

Religious Issues in Malaya: A Study of Views and Debates in *Saudara*, 1928-41

Wan Suhana Wan Sulong

Department of History and Civilization, Kulliyah of Islamic Reveled Knowledge and Human Sciences,
International Islamic University Malaysia

Abstract: *Saudara*, published from 1928-41 was one of the major Malay newspapers in Malaya in the all-important decade before the Second World War. Influenced by Islamic reformism fervour, this newspaper became an important medium for the Malays to voice out their views on various issues. This paper will show that throughout this period, religious issues are among the central themes which dominated the contents of *Saudara*. Within the published pages, readers could find views and debates on religious issues such as the conflict between Kaummuda and kaumtua; bid'ah practices among the Malays; Muhammadan Law in Malaya; the establishment of Malayan Ulama Association; Lebaipondok, etc. This paper will, in other words, illustrates the religious issues which dominated the lives of the Malay people in Malaya during that time and how it is comparable to the current Malay society in Malaysia. With *Saudara*'s association to Islamic reformist movement in Malaya, this paper will also shed some light on how far Islamic reformism influenced the ideas and views on the debated issues. Finally, the religious issues raised in *Saudara*, ranging from what were considered important to more trivial ones, were by no means exclusive to the respective period, they are in fact ongoing issues which have survived through several decades and continue to have relevance in contemporary Malay society.

Key words: *Saudara* • Islam • Islamic reformism • Malays • Malaya

INTRODUCTION

Saudara was the Malay newspaper published from 1928 to 1941 in Penang by the Jelutong Press, the publishing house of a prolific writer and renowned Islamic reformist in Malaya, Sayyid Shaikh bin Ahmad Al-Hadi [1]. "*Saudara*" is a Malay word which means "brother." In the introductory column of the article of its first publication, it was stated that the aims of the newspaper was "calling for unity and cooperation based on the right path, strengthening Islamic brotherhood, helping each other as promoted by Islam and preaching the Quran in order to achieve worldly progress as enjoined by Islam"[2].

The contents of *Saudara* were itemized as follows:

- An academic newspaper which contains subjects which could enrich the knowledge and perspectives of the readers.
- Letters which contain the demand for progress.
- World news.
- Local news [2].

Saudara would initiate debate on local issues or "news of the Malay world." *Saudara* stressed that all these debates would stay within the law and would not violate the rights of any individual and moreover, truly sincere. Apart from that, there were a lot of advertisements and stories or news, whether humorous or concerning general knowledge. In the beginning, each time of its publication, there were around 1000 copies printed but the number increased gradually and by the second year of its publication, the number of copies printed each time was between 1500 to 1700 based on demand from readers and sales agents [3]. Regarding its circulation, *Saudara* itself noted that its readership extended to people in Malaya, Sumatra, Java, Borneo and Celebes. Apart from that it was also read by Malay students in Europe, London and Egypt. It also reached Malays living in Mecca, Siam and Saigon [3].

Thus, this paper will concentrate on religious issues in Malaya from the perspectives of articles published and issues debated in *Saudara*. This paper will show that throughout this period, religious issues are among the central themes which dominated the contents of *Saudara*.

Corresponding Author: Wan Suhana Wan Sulong, Department of History and Civilization,
Kulliyah of Islamic Reveled Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia.
Tel: +60361966006, Fax: +60361965150.

It will, in other words, illustrate the religious issues which dominated the lives of the Malay people in Malaya during that time. *Saudara*'s association with Islamic reformist movement in Malaya will also enable the paper to shed some light on how far Islamic reformism influenced the ideas and views on respective issues.

Religious Issues In *Saudara*

The Impact of Wahabism in Malaya: In a series of articles in *Saudara* in the years 1929-1930, entitled "Bukti Pekerjaan Kerajaan Islam" (The Evidence of an Islamic State's Deeds) by 'Arab Sumatra'[4], the steps carried out by the new Saudi government to strengthen Islamic teachings in what had become Saudi Arabia were discussed. In his articles, 'Arab Sumatra' not only explained Saudi government actions, but also took the opportunity to criticize indirectly various aspects of the Malay community's attitudes and behaviour at that time; and the people who came under most heavy criticism were the *ulama* or religious teachers.

One example was in connection with the Saudi government's ban on smoking cigars (*cerut*) and tobacco. According to the regulations there, government officials warned the people against smoking and those who disobeyed were to be punished. By contrast, the writer pointed out, in Malaya, although warnings were issued to the people, it was difficult to find even one *alim* who did not enjoy smoking cigarettes or tobacco [5].

A similar unfavourable comparison was made when the writer explained the restrictions implemented by the Saudi government to prevent men and women from mixing on occasions such as wedding ceremonies and funerals. The writer observed that in the Malay world, the situation was quite the contrary; for example, at wedding ceremonies, it was the *ulama* themselves who would lead the "*upacara menepung tawar*" [6].

Some of the measures taken by the Saudi government were quite extreme, but nevertheless, the writer expressed agreement with them. For example, the writer seemed to approve the Saudi government regulation which made it compulsory for men to wear a beard in the name of *syara*. If a barber disobeyed this regulation, his permit would be cancelled and his premises closed. This action was rather extreme, because Islam does not compel its followers to keep their moustaches and beards; it is just a recommendation (*sunat*) [5].

However, it is difficult to determine whether the writer fully understood Islamic injunctions on this matter, or

whether, as a fervent Islamic reformer, he just wanted to use the actions of the Saudi government to challenge the opinions and behaviour of the conservative *ulama* in the Malay world.

Tuan Muhammad Yusuf S.M. [7], in a series of articles, elaborated on the reasons for the downfall of the Muslim *ummah* and the history and impact of the *Wahabi* movement. Regarding the teachings of Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab and its impact on Malaya, he wrote:

The accusations made by the Meccan *ulama* against the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahab have spread all over the world. The enmity between the Najd and the Hijaz groups remains until today. The Arabs ruined the name of Wahabi because of their national interest at the time. But what has this conflict between the people there to do with us, the Muslims outside of Arabia? For our part, we are obliged to accept all those teachings which are better and more complete and, moreover, in accordance with Islamic teachings. Do not be fooled by those stupid Arabs in Mecca. The teaching established by al-Malik Abdul Aziz today is the best and the purest Islamic teaching and most in accordance with the teachings of Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. Thus, all the accusations made by the Arab Meccans should be scrutinized beforehand. Do not just simply follow other people [8].

The Debates on the Idea of Forming Persekutuan Ulama Semenanjung (Malayan Ulama Association): In the 1930s the tendency to organize themselves into clubs and associations increased significantly in the Malay community. With respect to religion, this trend was reflected in the suggestion for the establishment of a Malayan Ulama Association (Persekutuan Ulama Semenanjung) and the strengthening of the already existing Persatuan Khairat Mati [9]. This period witnessed a wide rift between the religious establishment, popularly known as Kaum Tua (old faction) and a new group of Muslim intellectuals known as Kaum Muda (young faction). They had different opinions concerning religious issues and their arguments were reflected in various writings in the newspapers at this time. *Saudara*, a newspaper in the Islamic reformist mainstream, undoubtedly tended to defend the new generation in its writings. At the same time, however, the newspaper aspired for unity between these two groups so that the *ulama* could carry out their responsibilities for the welfare of all Malays effectively.

It was because of this rift between the conservative *ulama* and the new generation of Muslim intellectuals, that the suggestion came for the establishment of a Malayan Ulama Association. One of the most prominent individuals in the history of Islamic reformism in Malaya, Abbas bin Mohd. Taha, became an ardent supporter for the establishment of such an association. In his article entitled “Persekutuan Ulama Semenanjung,” 13.6.1936, he commented on various proposals made by writers in the newspaper on this issue. Abbas outlined the objectives of this proposed association as follows:

To save society from ignorance and backwardness, to shower it with knowledge and lead it to progress, to save it from practising unlawful adat and khurafat, to enable it to follow the true teachings of Islam and the right path in life... to strengthen the spirit of love and brotherhood in society. It should absolutely not be to defend one group against another [10].

There had already been initiatives to carry out such a proposal in Singapore. He urged the *ulama* to respond positively to this call. Regarding the disputes and differences among the *ulama* at that time, Abbas argued that there had always been room for disagreement and differences in Islam. However, practices which were clearly shown to have been implemented during the Prophet’s time must be followed by all Muslims without question. Where there were various differences in the mode of implementing those practices, however, Muslims are allowed to choose which one appeals most to them. However, Abbas advised the Muslim community to choose an alternative which would not cause divisions in society. Moreover, Abbas advised people not to oppose anybody for having different opinions on those issues where differences are allowed [10].

Another writer by the name of Pak Haji Abdu Ansamad, in an article of the same year, perceived the objectives of establishing a Malayan Ulama Association as follows:

This *ulama* association (*persekutuan ulama*) which is going to be established is not for making people slaves or to encourage people to perform actions for the sake of the hereafter only, or to perform prayers and fasting. No, the aim of its establishment is solely to educate the Malays towards progress in all matters relating to religion and this world and also to strengthen the spirit of brotherhood and *rabitah* between Muslims which had been created by Prophet Muhammad s.a.w [...] And the person who made the suggestion was not aiming to serve his own interests [11].

Abbas’s writings received a negative response from a writer with the pseudonym ‘Muhibbul Watan’ (Lover of the Nation). Taking into account the wide rift between the *ulama* in Malay society, the writer took a pessimistic view regarding the suggestion. He believed that it would be impossible to get an agreement on this kind of association from the *ulama* in Malaya. Basically, he was saying that Abbas’s plan was too idealistic. If Abbas believed that one of the aims of this *ulama* association would be to bring Malay people to a foremost position in Malaya, the writer argued, this was absolutely at odds with the teachings of many *ulama*, who always urged their followers to seek happiness in the hereafter and have no concern for the affairs of this world. If the objective was to encourage the *ulama* to write books on *fiqh* and *usuluddin*, the writer argued, he saw no use in adding to the already huge numbers of existing books on these subjects. Even if there were *ulama* who were willing to write these new books, the conservative *ulama* would prevent their students or followers from reading them, believing that they would mislead the people, since the contents would be ‘corrupt’. Finally, conflict among the *ulama* in Malaya was so prevalent at that time that the writer concluded: “if there is no enmity between one another, then they are not *ulama*”[12].

‘Muhibbul Watan’ continued his discussion on this issue in another article, where he suggested that, prior to the establishment of a Malayan Ulama Association, an *ulama* association should be established in every state first, from which every state should send representatives to form a Malayan Ulama Association. Any *fatwa* made by such a Malayan Ulama Association should then be followed by the sultans, *syekhul Islam*, *mufti* and *qadhi* of Malaya. In short, the president of the *ulama* association would be the *Sheikhul Islam*, while the sultan and *mufti* in each state would only act as committee members. However, repeating his pessimism about the success of such an association, he wrote:

We could not hope for any work to be carried out by people who believe that the door to *ijtihad* is already closed, refer to *fiqh* books only, dislike reading newspapers and do not have the courage to learn or revise their lessons without the presence of a teacher. They do not know how to appreciate the knowledge of other people and always rely on fate for everything. This kind of people are not qualified at all to be the leaders of their community. The task of the *ulama* has already been fixed and that is to recite prayers, conduct marriage ceremonies and read *talqin* [12].

In other words, 'Muhibbul Watan's pessimism was based on the attitude of the so-called conservative *ulama* at the time. The fact that many of these *ulama* had great power and influence in the administration of religious affairs in Malaya, along with the sultans and aristocrats (*pembesar-pembesar negeri*) would make it difficult for the proposed Malayan Ulama Association to play its role in the society effectively. Moreover, the way of thinking of the older generation of religious leaders was clearly so different from that of the new batch of Malay *ulama*, that unified opinion and efforts would be highly unlikely.

There were many interesting contributions to *Saudara* which reflected the difficulty of establishing such an association in Malaya. As-Shaikh Ibrahim al-Hadi, for example, raised the question of whether such an association would be exclusively for pure Malay *ulama*, or whether it would include all *ulama* in Malaya, regardless of ethnicity? This question was indeed very relevant, since *ulama* from among the Arab and *Jawi Peranakan* community held very important positions in Malay society and had been actively involved in religious activities in Malaya. They contributed significantly to charitable organizations, education and journalism. However, with the increasing spirit of Malay nationalism in Malaya at that time, the ethnic issue could no longer be ignored. Interestingly, the writer suggested that Arabic should be used by the *ulama* association, since it is the language of Islam and therefore that all the *fatwas* should be written in Arabic first and only after that should they be translated into other languages [13].

Pursuing the question of membership, the writer asked whether the *lebai-lebai kampung* [14] and all Quranic teachers who did not know Arabic would be accepted, or only those *ulama* who had graduated from Mecca with a knowledge of the Arabic language. The same applied to *mazhab*; would all the *ulama* from any *mazhab* be accepted, or only those from among the dominant Shafie *mazhab*? Regarding the *kitab*, how old should be the *kitab* that were going to be used [13]?

Finally on 12.8.1936, after a series of debates on the issue, the editor, Sayyid Alwi al-Hadi expressed his opinion on this projected *ulama* association. He believed that Malay society was in dire need of such an *ulama* association, because of the disputes in various matters concerning religion, resulting from the absence of understanding and unity among those people who claimed to be, or were referred to, as *ulama*. Sayyid Alwi expressed his support for the suggestion, but had some reservations about its chances of success. Sayyid Alwi suggested that, in order to establish a national *ulama*

association, associations at the state level should be established first. However, prior to that, those in authority will have to find a way of determining whether a person is an *ulama* or otherwise. Only after all these detailed preparations had been made, could all the state associations be united, with Kuala Lumpur as its headquarters, because of its central location [13].

Sayyid Alwi advised Haji Abbas bin Mohd Taha and all his followers first to concentrate on the already existing Singaporean Ulama Council (Majlis Ulama Singapura) [15] so that it could become an example to other *ulama* associations which were going to be established in other states. Only then should these state associations be combined to form a Malayan Ulama Association [16]. Sayyid Alwi was again emphasizing that state *ulama* associations should be strengthened first, before forming a national *ulama* association, so as to guarantee a strong foundation for the latter [16].

Looking at the religious establishment in Malaya at that time, some writers' reservations regarding the success of the creation of a nation-wide association were quite reasonable. An example of the difficulties in creating a unified religious establishment is illustrated by a *Saudara* editorial of 7.10.1936, dealing with the situation of the Muslims of Singapore. Singapore was at that time an important state for Malays and for Islam in Malaya in general, because so many *ulama*, intellectuals and wealthy Muslims resided there. In another editorial, Sayyid Alwi outlined the problems which affected the unity of Muslims in Singapore, which originated from divisions within an umbrella organization, the Singaporean Islamic Association (Persekutuan Islam Singapura). The dispute was between the Singaporean Ulama Council, which was a branch of the Singaporean Islamic Association and the Islamic Board (Lembaga Islam), which had been established by former members of Singaporean Islamic Association. Ironically, the Singaporean Islamic Association, which had been established in order to unite Muslims, had ended up doing exactly the opposite. It was suggested by *Saudara* that these disputes between these two associations were petty and could have been resolved without splitting into separate associations [16].

It was probably because of this situation that Sayyid Alwi suggested to the people who were so keen on the establishment of Malayan Ulama Association that they should work at creating Muslim unity at the state level first. If it was so difficult to unite the *ulama* in one state, would it not be much more complicated to unite the *ulama* from the whole country?

Kaum Muda vs Kaum Tua

Who Are They?: Literally the word Kaum Muda means “young faction” while Kaum Tua means “old faction.” In Malaya at that time, Kaum Muda was represented by the people with an Islamic reformist tendency, while the opposite group, Kaum Tua was represented by the sultans, aristocrats (*orang-orang besar*) and traditional or conservative *ulama*. Most of the debates regarding the difference between Kaum Muda and Kaum Tua can be found in the early years of *Saudara*’s publication, i.e. 1928 and 1929. Judging by the number of articles on this issue, it could be said that either the conflict between the two groups was particularly intense at this time, or the newspaper was conforming to its Islamic nature more strictly in the beginning as compared to its later editions. As a Muslim reformist newspaper, most of the articles represented the ideas of Kaum Muda. Thus, most of the articles were criticisms of Kaum Tua’s practices and beliefs, most probably with the objective of making the readers aware that they had been following a corrupt form of Islamic teaching for a long time.

In 1929, a contributor with the name of Abham gave a definition of Kaum Muda as follows:

People who are regarded as Kaum Muda are not necessarily people who are young in age – not young people who are wearing beautiful clothes – nor the people who are wearing ties, but only those whose direction is progress – they know how to use their intellect – they realize that all the nations in this world have carried out their responsibilities and that the Malays have been left behind in all aspects of life; these are the people known as Kaum Muda. No matter if someone is already 100 years old, if he holds to this belief then he is one of the Kaum Muda. On the other hand, even if a person is young and knows other languages like English, Arabic, Persian and German, but ignores all the things mentioned above, then he does not belong to Kaum Muda, but is one of the Kaum Kuda (horse), who does not realize that his people have been exploited by foreign people and all the revenues of his land are monopolized by other races. So what things are left to them? Just the name with the Malay title, Tanah Melayu, bumi Melayu etc. but everything else has been swept away by the Chinese, Indians and other foreign races [17].

Abham believed that the people were indifferent to their worsening condition because of the influence of the teachings of *tuan guru*, *tuan sheikh*, *tuk alim* and *pak lebai* [18] in *pondok* and *madrasah*. They taught the people to hate this world by emphasizing that this world is the place for non-Muslims – “*rezeki secupak takkan*

jadi segantang.” They promoted fatalism among the people and taught them to be patient, practising *zikir* such as reciting the *Qulhuallah* (Surah al-Ikhlās) with the *tasbih* and giving extensively to charity. Such religious teachers preached that these were the main obligations for Muslims indicated by the Quran. The writer believed that if the Muslims were taught these ideas for another ten years, eventually all their land and belongings would fall into the hands of other races [18]. Abham clearly linked Islamic reform to the self-strengthening of the Malay people.

In the same year, Abdul Wahab al-Falfalaani, provided a thorough explanation in *Saudara* for the terms used for these two groups and how they became popular. According to him, the term ‘*kaum muda*’ originated from Turkey about fifty years previously (1880s) when a group of intellectuals aimed to carry out reforms in Turkey and at the same time revive the strength of Turkey, which was then under the weak administration of Sultan Abdul Hamid. In 1908, they managed to install Muhammad Rashid as leader, but before the First World War, the old group managed to seize power again and Turkey once again remained in backwardness until the emergence of Mustafa Kemal Pasha. He managed to obtain all the land taken from Turkey during the war and build Turkey to be a strong country. This, the writer viewed as an outstanding achievement, since elsewhere there was no Muslim land that was truly under independent Muslim control. They had either been colonized by other powers outright, or had signed some kind of agreement with them [19].

Abdul Wahab criticized the teachings of Kaum Tua as the main cause of Muslim degradation. Their constant claim was that “this world is only a prison for the Muslims,” and all the honour of this world belonged to non-Muslims. All their teachings were based on this concept. Consequently, according to Abdul Wahab, the Muslims had become slaves to other foreign races. For centuries, the Muslim kings had just sat in idleness, looking at the progress of other people, hoping that the *khalifah* would help them in their difficulties and waiting for the coming of the *mahdi*. But now, Abdul Wahab insisted, the long-awaited *mahdi* had indeed come and set the Muslims on the right path, the path which had been abandoned by the conservative *ulama*. Accordingly, Muslims in other countries had taken Mustafa Kemal as their example. They had risen up in opposition to the Kaum Tua, who had always wanted to bring the Muslims to destruction and stuck to their *iktikad* – “this world is a prison for the Muslims” [19].

Among the objectives of Kaum Muda, Abdul Wahab wrote, was to place a key emphasis on education, especially secular education. At the same time, they promoted the eradication of *bid'ah* in Muslim society, which they saw as a hindrance to the people's progress. Moreover, they wanted to free society from the tyranny of their sultans and Kaum Tua and to concentrate on religious aspects, to correct all the wrong understanding of religion which had led to the downfall of Islam [19].

Regarding Kaum Muda in Malaya, Abdul Wahab continued, the origin of this group had been 20 years previously, when a group of Muslims had published *al-Imam* in Singapore, which had been a translation of the periodical *al-Manar* and other writings by Shaikh Muhammad Abduh, whose ideas had been greatly influenced by Jamaluddin al-Afghani. At that time, there had been no wide interest in new forms of knowledge and freedom of thought in the Malay society. Thus, it had created a shock among the Kaum Tua in Malaya, to the extent that some did not even dare to touch the *al-Imam* journal. From the beginning of 1914, the new influences spread by the ideas of *al-Imam* had been strengthened with the publication of *al-Islam* by Khwaja Kamaluddin, since the contents of this magazine were much the same as those of *al-Imam*. In subsequent years, the number of Malay journals and newspapers had increased and many had an Islamic content. Consequently, the people of Malaya could now feel the fruits of freedom of thought and were enabled to differentiate for themselves between true Islamic teachings and false ones. Abdul Wahab therefore warned Kaum Tua: "Do not jump into the arena without enough weapons. If you are only depending on *kitab Jawi*, you will lose." The followers of Kaum Muda, Abdul Wahab stated, had increased significantly because many intellectuals agreed with their teachings [19].

In this article, Abdul Wahab then alluded to a *kitab* entitled the "book of history," in which it was stated that, at the end of this world, the Muslims were going to be divided into 78 branches (*firkah*). Abdul Wahab asserted that it was Kaum Tua who were dividing the Muslims and it was Kaum Muda who were trying to unite them. According to the writer, positive signs regarding the influence of Kaum Muda could be seen in Turkey, Afghanistan, Syria, Persia, Najd, Iraq, Egypt, Lahore (India), Sumatra, Java and Malaya. All of them were united in their religious stance, upholding the Quran as their guidance and were trying to strengthen the spirit of brotherhood among themselves. They tried to learn from each other's example, to eliminate all corrupt practices and

were willing to take what was good from others, even from the Jews, Zoroastrians and Christians.

In this article, we can observe the excessive praise given to Mustafa Kemal Pasha from Turkey. Abdul Wahab even regarded him as the *mahdi* or saviour of the Islamic world. This is clearly different from the attitude of most Muslim scholars nowadays, who strongly condemn his reform movement. However, what the writer clearly admired was Mustafa Kemal's ability to unite and build Turkey to be an independent country with a strong spirit of nationalism after the disastrous outcome for Turkey of the First World War. Looking at the situation prevailing in those days, when most of the Muslim countries were under the subjugation of other powers, it is not surprising that Mustafa Kemal was seen first and foremost as a champion of the Islamic world. In a period when nationalism ruled the spirit of the people, Mustafa Kemal showed how a modern, progressive, ardent nationalist like himself could build a strong foundation for a country.

Apart from the articles mentioned above, there were many other articles which contained criticisms against Kaum Tua in *Saudara* especially those dealing with the issues of *taqlid*, *talqin*, *Rubu' Akhir Safar* and *Friday Khutbah*.

Muhammadan Law for the Federated Malay States (*Undang-undang (Daus) Orang-orang Islam bagi Negeri-negeri Melayu Bersekutu*): In April 1938, a discussion of Muhammadan Law appeared in *Saudara*. This law was proposed for the Federated Malay States, namely, Selangor, Perak, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan and was actually an amendment to "The Muhammadan Laws Enactment, 1904" with some new offences defined and some changes to the punishment of certain offences. The bill, which was drafted after a conference of high Islamic officials in the Federated Malay States, caused a heated debate in the newspapers in Malaya, whether English or Malay. Most of them were opposed to the implementation of this law, for various reasons. Despite the opposition, the bill was passed simultaneously in the states of Pahang, Negeri Sembilan, Selangor and Perak [20].

It is important to note that most of the explanations of the law came from editorials of another newspaper, *Warta Malaya*, which were then reprinted into *Saudara* [21]. Apart from explaining the law, the editor of *Warta Malaya* also gave his own opinions regarding the new law, including some strong criticisms. Apart from him, another significant contributor to the issue of this so-called Muhammadan Law or Islamic Law for the Muslims

in the Federated Malay States was the editor of *Saudara* himself, Muhammad Yunus bin Abdul Hamid.

Looking at general newspaper comment at the time, it can be seen that many newspapers in Malaya at that time, whether run by Muslims or non-Muslims [22], disagreed with the implementation of the law. In the second part of a series of articles discussing the law, the editor of *Warta Malaya*, Sayyid Hussein bin Ali al-Sagoff, also expressed his objections to the provisions of the law. He believed that the proposed Muhammadan Law looked like a mockery of Islam and was going to be introduced by force without considering the opinion of the public. He was opposed to the law being called an Islamic law because it was different from the law revealed by Allah to Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. He was convinced that the introduction of this law would not upgrade Islamic practices among the people in the Federated Malay States. On the other hand, he said he would be totally in favour of true Islamic law being implemented in Malaya [22].

Sayyid Hussein boldly called for Muslims not to support the implementation of this law, although it would mean that they would have to disobey the sultan. He argued that the nature of the law was rather confusing: to say that it was an Islamic law would be impossible; but at the same time, there *were* many Islamic elements in it [23].

He believed that the ordinary public in the Federated Malay States disagreed with the implementation of the law. The only people who really wanted the law to be carried out were people who were greedy for power. The writer contemplated:

To rule a country is impossible for them. To become a chief of justice in a court, they are not qualified. To demonstrate that they have the power to grant land to the people or even to show that they are powerful, they have no chance; thus, they implement the Muhammadan Law. Even though no Malay has stood up and objected to this law, this is not evidence to say that the Malays are willing to accept the law. It is the attitude of the Malays to be quiet, but actually they do have sound minds [23].

The editor of *Saudara* discussed this law in several editorial articles of the newspaper with the title “Undang-undang (Daus) Orang-orang Islam bagi Negeri-negeri Melayu Bersekutu.” In the editorial of 13.4.1938, the editor, Muhammad Yunus bin Abdul Hamid, criticized the article which dealt with Friday Prayer. He disagreed with the government for paying too much attention to this issue, while other pillars of Islam were not mentioned, as he wrote:

Only the laws regarding Friday prayer and fasting are mentioned. The obligation on religious tax (zakat fitrah) and pilgrimage (haj) have not been mentioned, despite the fact that these are also obligatory upon all Muslims who fulfil the necessary requirements. Is it because they know that the people who have to pay religious tax and perform pilgrimage are from among the rich and aristocrats (orang besar) [23]?

Muhammad Yunus also saw no benefit in *forcing* the people to do *ibadah*, pointing out that it was a grave sin if *ibadah* was done out of fear of human beings and thus, not sincerely because of Allah. In this respect, Muhammad Yunus was referring to the condition in regulation regarding Friday Prayer, where people could avoid being fined if they obtained permission from the mosque officials to be absent from the prayer and/or the talk. This demonstrated that, with the consent of only one official, people could free themselves from an obligation enjoined by Allah [24]. In short, Muhammad Yunus was making the point that religious observance had to be a matter of conscience, not law.

Muhammad Yunus continued his discussion of this law in his editorial of 16.4.1938, in which he commented on Quranic education for Muslim children in Malaya. He alluded to the practice in Malaya at that time, an issue that had worried *Saudara* for a long time, where children were taught to read the Quran without understanding a single word that they read.

He further argued that many people who did not practise Islamic teachings had learnt or knew how to recite the Quran; this clearly suggested that they did not understand anything that they read. Thus, the present form of Quranic teaching could be considered as a mockery to Allah’s injunctions. They read the Quran but they did not practise it; why? Because the Quranic teaching at the time was completely deficient; it only encouraged children to read and recite the Quran, without gaining any understanding of its contents [24].

In another editorial dated 27.4.1938, Muhammad Yunus expressed his agreement with the opinion of the editor of *Warta Malaya* that the law was not in accordance with the true Islamic law as enjoined by Allah and Prophet Muhammad s.a.w., because it was against clear injunctions mentioned in the Quran and Hadith of the Prophet s.a.w. The editor gave as an example of punishment for adultery. According to the law stated in the Quran, married people who committed adultery had to be stoned to death. He gave the example of a woman during the period of Prophet s.a.w. who admitted that she

had committed adultery which had resulted in the birth of an illegitimate child. This woman voluntarily came to the Prophet s.a.w., confessed her act and asked the Prophet s.a.w. to carry out the punishment for adultery according to Islamic law [24].

Muhammad Yunus argued that the woman was willing to confess her misdeed and underwent the punishment wholeheartedly, because she truly understood the Islamic teachings and was aware that she would face punishment on the day of judgement, if she were to escape worldly punishment. Thus, she surrendered herself with the hope that she could clear herself of all her sin. On the other hand, Muslims of today, the editor argued, were not afraid of punishment for this crime and the editor was convinced that the reason was because many Islamic teachings were still not truly understood by the Muslims of Malaya. He was convinced that adultery would not be prevented, even if the punishment were carried out, because the people were still ignorant of the true basis of the law. Such people would still commit the crime repeatedly, even after being caught and punished and even to the extent of being infected by dangerous sexual diseases. The most important thing, Muhammad Yunus reasoned, was to give people sufficient Islamic knowledge so that they would know the punishments in the teachings of the Quran and *Sunnah* of Prophet s.a.w., of which the truth could not be disputed. Thus, the only way to convince them was through Islamic teachings conveyed by genuine *ulama* based on the teachings of Quran, Hadith and Islamic history, but not by people who claimed to be religious teachers, or by religious leaders who only knew how to teach the *kitab-kitab perukunan*, *bersuci*, prayers for *kenduri*, etiquette in front of teachers, or the Islamic injunctions on charity (*sadaqah*), etc [24].

The editor was convinced that if Muslims had an accurate knowledge of injunctions and prohibitions from Allah, there would be nothing which could prevent them from obeying Allah. Once again, he was appealing to conscience based on true knowledge, as against a state law based on a defective understanding of Islamic law. They then would not allow themselves to be forced to accept any other law which was either stricter, or more lenient, than the injunctions laid down by Islamic teachings. Regarding the religious authorities, the editor reminded them that it was their responsibility to educate people before implementing the law, otherwise they would be held responsible in front of Allah for punishing ignorant people [24].

Another editorial on the issue dated 4.5.1938, interestingly brought up the issue of ethnicity in relation to this implementation of the law. In the case of adultery, one of the possible punishments of the proposed law was imprisonment. The editor, Muhammad Yunus bin Abdul Hamid, argued that this punishment would be a disadvantage to the Malays in relation to other ethnic groups, because once anybody had been in prison, a criminal record would be attached to him and thus, the door towards government employment would be closed for him. Once Malays could not fill these positions, Muhammad Yunus argued, they would go to non-Muslims or foreign races. The foreign races would be in an advantageous position here because they were not subjected to this law, though their social life was full of acts of adultery and similar behaviour. The temptation to commit adultery was furthermore, he argued, greater among the English-educated Malays and they were the ones who were most qualified for the position of clerk. The fact that this group lacked an Islamic education was the largest contributing factor for them becoming involved in such immoral activity. Thus, once again, the writer demanded that the religious authorities put all their efforts into providing people with sufficient religious knowledge; otherwise, the Malays would once again be placed in a disadvantageous position in relation to foreign races [24]. This is another strong evidence that ethnic competition dominated the Malayan scene at that time, to the extent that even religious issues could not escape its influence.

Looking overall at the arguments brought up by the editors of *Saudara* and *Warta Malaya*, they were not against introducing some kind of law for Muslims, but they felt strongly that any such law must be the true Islamic law; for example, in the case of adultery for married people, the punishment should be stoning to death. What both editors disapproved of was a law that had been invented by human beings, since this would corrupt the purity of Islamic teachings. Perhaps they were also worried that this phenomenon would lead to a misuse of power by the religious authorities, since they could impose their own law on the people and force the latter to abide by it. In fact, the editors' worries were not unfounded, since the law did plan to give a lot of power to the religious authorities to exercise their influence on the laity. Furthermore, since they were antagonists to the existing religious authorities in Malaya, this law would place many restrictions on the so-called *Kaum Muda* or the Islamic reformists in Malaya, especially with regard to

the issue of teaching Islam and the publication and printing of *kitab*. Since many people who belonged to the Islamic reformist group were considered “misguided,” the control upon them would be tightened with the implementation of this law.

Their opposition to a law which was created by man confirmed the religious reformist core of their thought, which was totally against any innovation in religion; instead, they believed Islamic injunctions should be derived directly from the Quran. Both the editors of *Saudara* and *Warta Malaya* were clear on their stand that this law could not be considered as an Islamic law because it was contrary to the law revealed in the Quran and practised by Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. Both also supported the idea of implementing true Islamic law, *provided that* the masses were given enough knowledge of all aspects of Islamic teachings in general and Islamic law in particular, so that the government would not be guilty of passing sentences on ignorant people. Perhaps because he felt helpless in dealing with the religious authority in Malaya which seemed to completely ignore differing opinions, Sayyid Hussein, in his last article on the law, expressed his disappointment and feeling of dissatisfaction towards the British. He wrote in an editorial which was reproduced in *Saudara*:

The British government action in passing this law in the country they rule is clearly against normal British justice and fairness. The British government will not be able to run away from public accusations that they have become a tool to destroy Islamic teachings. This law is not an Islamic law, but a modification of the Quranic injunctions, which is a grave sin to Allah. Perhaps the British felt that they could escape by saying that they have no authority to interfere in the religious affairs of the Malay states, as stated in treaties, but becoming a tool to support the implementation of the law could also be considered as an act of interference and a disturbance of the freedom of religion. Furthermore, the British are considered as advisers to the Malay sultans and it is not right for an adviser to advise something which could destroy and degrade Islam [24].

Thus, this issue of the Muhammadan Law of 1938 highlighted the tense relationship between the people who were referred to as *Kaum Muda*, or the Islamic reformists and the religious establishment or *Kaum Tua* who were responsible for administering religious affairs in the Malay states. It is also an illustration of Islamic reformist thinking, which held fast to the teachings of Quran and *Sunnah*. No hint of liberalism is found in their

outlook on this issue, since they supported the implementation of the true Islamic criminal law (*hudud*). However, it is important to note also here that what they stressed most was the need for the authorities to carry out the task of educating the masses with Islamic teachings to prevent the people from committing unlawful acts and, even if they committed those acts, they should be able to have a full awareness that what they did was wrong. Thus, their support for the implementation of Islamic criminal law was not very convincing, since it was very vague about the actual means of implementing the law effectively and indeed, sometimes it seems that they were just using the arguments concerning Islamic purity to put the supporters of the law in the wrong in religious terms and thus prevent the so-called Muhammadan law from being implemented in Malaya.

CONCLUSION

Religious issues undoubtedly were among the issues which dominated the pages of *Saudara*. The issues mentioned above were by no means the only religious issues discussed in *Saudara* but rather they were chosen due to the fact that these are the issues which initiated rigorous debates in the newspaper. In many of the articles cited, there were constant exhortations towards the Malays to improve themselves and strive towards progress. At the same time, readers could also find a lot of criticisms directed towards the conservative *ulama* and religious authorities in Malaya for their failure to carry out their duties properly. As a newspaper associated with Islamic reformism in Malaya, the Islamic theme is continuously present throughout *Saudara*'s publication. However, this influence gradually waned as publication progressed. The waning influence of the Islamic element in the newspaper was perhaps a reflection of the decreasing influence of Islamic reformism in Malaya itself, replaced as it was by the spirit of radical nationalism pioneered by the Malay intelligentsia. The late 1930s saw the emergence of new Malay leaders in the form of Kesatuan Melayu Muda and personalities like Ibrahim Yaacob, Ishak Haji Muhammad, Burhanuddin Helmi and Ahmad Boestamam, who were known more as ‘*Melayu muda*’, from their radical Malay nationalist standpoint, rather than as ‘*kaum muda*’ associated with Islamic reformism. Moreover, it was not *Saudara* or *Warta Malaya* which became their platform for propaganda; rather, it was the more ‘pure’ Malay ethnic newspaper, *Utusan Melayu* which won the hearts and souls of the so-called ‘pure’ Malay readership.

Brief Biography: Wan Suhana Wan Sulong is a lecturer at the Department of History and Civilization, IIUM. She obtained her B.A. from International Islamic University Malaysia, M.A. from School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and PhD from The University of Hull, United Kingdom. Her area of interest includes Islam in Southeast Asia, History of Malaya up to the Second World War and Modern History of Southeast Asia. Dr. Wan Suhana has done research on print journalism in Malaya, the nationalist movement in Malaya in the early 20th century and Islamic reformism in Malaya in the early twentieth century. She has been working in IIUM for about 16 years.

References

1. Sayyid Shaikh bin Ahmad al-Hadi is considered as one of the pioneers of Islamic reformism in Malaya. In 1906, together with other Muslim elites in Singapore, he founded al-Imam. In 1918, he became the principal of Madrasah al-Masyhur al-Islamiyyah. In 1926 he published a monthly journal called al-Ikhwan (The Brethren) in Penang. This was followed by the establishment of his own printing press known as 'Jelutong Press' in the suburbs of Penang which published al-Ikhwan and Saudara. Sayyid Shaikh was an active writer during his lifetime. In fact, he is best remembered for his contribution to journalism and literature.
2. Anonymous, 1928. Pendahuluan. Saudara, vol. i, no. 1 (29.9.1928), p: 1.
3. Anonymous, 1929. Saudara Genap Satu Tahun, Saudara, vol. ii, no. 52 (28.9.1929), p: 1.
4. The name 'Sumatra' perhaps referred to the place where the writer originated and 'Arab' most probably indicates that the writer was of Arab descent.
5. Arab Sumatra, 1929. Bukti Pekerjaan Kerajaan Islam, Saudara, vol. ii, no. 65(28.12.1929), p: 4.
6. _____, 1930. Bukti Pekerjaan Kerajaan Islam, Saudara, vol. ii, no. 66 (4.1.1930), p: 4.
7. It was stated in Saudara in 1940 that Tuan Muhammad Yusuf S.M. was the president of Persatuan Melayu Pulau Pinang.
8. Yusuf, T.M., 1930. Kejatuhan Kaum-kaum Islam dan Pergerakan Wahabi, Saudara, vol. iii, no. 112 (29.12.1930), p: 6.
9. A welfare organization designed to help the members in the event of the death of a member or his family.
10. Taha, A.M., 1936. Persekutuan Ulama Semenanjung, Saudara, vol. viii, no. 620 (13.6.1936), p: 3.
11. Ansamad, A., 1936. Persekutuan Ulama Semenanjung, Saudara, vol. viii, no. 637 (12.8.1936), p: 2.
12. 'Muhibbul Watan' 1936. "Persekutuan Ulama Semenanjung" (The Malayan Ulama Association), Saudara, vol. viii, no. 622 (20.6.1936), p: 2.
13. As-Shaikh Ibrahim al-Hadi, 1936. Persekutuan Ulama Semenanjung, Saudara, vol. viii, no. 631 (22.7.1936), p: 2.
14. Religious people who hold important positions in a village and are highly respected by the villagers. Usually they do not have formal education, but might have spent some time studying in a pondok.
15. Details about the establishment of Majlis Ulama Singapore can be found in the editorial of Saudara, 29.7.1936, p. 9, in which the editor provided his analysis and comments on the constitution of the newly established association and expressed his hope that the association would "eliminate the disputes between the same race and religion especially between our ulama which has hindered the progress of our nation and indeed humiliated us in the eyes of foreign nations and religions."
16. al-Hadi, S.A.S., 1936. Persekutuan Ulama Semenanjung, Saudara, vol. viii, no. 637 (12.8.1936), editorial, p: 9.
17. Abham, 1929. Kaum Muda dan Kaum Tua, Saudara, vol. i/42, no. 42 (20.7.1929), p: 4.
18. Some of the titles given to religious leaders in the Malay society.
19. al-Falfalaani, A.W., 1929. Kaum Muda dan Kaum Tua atau ahli al-Quran dan ahli al-Kitab, Saudara, vol. i, no. 15 (5.1.1929), p: 4.
20. See "State of Pahang Enactment No. 6 of 1937," "State of Negri Sembilan Order in Council No. 1 of 1938," and "State of Perak Enactment No. 5 of 1939."
21. The seven editorials of Warta Malaya were reprinted into Saudara dated 6.4.1938, 9.4.1938, 13.4.1938, 16.4.1938, 20.4.1938, 23.4.1938 and 27.4.1938.
22. For example, in the editorial of The Straits Times, Singapore entitled "Go to Mosque or Go to Prison", 23.3.1938, (p. 10), the editor expressed his astonishment regarding the punishment of certain offences in the proposed bill, especially in relation to adultery, where he considered the punishment to be "medieval" in nature. The fact that adultery was considered as a criminal offence, the editor argued, was clearly a restriction of personal liberty in the age

of European liberalism. Lastly, he emphasized that "the British and administration in the Protectorates, together with the State Councils and the civil courts, cannot be asked to enforce religious practices and morality upon the Malays unless it is certain that such compulsion is accepted as right and natural by the Malays themselves."

23. al-Sagoff, S.H.A., 1938. Undang-undang (Daus) Orang-orang Islam: Pemandangan dan Bandingannya, *Warta Malaya*, vol. ix, no 73 (29.3.1938), editorial, p: 9.
24. Hamid, M.Y.A., 1938. Undang-undang (Daus) Orang-orang Islam bagi Negeri-negeri Melayu Bersekutu, *Saudara*, vol. x, no. 791 (13.4.1938), editorial, p: 5.
25. Hamid, M.Y.A., 1938. Penutup Bahathan Undang-undang Muhammadan, *Warta Malaya*, vol. ix, no. 78 (4.4.1938), editorial, p. 9. Reproduced in *Saudara, Muhammadan Law - Undang-undang (Daus) Orang-orang Islam Bagi Negeri-negeri Melayu Yang Bersekutu*, *Saudara*, vol. x, no. 795 (27.4.1938), p: 3.