LGBT, Malaysian Malay-Muslim men, masculinity, non-heteronormative sexualities, queer theory, performativity, Barisan Nasional, PAS, UMNO.

1. A Subversive Project
My argument in this chapter is that the vitriol towards non-heteronormative sexualities in Malaysia, notably towards non-heteronormative Malay-Muslim men, often eclipses greater issues of maintaining Malay-Muslim political power through an imagined Malay-Muslim cohesiveness. My use of non-heteronormativity in this
which are discursively assembled. Such queer manoeuvres occlude possibilities of political, social and religious transformations. Thus, my queering endeavour embodied existence, including resistance towards a 'normative alignment of sex, and sexuality,' as well as intersecting notions of citizenship and religion. I particular structures of Malaysian civil and Islamic authority in their condemnation benefit of their own agendas. My reference to Malaysian civil and Islamic labour under this description. Rather, it is a reference to particular segments of governance and institutional Islam in Malaysia that adopt limited, and often homo- and trans-negative approaches to matters of gender and sexuality.

Hence, I aim to confound and displace the 'normalizing mechanism' that have been co-opted by the aforementioned authorities to interpretable and inscribe ideologies of sexual validity upon Malaysian subjectivities. I intend to do this by oppositional Malaysian political parties that are heavily invested in Malaysian Muslim issues: Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu (or United Malays Islamic Party, PAS). UMNO is a major party under the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (or the National Front, BN), but its powerful position therein has given rise to the governmental leadership of Malaysia being touted as an UMNO/BN-led federal government. While many other global, historical and political factors abound in the rise of negativity towards Malaysians who are not aligned with heteronormative frames of sexuality, particularly LGBT persons, my discussion will focus on selected UMNO/BN-PAS exhibitions of rivalry.

First, I explain the ethos of sexuality in Malaysia, particularly from non-heteronormative perspectives. Then I examine the unstable and shifting how the UMNO/BN-PAS squabble has perpetuated, and continues to perpetuate, particular normalising forms of heteropatriarchy, masculinity, ethnicity, citizenship and religion on Malaysian Muslim men in an effort to construct an imagined icon of Malaysian Muslim-Malaysian masculinity. I conclude by highlighting how non-heteronormative Muslim-Malaysian men, through the examples of Malay writer and engineer Azwan Ismail and University College Dublin medical student Ariff Alifian Rostin, are the antitheses of a cohesive, and normative performativities of masculine and heteronormative expectations, which also frequently give rise to far-reaching and complex implications for intersecting issues such as ethnicity, sociocultural identification, citizenship and religion. Additionally, these men who experience attraction towards or engage in sexual activity with other men may not subscribe to a heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, or unproblematically embrace labels such as gay or homosexual as they are popularly understood.

I use performativity in the Butlerian sense, as 'a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body' that aims at 'constituting the identity it is purported to be.' While I resist the invocations of ontologised genders or sexualities in my discussion, I recognise that flesh-and-blood persons embody these performativities within the religious political and sociocultural specificities and limitations of the Malaysian context. My project reveals how the insistence on heteronormative categories of gender and sexuality for Malaysian Malay-Muslim men which is deployed in pursuit of that cohesiveness does not stand in distinct isolation from political underpinnings, and vastly relies on religious mechanisms. Indeed, the pursuit of such cohesiveness is inexorably connected to productions of masculinity, heteropatriarchy, ethnicity and citizenship. I am neither claiming that patriarchal impositions are to be exclusively assigned to heteronormative men, nor that non-heteronormative men are exempted from imposing their own forms of patriarchy. I am specifically referring to heteropatriarchy as a heterosexist ideology which is further bolstered by a dominant devaluation of the qualities, rights and visible presence of women, as well as a rejection of non-heteronormative masculine subjectivities. My work draws from the various resources available in Malaysian scholarship and online media resources.

In this chapter, I deploy queer theoretical hermeneutics in a manner that moves beyond a subjectless critique to the foregrounding of embodied subjectivities that are affected by heteronormative religiopolitical and sociocultural regimes. In this volume, Meenakshi Malhotra underscores forms of queer critique that lack political currency due to their persistence in rejecting and deconstructing identities and religio-political and sociocultural acceptance, and 'marked as a natural state.' Specifically, my mentions of non-heteronormative persons point to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* (LOBT) subjectivities which are increasingly being branded in the Malaysian news media, and by religious and political personages as LGBT. My use of LGBT in this chapter thus coincides with its common use in the Malaysian news media and among many religiopolitical circles, despite the reality that non-heteronormative subjectivities in Malaysia are more diverse than the static prescriptions of LGBT. In referring to non-heteronormative men and non-heteronormative masculinity, I am deploying a tentative and provisional description of the plurality and diversity of Malaysian men who do not conform to rigid and normative performativities of masculine and heterosexual expectations, which also frequently give rise to far-reaching and complex implications for intersecting issues such as ethnicity, sociocultural identification, citizenship and religion. Additionally, these men who experience attraction towards or engage in sexual activity with other men may not subscribe to a heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, or unproblematically embrace labels such as gay or homosexual as they are popularly understood.
religiosity. I further contend that these men expose the relentless heteronormatisation and masculinisation of institutionalised Malaysian Islam.

2. Sexploations

Gender variances and same-sex expressions are listed as grievous offences under the laws of institutionalised Islam in Malaysia. For example, the Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act (1997) penalises men who engage in "buiat (sexual relations between male persons) by sentencing them to ‘a fine not exceeding five thousand ringgit [approximately USD1600 or €1200] or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years or to whipping not exceeding six strokes or to any combination thereof.” Religious proscriptions are further fortified by civil law. In the Malaysian Penal Code, anal and oral sex are still upheld as ‘carnal intercourse against the order of nature,” and those who engage in such activities are liable for imprisonment and flogging, in both consensual and non-consensual instances. These laws however have only intermittently been exacted on the Malaysian populace. The most notorious displays have been the multiple sodomy cases involving Anwar Ibrahim, the former Deputy Prime Minister. Anwar is currently the de facto leader of Parti Keadilan Rakyat (or the People’s Justice Party, PKR), which alongside the Democratic Action Party and PAS, constitutes Pakatan Rakyat (or the People’s Alliance, PR), an unregistered political coalition against BN. Despite the tentativeness in their deployment, the continual existence of such civil and religious laws spells a sociopolitical and religious precariousness for Malaysians who profess gender variance or sexual diversity. In 2012, the Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Mashitah Ibrahim, stated that LGBT persons were excluded from the clauses on equality and non-discrimination for Malaysian citizens in the Malaysian Federal Constitution. Such laws, she explained, were applicable only to those who were manifestly male or female. Mashitah’s claims, which foreground the construction of Malaysian sexual citizens as positioned on the axis of genital certainty, represent prevailing convictions about the heteronormative constellations of genitalia, gender and sexuality.

Furthermore, Mashitah’s remarks belie a dearth of constitutional protection for non-heteronormative protections who are then relegated to realms of multiplicitous vulnerability. Numerous blatantly anti-LGBT projects and pronouncements which are congruent with this exclusionary premise have emerged. In March 2012, Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (or Department of Islamic Development Malaysia, JAKIM) and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission announced their joint efforts to place ‘LGBT activities’ under surveillance, ‘particularly on the Internet.” In February 2013, the Malaysian Education Ministry boldly proclaimed an attendance rate of 16,000 parents and teachers in its nationwide seminars on curtailing LGBT behaviour which was ‘like a disease but [curable] with early intervention.” In April 2013, Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Hassin even cautioned Malaysian Muslims to be wary of strategies that sought to influence Malay-Muslim minds in accepting perverted practices under the guise of human rights, in his rhetoric against LGBT supporters. Malhotra notes how such heteronormative devices mark off any gender or sexual identification or practice that fails to conform to stringent definitions, as sinful and deviant. Additionally, she underscores a pronouncement which are intolerant towards non-heteronormative persons to canvass a relocation of such persons from perceived deviancy to perceived pathology, thus mobilising concepts of pathology and remedy as implements for the dismissal of non-heteronormative subjectivities. These ‘perceptual apparatuses, conditioned by heteronormativity [which] tend to pathologise the so-called deviancy as illness,” provide a backdrop of contempt towards non-heteronormative subjectivities. In this chapter, I examine how such issues of sexuality are negotiated in Malaysia, particularly in the case of Malay-Muslim men.

There exists a pervasiveness in approaching sexuality as a matter of taboo in many circles in Malaysia. Malaysian feminist Tan Benghui avers that ‘most Malaysians do not discuss sex and sexuality openly, much less freely raise questions in relation to these.” While I concur with tan’s observation, I also see how it particularly resonates with Malay-Muslims by virtue of an adherence to Islam in which ‘one should not expose sinful behaviour, whether one’s own or another’s.” The potentiality of exposing deeds which transgress Islamic theological and ethical laws through sex-talk becomes a risk too great to be taken for many in the Malaysian populace. Nevertheless, I argue that the insistence on straitjacketing sexuality within a cocoon of hushed privacy is an imagined one for Malaysian authorities. Far from being taboo, discussions on sex and sexuality have entered the public domain through state and legal instruments. Malaysian anthropologist Julian C. H. Lee has stated that ‘the State deems it necessary or worthwhile to expend significant energy in policing sexual morality – both heterosexual and homosexual.” This insight underscores the reality that Islamic authorities who fall under Malaysian civil governance take the private to the publicly political through projects of surveilling and heteronormalising the sexual behaviours of Malaysian Muslims. In a bizarre twist of contradiction, the private sexual acts of Malaysians are thrust into a mechanism which publically validates/invalidates such acts by those who purport to abide by Islamic ‘theological and juridical principles” of non-disclosure in relation to sinful matters.

Islamic authorities in Malaysia underwrite their support for heteronormative representations of gender and sexuality through a performance of Islam which rigidly regulates almost every aspect of the lives of its adherents, notably by ‘ravaging the sexual lives of Muslims.” For example, the Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act (1997) showcases gender and sexual transgressions in a section entitled Offences Relating to Decency. These include
incest, prostitution, muncikari (matchmaking of persons for purposes that contravene Syariah laws), sexual intercourse outside of wedlock and/or preparations leading up to such acts, liwat, musahahah (sexual relations between women), female impersonations and acts of public indecency, and khawlut (being discovered to be in close proximity with a member of the opposite sex who is not one's legitimate spouse). JAKIM, for instance, has been actively involved in regulating sexuality even beyond Muslim circles, including the proscription of Valentine's Day celebrations which could potentially 'lead to "kissing in gardens" and pre-marital sex. While every manner of sexual activity – heterosexual or homosexual – which falls outside the faultlines of Islamic laws may be taken as non-normative sexual iniquity, I believe that the burden of disdain and accused wrongdoing may not be equally shared. The exclusion of LGBT Malaysians from constitutional protection and fierce advocacies against LGBT activities indicate a valorisation of heterosexual relations and consequently, milder reproaches in heterosexual misdemeanours. JAKIM has publicised a call to specifically help LGBT persons 'return to the correct path via awareness programs.' It is the notion of same-sex activity and gender transgression – not heterosexual offences – which has incited mass protests and threats of violence against LGBT Malaysians. This disparity in perception and treatment which constantly vilifies LGBT persons creates 'a whole field of social relations [which] becomes intelligible as homosexuality, and this privatized sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy. Provisions are even made for the mitigation of heterosexual transgressions. In the political arena involving Anwar Ibrahim for instance, Malaysian scholars Shamsul A. B. and Mohamad Fauzi Sukim point out that heterosexual indiscretions are transformed into 'bukti kejatihan' (proof of one's "machismo") whereas tales of homosexual deviation are used as political ammunition. In discourses which unequivocally condemn non-normative expressions of sexuality, male homosexual deeds are further marginalised and vilified. As I will demonstrate in the sections that follow, the severity of male homosexual infractions outweighs its male heterosexual counterparts.

3. Malay-Muslim

The demography of Malaysia is substantially defined by ethnic groupings. Of Malaysia's 26 million citizens, 54.6% are classified as Malay. Non-Malay Bumiputeras – a diverse array of indigenous peoples who are considered natives of Malaysia – constitute 12.8%, Chinese comprise 24.6%, Indians form 7.3% and other ethnic groups total 0.7%. As such, Malays, who are also considered Bumiputeras, form the majority of the nation and are accorded a special status as 'the original owners of the country'. Malaysia holds Islam as its official religion while it ostensibly acknowledges the freedom of other faiths. The Malay ethnicity and Islamic practice are conflated in Malaysia. This forms a privileged symbiosis in which Islam serves the dual purpose of being 'a marker of Malay identity and... an area of political autonomy.' In the Malaysian Federal Constitution, a Malay is overarchingly codified as 'a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom.' The notions of Malay or Malay identity, however, cannot be understood as 'an "essential" core that defines a group.' Ethnic awareness began to surface only in the seventh century, and even then manifested great diversities. For many centuries, Malay was a shifting category. It was indicative of a popular trading language and had very little to do with what today are labelled "ethnicity," "race," or a "people." The arrival of Muslim traders and religious scholars in Southeast Asia, and particularly on 'Malay shores around the thirteenth century,' gradually paved the way for the establishment of the 'peninsular Malay Sultanates' beginning with the Melaka Sultanate. This signified a "formally established... set of traditions which crystallised into what may be justifiably termed the "political culture" of the peninsula Malays" in the fifteenth century. Malaysian Islamic scholar Mohammad Hashim Kamali insists that 'it was the Malay ethnic consciousness that determined the course of Islamic resurgence in Malaysia.' This suggests that a linear awareness of Malayness propelled the spread and influence of Islam in the nation. I disagree with such a facile analysis, and instead am more inclined towards an understanding that it is the messy, unstructured and interpenetrating confluence of Islam and the various fragmented Malay societies at various periods of time that sustained an imagined peninsular Malay-Muslim cohesiveness.

One such instance of this confluence resides in colonial attempts to advocate this Malay-Muslim cohesiveness. Shamsul A. B. underscores the colonial construction of the Malay identity through what he calls a British 'enumerative modality,' a convenient administrative tool which effectively determined who was enfolded into the monolithic category of Malay. This taxonomising strategy used by the British who ruled Malaya (as it was known then) from 1824 to 1957, 'objectified and stultified social, cultural and linguistic differences among the indigenous peoples and the migrant population' and relegated the Malays to a minority status. The Malays witnessed their Syariah laws and revered sultans being 'made subservient to British legal codes and enactments.' As a nation 'configured by its feudal cultures and precedents,' the 'Muslim literati' of the nineteenth century perceived this interference as challenging and transgressing Malay-Muslim authority, customs and religion. It soon became evident to these educated Malay-Muslims that they had been defined by colonial terms, and that power needed to be wrested back from the British in order to secure the organisation of ethnicity, religion and citizenship of the Malays in Malaya. Attempts at attaining this goal were performed particularly through strategies of Islamic reformation that left a lasting impression on their successors, and which eventually led to the procurement of independence in 1957. What is particularly noteworthy is the indispensable role
of Islam in the zealous attempts of the literati in reappropriating a Malay imaginary on their own terms as they faced colonial encroachments.

Definitions of Malayness, Malay-Muslimness or even Muslimness continue to be problematic in present times. In writing on the development of Islam in Malaysia, Singaporean scholar Hussin Mutalib has sought to characterise Malay culture by identifying it as a conglomeration of 'adat (customary norms and oral traditions...), ethnic nationalism (a strong sense of wanting to uphold 'Malayness'), and Islamic principles and values.' Though the fact that Hussin's explanation of ethnic nationalism appears to be tautological, it is vital to see that his claim of the performativity of Malayness involves Islam. Twenty-first century studies suggest that being affiliated with Islam is gaining increasing identity currency over a more ambiguous ethnically-driven Malay nationalism for younger Malaysian Malay-Muslims, as 'the Muslim identity marker is becoming more detached from other markers of Malay identity.' Malaysian scholar Dahlia Martin's findings that Islam has become the crowning feature of identification for young, twenty-something Malay-Muslims in Malaysia - some of whom even discard a Malay identity in favour of a Muslim identity - refute an earlier notion of Hussin's that 'Malays tended to side their [sic] parochial ethnic leanings rather than act as Muslims who have adopted the non-ethnic and universalistic principles of their faith.' What is particularly striking is the escalating role that Islam plays in the performativity of the Malay identity. Islam is embraced as a stabilising agent for an otherwise shaky construction of Malayness. Hence, Malayness, Malay-Muslimness and Muslimness continue to be highly unstable epistemological taxonomies. To sum, Malay-Muslim cohesiveness remains an imagined construct that relies on convincing performativities to sustain the illusion of a natural and fixed reality.

Nonetheless, refraining from grounding Malay-Muslim identities in fixed categories does not bode well for sociopolitical security, rights and privileges. I wish to postulate that the erstwhile anti-colonial sentiments were set in motion as much for the sake of expelling the British as they were for preserving Malay-Muslim ascendency and cohesiveness. To have succumbed to the British would have meant yielding to the fracturing of that strength and cohesiveness in shame, embarrassment, weakness and inferiority. It would also have meant surrendering to the diminishment of a people who identified as Malay-Muslims and who claimed a special affinity with Malaya. As such, it was necessary to defend and perpetuate at all costs the authority, customs and religion that had evolved and were associated with Malay-Muslims over the years by projecting a cohesive Malay-Muslim identity that was carved out by Malay-Muslims. The salience that arose from these earliest efforts to exercise autonomous Malay-Muslim agency and achieve independence has lingered on to present-day Malaysia, even though its dynamics have taken on new and diverse forms. As the following section will demonstrate, a striking example of how these dynamics have morphed rests in a race among political parties – UMNO/BN and PAS in particular – to outbid each other in the ultimate performativity and display of Malay-Muslim cohesiveness, with an increasing reliance on Islamic ramparts in order to secure political power, pride and superiority.

4. The Islamic Bid for Moral and Political Authority: UMNO and PAS

My discussion of UMNO and PAS hones to 'disrupt the logic of coherence' among the dynamics of masculinity, heteropatriarchy, ethnicity and citizenship which are all religiously-coated for political leverage. I propose to focus on the stirrings of UMNO and PAS to 'out-Islamize each other in a bid to colonise the moral sphere – and by extension, the political sphere – in modern Malaysian history. The manipulation of Islamic discourses and mechanisms in Malaysia is the ongoing theme of rivalry between UMNO and PAS in a 'holier-than-thou competition for political mileage through religious legitimacy. Malaysian scholar Patricia A. Martinez cautions against a simplistic approach to the UMNO–PAS rivalry which presumes that the federal government has unlimited access to the implementation of its version of Islam on the nation. In reality, Malaysian states can only be urged, not compelled, to implement Islamic policies which are crafted by JAKIM, as Islam is governed – in the states that have them – by their respective sultans. While acknowledging Martinez's important caveat, my concentration on UMNO and PAS in this chapter is concerned with the politically-driven competitiveness between them that does the mantle of institutional Islam and its repercussions on non-heteronormative subjectivities, rather than an examination of the intricate mechanisms of Malaysian Islam itself.

UMNO began life in resistance to efforts by the British to create a united confederation of Malay states known as the Malay Union, in which the authority, customs and religion of the Malays would become subordinate to the British. Furthermore, all inhabitants of Malaya would be accorded equal rights and privileges. The first Malay Congress, which was organised in 1946, concluded with the establishment of UMNO. Initially excluding religion from politics, UMNO's time-honoured stance had been that Islam was best left to 'religious rituals, with no coercion or imposition. Its main preoccupation was the advancement of the Malays in political and economic spheres, as well as the implementation of its version of Islam on the nation. In reality, Malaysian states can only be urged, not compelled, to implement Islamic policies which are crafted by JAKIM, as Islam is governed – in the states that have them – by their respective sultans. While acknowledging Martinez's important caveat, my concentration on UMNO and PAS in this chapter is concerned with the politically-driven competitiveness between them that does the mantle of institutional Islam and its repercussions on non-heteronormative subjectivities, rather than an examination of the intricate mechanisms of Malaysian Islam itself.

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As it evolved in the subsequent decades, UMNO's parsimonious Islamic advocacies underwent a peripeteia with former Malaysian premier Mahathir Mohamad, who helmed UMNO and the nation at the outset of the 1980s. In his
inaugural year,Mahathir organised a seminar entitled The Concept of Development in Islam, and the recommendations which emanated from the seminar were assimilated by the government. Mahathir injected Islamic values into the political system, amounting to ‘the bureaucratisation of Islam at the level of state governance’ (or) the expansion of Islamic policies and declared Malaysia an Islamic state. The position of Malaysian Islam as progressive, liberal and thoroughly modern was upheld alongside a commitment to the concept of Ketuanan Melayu. The UMNO/BN government was bent on inventing itself as the legitimate Islamic authority in contradistinction to PAS, which was labelled as subversive, decadent, fanatical, misogynistic, dangerously prone to literal jihad (holy war) and a constant threat to national security.

The origins of PAS on the other hand lie in the ulama (educated Muslim scholars) cohort of the Persatuan Ulama Sa-Malaya (Pan Malay Movement of Religious Learned) in UMNO’s fledgling years. The rejection of their demands for a fuller implementation of Syariah laws by UMNO caused a division which eventually led to the departure of the ulames from UMNO and the formation of a new party, which in 1974 became known as Parti Islam Se-Malaysia. Conversely, the personal goals of PAS had grown over the years from ‘ethno-nationalist objectives’ that concentrated on the Malay ethnic group to the canvassing of a synthesis between Islam and politics through the creation of a theocratic state. Undeterred by UMNO’s viciousness and despite being an implicitly Malay-Muslim party, PAS presented itself as a representative of the mustadhamin (meek) and adil (just), which held the concerns of not just Malays, but of all ethnic groups at heart. PAS thus accused its nemesis UMNO of being mustokbirin (arrogant), zalim (cruel), kafir (infidel) and Malay-centric, and perceived UMNO as having succumbed to immorality, nepotism, corruption and various modes of mismanagement. In 1999, PAS allied itself with the Democratic Action Party, Parti Rakyat Malaysia (or Malaysian People’s Party) and Parti Keadilan Nasional (or National Justice Party) in a coalition known as Barisan Alternatif (or Alternative Front, BA), against the ruling coalition in the nation’s tenth and eleventh general elections. The BA coalition would eventually evolve into Pakatan Rakyat (PR), which participated in subsequent general elections.

Nonetheless, Mahathir’s pro-Islamic stance was a strategy to outwit … PAS in their legitimacy quest for Malay-Muslim votes. His introduction of a ‘conceptual divide’ between the UMNO/BN brand of Islam as modern and the PAS version as backward was a ploy to ensure the security of his political agenda. This dichotomising of Islam in Malaysia was deliberately engineered to encourage Malay-Muslims ‘to work harder, accumulate wealth, and rally behind the BN’s strong government’. Mahathir’s vision was to present Islam ‘as an identity and raison d’être of the Malay political struggle’ in which UMNO would emerge triumphantly as the authentic authority of Islam, and Mahathir himself would appear ‘not only as a Malay moderator but also as a Muslim modernist’.

Given that Islam, the Malay ethnicity and the nation are constitutionally intertwined, the attempt of UMNO and PAS to out-Islamise each other must necessarily be seen also as efforts to out-Malayise and out-Malaysianise each other on religious platforms, despite accusations by PAS of UMNO’s Malay-centricities. While the rat race in representing an unassuaged and valid form of Islamic authority encompasses the areas of governance and jurisprudence, academia, citizenship and ethnicity, the UMNO-PAS feud has also spawned a rush for legitimacy in the moral and political spheres, particularly in Malaysian heteropatriarchal and masculine systems as characterised in various Islamic family laws. As I explain in the following section, the upshot of their altercations has been an unyielding competition to construct an imagined icon of masculinity and heteropatriarchy that will act as an important palisade of Malay-Muslim identity, authority and cohesiveness. Such efforts have escalated the marginalisation of, and discrimination against, non-heteronormative Malay-Muslim men.

5. Malaysian Malay-Muslim Masculinity: An Imagined Icon of Coheriveness

Both UMNO and PAS evince strong male dominance within their leadership structures, in which the roles of women are minimised. A casual perusal of the members list of UMNO and PAS at their official websites reveals their male-dominated hierarchies. Despite PAS’s politically-driven turndown in addressing its hardly visible stance on Malaysian Muslim women’s roles and rights, ‘there is still a great dilemma facing such women when it comes to defining women’s own role in PAS’. As mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, Malaysian scholars have noted that in UMNO, (hetero)sexual misconduct is chuckled off as an inevitable contraindication of ‘manliness’. Thus, a distinct and naturalised UMNO/BN-styled Malay-Muslim masculine and heteropatriarchal identity for all Malay-Muslim men is crucial as a centripetal force in the preservation of Malay-Muslim dominance in a continuous centrifugal grip on a nation that must be kept ‘normatively heterosexual’ at all costs. The ruling UMNO/BN-led government also demonstrates a particular proclivity in favour of Malay-Muslim men, particularly in marriage and paternal rights as seen in various Syariah legalities. Male Muslim converts are more likely to win custody of their children and escape financial provision for their ex-spouses in Syariah courts. Malay-Muslim men have greater ease in divorces and accessing the wealth of their wives within polygynous marriages. These grandiose forms of Malay-Muslim masculinity have become
crucial implements of the UMNO/BN-led Islamisation of the country. Nevertheless, these ‘conferred entitlements’ to masculinity and heteropatriarchy serve a higher political purpose as they are capitalised for religiopolitical currency. Heteropatriarchal and heteronormative masculinity are thus subtly depicted as the entitlement, right and power-features of manness and Malay-Muslimness, which ironically demand both a concomitant distancing from, and a measure of connectivity with, women. Any hint of non-manness is not only perceived as feminised weakness and failed masculinity; it is also projected as an improper and invalid embodiment of power, ethnicity, citizenship and religious belief. This is particularly true of non-heteronormative Malay-Muslim men.

Little wonder then that UMNO/BN and PAS engage in the vilification of LGBT persons. In recent years, antagonism towards LGBT Malaysians as the nemeses of Islam, annihilators of procreation, and traitors to the Malaysian culture and lifestyle has intensified. Political leaders of both parties have denounced gender and sexual diversities. Myriads of anti-LGBT demonstrations have taken place in various Malaysian universities.\(^{53}\) Parent-teacher associations have been particularly favourite haunts for painting egregious epiteth of non-heteronormative persons. Although subsequently denying being privy to any such measures, the Malaysian Ministry of Education under the UMNO/BN-led administration was reported to have collaborated with the Yayasan Guru Malaysia Bhd (Malaysian Teachers’ Foundation) and Putrajaya Consultative Council of Parents and Teachers Association to produce a set of ‘guidelines’ on how to identify gay and lesbian schoolchildren based on stereotypical ‘traits’.\(^{24}\)

PAS has also had its share of disowning non-heteronormative persons, which engulfs non-heteronormative Malay-Muslim men. When Seksualiti Merdeka (Sexuality Independence) was outlawed in 2011, PAS unequivocally condemned its illicit manifestation of a ‘western lifestyle’.\(^{77}\) Seksualiti Merdeka is a Malaysian sexuality rights festival that began in 2008 and continues to be at the forefront of sexuality-rights advocacy in Malaysia.\(^{30}\) PAS Youth also objected to the presence of Canadian lesbian author and Muslim reformist Irshad Manji in Malaysia in May 2012, claiming that it would be construed as Malaysia’s endorsement of a heretical agenda that could become virulent.\(^{57}\) Later that year, PAS Youth also registered its disapproval of British singer Elton John’s concert in Malaysia’s Genting Highlands hill resort, citing the event as a promotion of hedonism by a man in a gay marriage.\(^{58}\) In this ongoing censure of LGBT Malaysians, it is easy to detect tactics that advocate a strong insistence on a heteronormative version of gender and sexuality. Men and women must appear, act and live as men and women should, and alternative comportments and expressions mean little beyond distorted perverseness. The rise of these discursive attacks by both parties is significant, for any attenuation would be construed as an admission of defeat in moral and political authority.

Nonetheless, the stakes are inevitably higher for the UMNO/BN-led government as it strives to maintain a political grip on the nation while it confronts the best efforts of PAS to erode and undermine its authority. The recent Thirteenth General Elections in Malaysia have further displayed this rivalry between the ruling coalition (BN, which includes UMNO) and the opposition coalition (PKR, which houses PAS). In the lead up to polling day, Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin extolled the mission of UMNO, as Malaysia’s largest Malay and Muslim political party, ‘to uphold, defend and propagate Islam as its principle.’\(^{99}\) This included handling LGBT issues which he claimed were intended to create confusion and discord among Malaysian Muslims. UMNO had also printed colourful campaign literature in which it boasted of curbing LGBT visibility as one of its policies and accused the PAS-inclusive alliance, PR, of encouraging the LGBT movement in Malaysia.\(^{100}\) Prime Minister Najib Razak himself belittled his main opponents by associating PKR and its allies with a medley of pluralism, racism and LGBT issues, while declaring that ‘PKR is an anything goes party – pluralism can, LGBT can, everything also can... The Chinese are afraid of PAS, correct? Non-Muslims are afraid of PAS.’\(^{101}\)

An imagined Malay-Muslim cohesiveness that is constituted out of heteronormative and heteropatriarchal gender and sexual embodiments becomes indispensable for UMNO/BN to maintain religiopolitical recognition and mileage vis-à-vis its political enemies. Furthermore, Malay-Muslim masculinity and heteropatriarchy are terminally caught up in the interfacing of ethnic and citizenship discourses for political strategising under the banner of religion. Any variation from such norms of gender and sexuality also hearth back to the colonial destabilisation of Malay authority, customs and religion, and is perceived to invoke an admission of defeat.

Hence, heteronormative performativities of gender and sexuality become synonymous with strength, power, uprightness and religiosity, whereas non-heteronormative sexualities rise to the surface as their antithesis. In the following section, I postulate that what strikes at the heart of this political pursuit is the counter-imagery of Malay-Muslim men who not only defy this essentialised and hegemonic machinery of glory, but who tenaciously adhere to their multiple belongings of religious belief, ethnicity and citizenship. Such processes provide a queer expose of the politised agenda of, civil and religious authorities in their malevolence towards non-heteronormative Malay-Muslim men.

6. Agents of Dislodgement and Effrontery: A Queer Expose
Non-heteronormative Malay-Muslim men who contest the norms of heteronormative masculinity are condemned as subverting not just the ‘logic of the sexual order’,\(^{102}\) but the entire Islamic, Malay and national order. By denouncing non-heteronormative Malay-Muslim men as intractable subjectivities under the subterfuge of a noble and righteous battle for the integrity of Malaysia and Islam,
both UMNO/BN and PAS scramble to accumulate moral and political mileage. Yet the presence of LGBT Malaysians, and indeed non-heteronormative men in particular, is a prerequisite for such political endeavours. The existence of LGBT Malaysians, 'disavowed but necessary for a heterosexual normality that defines itself in terms of what it rejects,' ironically plays a crucial part in the UMNO/BN and PAS warings. The persistent condemnations of LGBT protrusions in the public sphere, particularly non-heteronormative Malaysian Malay-Muslim men, act as inscription plates upon which UMNO/BN and PAS can invent and circumscribe what is and what is not Malaysian, Malay, Muslim, male and properly sexual for men. These fabricated mechanisms of legitimacy are supported by their creators through pontifications of approval and disapproval. These mechanisms become contrived modes of convenience through which they can convincingly interrogate and evaluate valid/invalid subjectivities, while concomitantly aggrandising themselves as the ultimate moral and political crusaders in this process.

Non-heteronormative men who are perceived as defiantly violating impregnable sanctioned structures in turn become justifiably punishable by civil and Syariah laws, or more poignantly, become susceptible pawns to religiopolitical agendas. Azwan Ismail publicly declared himself as a gay Malay-Muslim in 2010 in a brief YouTube video in Bahasa Malaysia. A translated excerpt from his public disclosure reads as thus:

I am 32 years old. I took a long time to know myself, to convince myself that I am gay, and after I am brave enough to say I am gay to other people...There is no denial that it is hard to be gay in Malaysia, especially if we are Malay...because religious and cultural factors have defined our lives, telling us who we can be and who we can't...They don't understand what it's like to be gay. I hope you can find that strength and hold on to it so you can tell others confidently. I am gay and I am okay.

By publicly declaring himself as a gay Malay-Muslim Azwan attracted death threats, as his integrated discourses of non-heteronormative sexuality and Islam were 'ungrammatical,' particularly as he proclaimed 'I am gay, I am okay' ('saya gay, saya ok'). In his statement 'religious and cultural factors have defined our lives, telling us who we can be and who we can't,' Azwan evinced a blatant objection to the multifaceted efforts aimed at redefining the person that he was, and with all its attendant intersectionalities, through heteronormative lenses. His appearance and talking back, which were part of an It Gets Better video project by Seksualiti Merdeka, also excited calls for legal action and repentance. In a similar manoeuvre, Ariff Alfian Rosli rode on from his Muslim compatriots when reports of his same-sex civil partnership in Ireland reached Malaysian shores. Photos of him in traditional Malay attire embracing an Irish man known only as 'Jonathan' were splashed across the internet and attracted every manner of unfavourable comment. Ariff provided adamant affirmations of his Islamic beliefs when he stated:

I did not convert another [sic] religion, what was reported was extremely contrary to the real fact. I was born as a Muslim, I am still a Muslim and will remain a Muslim until I die. There is nothing that can shake my faith.

Ariff's actions were touted as blasphemous towards the Malay people, Islam and Malaysia. Although Azwan's narrative was brief, and the media coverage on Ariff was relatively sparse, the public nature of their sexual subjectivities captured the homonormative imagination of many, and rendered the two men eligible for judgement by the mechanisms of legitimacy. These mechanisms mostly elicited unfavourable responses from segments of the Malaysian Malay-Muslim population, but fud conveniently into the UMNO/BN's and PAS's homonegative grids.

Yet by choosing to embody conflicting juxtapositions while exercising personal agency towards increasing self-acceptance and self-fulfilment, these men act as queer agents of effrontery that shrug off imputations of being a 'disgrace to... religion, race and country.' They engage in a subtle queering – a deep-seated scepticism of heteronormatively-rationalised censures in which a personal insolence, dissonance and revolutionary boldness in lived realities is manifested. They apply this queering to religiopolitical systems that attempt to reduce them to deviants who are worthy only of repentance and rehabilitation. By positioning them as queer agents, I am not claiming that they conspicuously march in the frontlines of Malaysian LGBT liberation, nor am I canonising them as queer martyrs. Ariff seemed uncomfortable being exposed on a global level, declaring 'I feel I have been inadvertently thrust into the public eye. I just want to get by without upsetting anyone or causing any trouble.' Azwan alone appears to bear some connection with sexuality rights activism in Malaysia, notably through his participation in Seksualiti Merdeka's YouTube project. The point I make here is that their queer transgressions come by way of their public visibility, and the open manner in which they exact an inversion of accusations against their sexuality, thus disrupting the religiopolitical notion of Malaysian Malay-Muslim cohesiveness. I wish to highlight three ways in which the public visibility, life decisions and narratives of Azwan and Ariff dislodge heteropatriarchal and heteronormative metanarratives on multifarious levels.

First, heterosexually- and heteropatriarchally-architected Malaysian political structures are destabilised in the visible presence of non-heteronormative men. It is indisputable that Azwan and Ariff serve as convenient caricatures that can be registered and demonised in religiopolitical censures, and thus manipulated for
political advantage. As UMNO/BN prides itself on being the apostle of a progressive Islam, and PAS professes to be the vessel of untainted Islam, every single element that secures each party’s impregnability and legitimacy in the politico-Islamic arena must be aligned to its central cohesiveness and zealously defended. This includes the image of a heteronormativity-masculine political prowess that has been woven into the struggle for political self-representations of moral validity and authority. Nonetheless, as non-heteronormative Malay-Muslim men who are perceived as pathological and morally decadent but who have gained public attention by the varying degrees of their self-disclosures, Azwan and Ariff tap on raw nerves of insecurity. They not only challenge the politico-moral authority of the two conflicting parties, but also symbolically portray a feminised, inferior, emasculated and vanquished UMNO/BN and PAS. Hence, the transgression of specific masculine, heteropatriarchal, ethnic, nationalist and religious norms is regarded as a seductive act that threatens the ascendency of power.

Second, Azwan and Ariff undermine the notion that the civic, ethnic, religious, sexual and gendered obligations of Malaysian Malay-Muslim men are necessarily and unquestionably congruent with heteronormative expectations. In particular, there is an ostensible positionality of ease and reconciliation demonstrated by these two men between their non-heteronormative sexualities and the performativity of their Islamic beliefs. In examining and inferring from their various public statements, it would appear that both Azwan and Ariff are committed to overcoming ferocious brandings while avowing their Islamic adherence, ethnic identifications and sentiments of Malaysian citizenship, despite Ariff’s decision to live outside Malaysia for the sake of his personal safety. The resoluteness of both men interrogates the imagined, heteronormativised cohesiveness of Malaysian Malay-Muslim masculinity. Moreover, just as the public presence of these two men interrupts the expectation that Malay-Muslim masculinity is necessarily heterosexual, it also weakens the imagined cohesiveness of the heterosexual Malay-Muslim man as the mirror of the nation’s strength and the epitome of Malaysian Islam. The individual performativities of citizenship, ethnicity, religion, masculinity and men’s sexualities — and their assemblage as a unified whole — become destabilised. As Malhotra asserts in this volume, subjectivities never achieve utter completion but remain in perpetual multiplicity and contingency. This destabilisation opens up possibilities for other forms of expression and embodiment.

Finally, their ‘maximum Muslim homovisibility’ — the public nature of their choices while professing multiple belongings of religion, ethnicity, citizenship and masculinity — provokes a queer shattering of heteronormative assumptions on multiple levels. Their very existence showcases the existence of non-heteronormative Malaysian Malay-Muslim men who do not cower in shame or guilt, or distance themselves from religious identifications, ethnic belongings and citizenship by virtue of their sexuality. Resisting invisibility, they disclose insights and life experiences as Muslims that unapologetically queer heteronormative expectations, which flip charges of seks songsang (deviant sex), cultural distortions and religion on their heads. As they invert accusations of sexual inversion, Azwan and Ariff make the ‘insult turned,’ and reclaim their positions as Malay-Muslims.

By denying religiopolitical and sociocultural forces the power to create social realities through historical time through dictation of their lives, Azwan and Ariff do not merely display an ‘alternative and a viable form of Malaysian masculinity,’ but also embody alternative performativities of Malayness, Muslimness and Malayanness. As such, these ‘dissident identities’ dislocate an ontological construction of heteronormative Malay-Muslim masculine and heteropatriarchal cohesiveness from securely-fastened ideologies that serve as collateral for the UMNO/BN-PAS political factions and rivalries. Azwan Ismail and Ariff Alfi Rosli resist being fodder for political discourses that serve self-interests, and unmask the oppressive mechanisms of heteronormative masculinity, ethnicity and citizenship which are undergirded by religion for political security.

Notes

1 My explanation of the unstable and contested terms Malay and Malay-Muslim will be elaborated later in this chapter. Nevertheless, I use these terms as provisional references to the subjectivities I discuss in this chapter.


3 Although rare, I have experienced the use of trans* to refer to all gender variant persons in Malaysia, although the term mabiyah remains popular for transwomen. Trans* was used by Malaysian LGBTIQ activist Thilaga Sulathireh during a talk on sexuality rights in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 2013 (see Bibliography).

4 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1999), xv.

5 Ibid., 33.


7 See Meenakshi Malhotra, ‘Reconceptualising the Subject in Queer Theory: A Narrative from India,’ in this volume.


13. I refer to Malaysian Malay-Muslims who do not use surnames by their first names, following the initial introductions of their full names. For those who do use surnames, I use their full names in initial introductions, followed by their surnames. Subsequent Notes carry first and last names.


16. Ibid.


21. 'Eye on LGBT Activities Online,' New Straits Times, 14 March 2012.

22. '16,000 Attend Seminars on How to Curb LGBT,' The Star Online, 1 February 2013.


24. Malhotra, 'Reconceptualising the Subject in Queer Theory,' in this volume.


27. Lee, Policing Sexuality, 98.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Patricia A. Martinez, ‘The Islamic State or the State of Islam in Malaysia,’ *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 23.3 (2001): 475.


Ibid., 19.


Martinez, ‘Islamic State,’ 477.


Ibid., 117.

See Kamarulnizam, ‘National Security and Malay Unity,’ 265.


Ibid.


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