

**“THE ARAB UPRISING AND MALAYSIA’S ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS
INFLUENCE, IMPACT AND LESSONS”**

Routledge, 2019, 188 pages, ISBN: 9780367854034

Almost all of the Malaysian Islamist Movements reviewed the height of the 2011 Arab Spring movement in the Middle East and North Africa that surprised them. Malaysian Islamists - (1) Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), (2) National Amanah Party (AMANAH), (3) Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement (ABIM) and (4) Malaysian Muslim Unity Front (ISMA) - turn and look at the Uprisings of 2011 Arab Spring. The economic crisis, which led to rising food prices, endemic poverty and chronic unemployment as well as systematic political repression and corruption at various levels, has encouraged popular resistance in the Arab Uprisings in 2011.

Welsh (2011) points out that as in the Arab World, much of the change is driven by ordinary citizens, who are often connected through social media, Southeast Asia too has experienced important and substantive political changes. In this Arab Spring, the attention of Southeast Asian people, especially Malaysia, is focused on developments in the Middle East. With street protests and elections, in the midst of violence, no one questions that the region has experienced deep political upheaval. However, not only in the Arab world, 2011 was also very significant in Southeast Asia: ripple of change is here. Driven largely by ordinary citizens, often linked through social media, Southeast Asia, especially Malaysia, underwent important and substantive political changes, with a clear balance supporting greater citizen empowerment, for the sake of justice, freedom and human dignity.

In the case of Malaysia, even since the establishment of the Malaysian Islamic Youth Forces (ABIM) as early as the 1970s, ABIM has indeed been encouraged to study, engage and participate global issues in the Middle East, starting with the events of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the 1979 Iranian Revolution and so on to the rise of the Arab people in 2011. However, arising negative polemic on social media related to the relationship between the Arab Uprisings and the Islamic movement in Malaysia after several incidents of social resistance and political protests (BERSIH or CLEAN) involving Islamic movement experts including ABIM around 2011-2015.

The doubts related to the above issues have been voiced by the kingdom, but the extent of the relationship between the Arab Spring and the Islamic movement in Malaysia, especially ABIM, remains unanswered. Indeed, this book reviews the expert perceptions of the ABIM movement towards the Arab Spring phenomenon in the Middle East and North Africa that erupted in early 2011. In addition, the influence of these events on the issue of democracy, political stability and human rights in the eyes of ABIM activists very felt, observed and appreciated. Most of

ABIM activists were sensitive to the Arab Spring incident with the response that it was a comprehensive political revolution towards the dictatorship of autocratic rulers in the Arab countries involved.

Specifically, in this book, Dr. Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin (Honorary Research Fellow, Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, UK) explored the knowledge and perceptions of selected Islamist activist activists, politicians and members in Malaysia regarding the Arab Spring protest, also considering how the event affected their activism. The Arab Spring influences powerfully political approaches and attitudes towards issues of regime change, civil disobedience, revolutionary politics, democracy, Islamism, and political stability in Malaysia. Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin identifies a number of lessons learned by Malaysian Islamists from the development of the post-Arab Uprisings in MENA. The tendency of Malaysian Islamists to be influenced by developments in the Middle East and global political Islam is not new, because that trend had already taken place in the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran (pp. 1-12).

According to Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin, the Malaysian Islamists were amazed, gasped and learned by what the Iranian Islamic Revolution showed in 1979. This popular event is well known in Malaysia for its direct impact on political activism and the PAS and ABIM approach in Malaysia in the 1980s and 1990s and inspired many Malay-Malaysian Islamists to uphold the struggle to establish an Islamic state in their country.

Following the recent Arab Uprisings, which also witnessed the rise of Islamic parties as the ruling power, these events were also attended by Malaysian Islamists with great interest. Furthermore, the main involvement of Malaysian Islamists in a series of mass protests, around 2011-2016, against the regime was seen by many local and foreign journalists as an effort to create the “Malaysian Spring”, inspired by the “Arab Spring” phenomenon. However, some Malaysian authorities have suggested that there is no basis for assuming that the Arab Uprisings had an impact on the Malaysian experience (pp. 15-27).

This raises questions about the relationship between the Arab Spring and Malaysian Islamists. However, before jumping to any conclusions about the ‘Malaysian Spring’ polemic, it must be understood to what extent Malaysian Islamists understand the fundamental issues of the Arab Spring. For the Malaysian Islamists, this inspiration came when they witnessed the removal of several autocratic Arab rulers who had long served from their respective positions by Arab protesters. However, fear of insecurity and political instability that is now evident after the Arab Uprising in Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen caused many respondents to prefer political stability over regime change. Most of them are quite skeptical about the ‘Malaysia Spring’ polemic because most disagree or agree that a series of local political demonstrations are an indirect attempt to overthrow the government. Speaking of the global impact of the Arab Uprisings, some elements of political oppression, coupled with corruption and abuse of power (which some

claim have been practiced by the previous Malaysian regime), led a number of Malaysian Muslims to believe that they were inspired by mass street protests during the 2011 Arab Uprisings during 2011 (pp. 13-39).

According to Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin, during the late 1970s and 1980s, several Islamic movements in Malaysia, especially PAS and ABIM, were heavily influenced by the 1979 Iranian Revolution. This transnational influence on Islamism and Islamist politics in Malaysia has increasingly changed after the fall of Shah Pahlavi monarchy in Iran. The effects of the revolution, though notably indirect, stimulated Islamic political ideas and thinking, and caused an increase in emotional appeal to a greater degree of Islamist political activism for the Muslim community in Malaysia, to achieve a stronger Islamic society. In 2011, almost four decades after the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, which influenced the development of the Islamic movement in Malaysia and Southeast Asia, through a major revolution which is known as the 'Arab Spring', the world has witnessed a new dramatic political scenario in Middle East & North Africa (MENA), with the fall of several autocratic rulers who have long served in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. That is undoubtedly a turning point in history. modern Middle Eastern politics, as well as Malaysia and the Arab-Muslim World.

Meanwhile, as a moderate Muslim country in Southeast Asia, Malaysia has significant economic, political and diplomatic relations, and social relations, with Middle East & North Africa (MENA) countries, given "Islamic values" with them, which indirectly unites the countries. The long and strong relationship between Malaysia and the Arab World is undeniable. Malaysia has developed and fostered multidimensional relations with the Arab world for more than 500 years, and this can be traced to the formation of the first Muslim country in the Malay Islands in the thirteenth century. Bilateral relations between Malaysia and the Middle East then led to published news and information about the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Algeria, Yemen and Syria entering Malaysia and widely discussed by Malaysia through various forms of social media such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. As Osman Bakar points out, the Malaysian public in general, and political observers and academics in particular, have observed the opening of events in the Arab world with great interest, if not with deep concern. Osman's statement was supported by Abdul Hadi Awang (PAS president), who acknowledged that even Malaysians without a season called 'spring' eagerly followed the development of the 'Arab Spring' in Middle East (pp. 71-103).

There is great interest among Malaysians, because this phenomenon is truly unexpected and extraordinary. They feel that the Arabs deserve real change for the better, especially in the political field. On the other hand, civilian groups and academics, as well as the majority of Internet users at the time, were debating whether Malaysia would be a victim of the next regime change and democratic transition after they watched Tunisia, Egypt and Libya overthrow autocratic governments.

For Malay Islamists, as Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin noted, the Arab Uprisings, specifically the 2011 Egyptian uprising, is significant for Malaysians for two main reasons. First, the majority of Muslims in Malaysia consider Egypt as a sanctuary for Arabic and Islamic knowledge. Thousands of Malaysian school graduates gather in Egypt every year to enroll in various Egyptian higher education institutions, with Al-Azhar, Mansoura, Zaqaziq, and Cairo Universities being the most popular destinations. Second, the majority of Malaysian Muslims are concerned about the role of Islam in the revolution because they know that the Muslim Brotherhood is the dominant force in the Egyptian opposition. As such, they were interested in whether political Islam and the Egyptian Cavalry would win over the autocratic government of president Hosni Mubarak.

The emergence of Islamic parties, the Tunisian Ennahda Party and the Egyptian Freedom and Justice Party shortly after the collapse of the ruling regimes in Tunisia and Egypt seemed like a beacon of hope and provided initial direction for the future of the Islamic movement in Malaysia. As said by Peter Mandaville, the success of Islamists after the 2010-2011 Arab Uprising seems to confirm the dominance of political Islam as a socio-political force in the Middle East. Combined with the rise of the Turkish AKP and the regular participation of Islamic parties in electoral politics in Southeast Asia, there seems to be strong evidence that faith-based parties have become a permanent fixture in Muslim politics (pp. 104-140).

The involvement of several Islamic movements in a series of mass protests against the government, known in Malaysia as 'BERSIH (CLEAN)', together with strong relations with Islamic groups in countries involved in the Arab Uprisings, might suggest links with the Malaysian experience. In addition, the Malaysian public has followed the Arab Spring with deep concern from the start. This raises the question of whether the previously 'semi-democratic' Malaysian state would follow the same regime change path as witnessed in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya in 2011, and overthrow their respective autocratic rulers. It is surprising that, during the post-2011 Arab Uprisings, Malaysian authorities firmly believed that there would be no basis for protesting the Arab Spring in Malaysia. However, a series of large-scale mass protests had taken place in the capital (Kuala Lumpur) before the 2013 general elections, where protesters and opposition parties (including PAS and several other Islamist movements and NGOs) had mainly demanded political reform and elections to the government.

However, the demonstration was far different from what had been seen at MENA, where there had been countless incidents of violence and intimidation and brutality as a result of government actions to suppress and weaken protesters. Quite a number of Malaysian political observers interviewed by the Malaysian National News Agency (BERNAMA) determined that Malaysians would reject the possibility of the Arab Spring style Revolution because there was no concrete justification for them to emulate, especially after seeing its terrible impact. The reason for people's rejection of such ideas is a track record of proven democratic

practices in Malaysia: elections are held every five years without a failure, and this has ensured the progress and prosperity of the nation. Another reason is that people can choose their government, and the majority vote is always respected, as evidenced by the three states (Selangor, Penang and Kelantan) currently under opposition rule. Moreover, the National Front Party (Barisan Nasional or BN) led by the government is transparent and constant in making efforts to improve the welfare of its people through various programs.

In my opinion, this book reveals new information about the perception and influence of the phenomenon of the Arab Uprisings among Islamic movements in Malaysia, especially in the period after the post-2011 Arab Revolution. Although a number of studies and publications have examined the relationship between the Arab Uprisings and responses around the world, as well as the implications outside the Middle Eastern countries, there is still a lack of comprehensive studies on the effects and impacts on Southeast Asian countries, particularly regarding Islamic movements in Malaysia. In this regard, this study was able to resolve these gaps and shortcomings. Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin (the author) collected data for this study from 2016 to April 2018 – which means that the recent political developments in MENA and Malaysia, for example the 14th Malaysian General Election in May 2018 and any subsequent events, were not discussed or included in this book.

Overall, this empirical study found that the majority of Malaysian Islamists from PAS, ABIM, ISMA and AMANAH supported free and democratic elections as relevant media for political change in the Malay tribal country. They did not support the overthrow of a regime led by the National Front through civil disobedience, street demonstrations, or 'people revolution'. This book is very observant in discussing the Islamic movement in Malaysia to explore questions about the global impact of the phenomenon of the Arab Uprisings outside the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Specifically, this book examines the relationship between the 2011 Arab Uprising and Islamic movements in Malaysia from the perspective of Malaysian Islamists, considering how this phenomenon impacts and influences the Islamist movement ideology and activism. This book provides new information about the 'Malaysian Spring' polemics among Malaysian Islamists in the post-Arab Uprisings period and contributes to the literature on the Arab Uprisings, and political Islam, making it a very valuable resource for students and researchers interested in contemporary Islamism and politics in Malaysia and Southeast Asia.

Herdi Sahrasad¹

1 Graduate School of Islamic Studies, University of Paramadina and Department of Political Science, University of Muhammadiyah, Jakarta. Contact E-mail: sahrasad@yahoo.com