

Challenging the Neoliberal Consensus: Islamic Populism as an Alternative Development Narrative in Post-Pandemic Malaysia

Honest Dody Molasy*, Erwin Nur Rif'ah, Sus Eko Zuhri Ernada

Universitas Jember, Indonesia

Email: honestdody.fisip@unej.ac.id*

Abstract

This research examines the unprecedented electoral realignment in Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE-15), widely referred to as the "Green Wave," which led to the dramatic rise of the Islamic populist coalition, Perikatan Nasional (PN). Moving beyond reductionist narratives of spontaneous theological revival, this study argues that the Green Wave represents a profound grassroots protest against the structural inequities of neoliberal development. The research employed a qualitative approach using a case study design, combining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of political speeches, manifestos, and elite narratives with the analysis of secondary socio-economic data, including post-pandemic inequality indicators and electoral results. The research traces the collapse of Malaysia's traditional Islamic Leviathan, the UMNO-led political establishment, which lost its moral and institutional legitimacy due to the 1MDB kleptocracy scandal and its failure to protect vulnerable demographics during the post-pandemic economic crisis. This state failure generated a severe "development deficit," fracturing the historical social contract. In this vacuum, PN and its ideological anchor, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), successfully mobilized subaltern class grievances by articulating an alternative, morally charged developmental rhetoric that demanded "Clean and Stable" governance. Furthermore, PAS consolidated its political capital by operating a faith-based "shadow state" at the local level, providing vital alternative welfare and social services where the formal state had retreated. Ultimately, this article posits that the Malaysian phenomenon holds crucial implications for the Global South, demonstrating that Islamic identity politics now serves as a primary and sophisticated channel for marginalized populations to articulate anti-neoliberal critiques and demand distributive justice.

Keywords:

islamic populism, development deficit, neoliberalism, ge-15, malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE-15) in November 2022 marked a watershed moment in the nation's political trajectory, characterized by the unprecedented electoral surge of the ethno-religious coalition, Perikatan Nasional (PN), and its principal anchor, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) (Juego, 2018). This phenomenon, colloquially termed the "Green Wave" (Gelombang Hijau), dismantled established political orthodoxies by capturing a substantial majority of the Malay-Muslim electorate, particularly in the rural heartlands and peri-urban constituencies (Juego, 2018). The sheer magnitude of PAS's electoral gains securing the highest number of parliamentary seats of any single party signalled a profound realignment of grassroots political allegiances (Dahlan & Idid, 2020). Consequently, the GE-15 results have triggered intense scholarly and public discourse regarding the shifting ideological contours of

Southeast Asia's purportedly moderate Islamic democracy, raising critical questions about the underlying mechanisms driving this massive mobilization.

Previous research has shown that the political strength of Islamist movements in Southeast Asia cannot be separated from structural and economic contexts. Hadiz (2014), in his influential work on Islamic populism, argues that contemporary Islamist mobilization often emerges as a response to the contradictions of capitalist development and the failures of elite-driven governance. Similarly, Hadiz and Teik (2011) demonstrate that Islam and politics in Malaysia and Indonesia are deeply shaped by political economy, especially by the exclusionary consequences of uneven development. Washida (2023) also provides important evidence that voting behavior in post-dominant party Malaysia cannot be reduced solely to ethnoreligious backlash, but must also be understood in relation to economic grievances and dissatisfaction with governance. These studies collectively indicate that Islamic political mobilization may function not only as a cultural or theological phenomenon, but also as an instrument through which marginalized groups articulate frustrations over distributive injustice and developmental exclusion.

In attempting to decode this electoral surprise, the prevailing mainstream literature has predominantly relied on paradigms of identity politics and religious conservatism (Shukri, 2023b). A significant corpus of contemporary analysis reduces the "Green Wave" to a linear manifestation of creeping Islamization, ethno-nationalist chauvinism, and deepening polarization within Malaysia's plural society (Shukri, 2023b). However, this analytical predisposition tends to fall into the epistemological trap identified by Zakaria (2005), who argues that mainstream observers frequently construct a "myth" around contemporary Islamist movements by attributing their momentum exclusively to theological radicalization or a monolithic religious awakening (Juego, 2018). By treating the electorate's pivot toward Islamic parties merely as a symptom of heightened piety or racial anxiety, conventional scholarship inadvertently flattens the multidimensionality of the phenomenon, thereby obscuring the structural, material, and socio-economic grievances that fuel such mass political behavior.

This reductionist focus on cultural and religious variables exposes a critical research gap: the conspicuous neglect of the political economy of development and the immediate post-pandemic crisis dimensions (Zain & Din, 2022). The exclusive concentration on identity politics overlooks the profound spatial inequalities, class stratifications, and systemic economic marginalization exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Shatkin et al., 2023; Soares, 2025). Furthermore, the existing literature fails to adequately interrogate the collapse of the traditional developmental state apparatus and the erosion of social safety nets, which historically sustained the legitimacy of Malaysia's ruling elites (Washida, 2023). By divorcing the electoral behaviour of the rural and working-class Malay demographic from their lived material realities, current analyses fail to capture how the structural deficits of Malaysia's market-oriented growth model have catalysed profound socioeconomic disenfranchisement, rendering these communities highly receptive to alternative political narratives.

Addressing this lacuna, this article advances the argument that the electoral ascendancy of PN and PAS in GE-15 is fundamentally a grassroots populist resistance to the systemic failures of neoliberal and elitist development governance. Rather than viewing the "Green Wave" as an isolated theological resurgence, this study posits that Islamic populism has been effectively operationalized as a counter-hegemonic discourse against the inequities of a state-led development model that has consistently privileged urban, cosmopolitan elites and global market integration over equitable wealth distribution (Alias & Hamil, 2023). In the wake of pandemic-induced economic precarity, Islamic political actors strategically capitalized on the state's "development deficit" by articulating the socio-economic anxieties of the marginalized through a potent moral lexicon (Dahlan & Idid, 2020). Consequently, Islamic populism in contemporary Malaysia functions not merely as a vehicle for religious conservatism, but as a

robust, alternative development narrative that challenges the prevailing neoliberal consensus and demands a re-centering of welfare and distributive justice

Based on this context, the novelty of this study lies in its effort to move beyond reductionist explanations of the Green Wave as merely an expression of religious conservatism. Instead, this article positions Islamic populism as an alternative development narrative rooted in post-pandemic socioeconomic grievances and the collapse of trust in the neoliberal developmental state. By combining perspectives from political Islam, development studies, and populism, this research offers a more comprehensive explanation of why Islamic political actors gained such strong support among marginalized and vulnerable segments of society.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how Islamic populism was constructed and mobilized as an alternative development narrative in post-pandemic Malaysia, particularly in the context of GE-15. More specifically, it seeks to analyze the relationship between the crisis of neoliberal development, the erosion of elite legitimacy, and the rise of PN and PAS as vehicles of morally framed grassroots resistance. Academically, this research is expected to enrich debates on political Islam and development in the Global South by showing how religious identity can serve as a channel for anti-neoliberal critique. Practically, the findings may also provide insight for policymakers and development scholars into the importance of addressing structural inequality, welfare deficits, and social discontent before they are transformed into enduring populist political realignments.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a tripartite theoretical framework at the intersection of the sociology of religion and the political economy of development to explain the rise of Islamic populism in Malaysia's GE-15. First, the concept of the Islamic Leviathan explains how the Malaysian state historically institutionalized and bureaucratized Islam from above to legitimize a centralized, market-oriented model of state capitalism, with UMNO using religious authority to morally justify neoliberal development and maintain political dominance. However, when this developmental model failed to deliver equitable welfare and was further discredited by corruption and post-pandemic crisis, its claim to religious and political legitimacy weakened. Second, the framework of Political Islam as anti-neoliberal resistance shows how religion became a counter-hegemonic language through which marginalized groups articulated grievances against inequality, welfare erosion, and elite corruption. In this sense, Islamic populism emerged not simply as a cultural or theological revival, but as a moral and political response to the failures of neoliberal governance. Third, the concept of Activism in Democracy highlights how Islamist actors such as PAS strategically utilized democratic institutions, decentralized networks, and grassroots welfare provision to build localized influence and function as a "shadow state" in areas where the formal state had retreated. Taken together, these three perspectives demonstrate that the Green Wave in post-pandemic Malaysia should be understood as a structural and rational response to developmental failure, where Islamic populism served as an alternative development narrative rooted in both material grievances and moral claims for justice.

RESEARCH METHOD

To empirically substantiate the theoretical framework, this research employed a qualitative research design utilizing a single, instrumental case study approach. The primary unit of analysis is Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE-15) held in 2022. According to Yin (2018), a case study methodology is particularly apposite when addressing complex "how" and "why" questions concerning contemporary social phenomena embedded within their real-world contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident. In this study, the GE-15 electoral outcome specifically, the unexpected "Green Wave" serves as a critical heuristic for examining the broader intersection of Islamic populist

mobilization and the structural contradictions of neoliberal development. By focusing deeply on this specific electoral conjuncture, the research avoids superficial generalizations. Instead, it provides a granular, context-rich analysis of how macro-level development crises are contested in the political arena.

The investigation relies on two complementary data collection techniques to capture both the ideational and material dimensions of this phenomenon. The first technique is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). As articulated by Fairclough (2013), CDA provides a robust analytical methodology for uncovering how textual and spoken language constructs, reproduces, or challenges social power relations and hegemonic narratives. The primary dataset for this analysis comprises official political manifestos, televised campaign speeches, press statements, and the public rhetoric of key elites within the Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition, with a specific focus on leaders from Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). This discursive approach is methodologically essential for decoding how PN/PAS elites strategically framed acute material grievances—such as rising living costs, post-pandemic economic precarity, and elite corruption—into a moralized, religious lexicon. Analyzing these texts reveals the exact mechanisms through which the structural failures of the state's development agenda were translated into a compelling Islamic populist narrative.

To triangulate the discursive findings and firmly anchor the analysis within the political economy of development, the second technique involves the systematic utilization of secondary empirical data. Relying solely on discourse risks reducing political phenomena to mere rhetoric; therefore, it is imperative to ground ideational claims in material reality (Bowen, 2009). This secondary data encompasses national socio-economic statistics, specifically focusing on post-pandemic Gini coefficients, rural youth unemployment rates, household debt ratios, and inflation indices, alongside aggregate data on the GE-15 electoral results. By juxtaposing the spatial and demographic distribution of the PN vote with macroeconomic indicators of regional inequality and state welfare deficits, the study maps the correlation between economic marginalization and populist electoral behavior (Nadzri & Azlan, 2023). This methodological synthesis of discourse and structural data ensures a rigorous, holistic analysis characteristic of critical development studies, demonstrating that the rhetoric of Islamic populism was highly resonant precisely because it mirrored the severe, lived material realities of the Malaysian electorate.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Collapse of the Islamic Leviathan UMNO and the Development Deficit

The historical hegemony of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) was long predicated on a dual strategy of extensive economic patronage and state-led institutionalization of religion. Drawing upon Nasr's (2001) conceptualization of the Islamic Leviathan, the Malaysian state actively co-opted Islamic bureaucracies from above to morally sanitize and legitimize its aggressive, market-oriented capitalist development. This top-down Islamization was strategically deployed to outflank political rivals, notably Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), while justifying a highly centralized, elite-driven economic model (Saravanamuttu, 2010). For decades, this formula sustained a resilient "protection pact" wherein the Malay-Muslim majority traded political acquiescence for the promise of consistent economic growth, ethnic-based affirmative action, and state-sponsored welfare distribution. Under this architecture, the legitimacy of the secular-nationalist elite was inextricably tied to their capacity to function as the exclusive providers of both material development and religious defense.

However, the foundational legitimacy of this Islamic Leviathan was profoundly fractured by the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) corruption scandal. This monumental financial debacle laid bare the grotesque contradictions between the state's

projected Islamic piety and the predatory realities of its crony-capitalist networks (Hadiz & Teik, 2011). The scandal catalyzed a pervasive moral bankruptcy among the traditional ruling elite, demonstrating to the electorate that the rhetoric of ethno-religious nationalism was often used merely as a veneer for elite wealth accumulation. Consequently, the traditional social contract began to erode as the grassroots, particularly the rural Malay majority, perceived a blatant betrayal of the developmental state's foundational promises of equitable wealth redistribution. The moral authority of the UMNO elites, previously insulated by their control over the state's Islamic apparatus, rapidly disintegrated under the weight of such systemic kleptocracy (Nadzri & Azlan, 2023).

This crisis of institutional legitimacy was acutely compounded by the devastating socio-economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, which acted as a severe threat multiplier. The pandemic mercilessly exposed the latent structural frailties of Malaysia's neoliberal consensus, revealing deep-seated spatial inequalities and highly precarious labor conditions across the nation (Juego, 2018). While the urban, cosmopolitan elites largely insulated themselves from the macroeconomic shocks, the rural Malay heartland and the urban lower-middle classes faced unprecedented economic dislocation. This demographic endured severe job losses, relentless inflationary pressures, and the rapid depletion of their retirement savings (Shukri, 2023b). The market-oriented growth model, long championed by successive administrations as the engine of national progress, proved fundamentally incapable of absorbing the systemic disruptions generated by the global health crisis, thereby exposing the inherent vulnerabilities of an economy overly reliant on deregulated capital and flexible labor.

The state's inability to protect its most vulnerable citizens during this period resulted in a profound and severe "development deficit." The formal social safety nets, progressively hollowed out by decades of neoliberal restructuring and elite mismanagement, were glaringly inadequate in mitigating the pandemic's socioeconomic devastation (Shukri, 2023b). The subaltern classes frequently perceived emergency relief measures and stimulus packages as reactive, insufficient, and structurally biased toward corporate preservation rather than grassroots survival. The collapse of the traditional welfare patronage systems—systems that UMNO had meticulously built and weaponized for decades to secure rural votes—left the Malay working class to navigate severe economic precarity alone (Nadzri & Azlan, 2023). The state's failure to fulfil its basic developmental obligations fundamentally ruptured the long-standing dependency between the rural electorate and the centralized bureaucratic apparatus.

Ultimately, the confluence of spectacular elite corruption and acute material deprivation fueled profound grassroots anger directed at the traditional political establishment (Washida, 2023). Both the long-ruling UMNO and the purportedly reformist Pakatan Harapan coalition were increasingly viewed through a lens of deep suspicion and class resentment. For the disenfranchised Malay electorate, the secular and traditional elites were culpable for architecting a rigged, elite-centric democracy that enriched a select few while abandoning the masses during an existential crisis. Echoing Heydarian's (2018) analysis of populist revolts against elite democracy, this systemic failure generated a massive reservoir of socio-economic grievance (Case, 2010). It was precisely within this widening chasm of moral outrage and severe development deficit that the traditional legitimacy of the Malaysian state collapsed, rendering the electorate highly receptive to the alternative, morally charged developmental narratives that the Islamic populist opposition would soon offer.

Alternative Development Rhetoric: The Islamic Populism of *Perikatan Nasional*

Perikatan Nasional's (PN) strategic ascendance during the GE-15 campaign was fundamentally anchored in its ability to articulate a compelling alternative developmental rhetoric, encapsulated by its central electoral slogan, "Prihatin, Bersih, dan Stabil" (Caring, Clean, and Stable). Rather than relying exclusively on traditional theological treatises or

demanding the immediate implementation of shari'a law, PN and its ideological core, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), pivoted toward a highly pragmatic, governance-oriented discourse (Juego, 2018). This discursive shift exemplifies Tibi's (2002) conceptualization of *Political Islam*, wherein religious identity is systematically mobilized as a counter-hegemonic ideology to critique the systemic failures of the prevailing socio-economic order. By branding themselves as the sole purveyors of "Clean" (uncorrupted by scandal) and "Stable" (politically coherent) leadership, the PN coalition successfully presented Islamic populism not merely as a mechanism for spiritual salvation, but as a rational, administrative panacea for a nation exhausted by chronic political volatility and elite malfeasance (Hamayotsu, 2010).

The operationalization of this alternative narrative relied heavily on the deliberate framing of acute material anxieties through a lexicon of religious morality. In the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, the Malaysian electorate particularly the rural and peri-urban Malay demographic faced severe economic challenges, including rising inflation, stagnant wages, and an escalating cost of living (Welsh, 2018). PN elites systematically manipulated these macroeconomic grievances, framing them not merely as structural economic fluctuations or external shocks, but as direct consequences of the moral decay and secular mismanagement inherent in the traditional political establishment. For instance, PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang frequently utilized campaign platforms to explicitly link economic prosperity with religious integrity, advancing the narrative that corruption and economic hardship were inevitable byproducts of abandoning Islamic principles in state governance (Hamayotsu, 2010). By moralizing the inflation crisis, PN transformed everyday economic survival into a compelling theological imperative, thereby resonating deeply with the socio-economically disenfranchised grassroots.

To consolidate this populist appeal, PN constructed a stark binary opposition between its own morally sanitized image and the perceived developmental decadence of its primary political rivals, Pakatan Harapan (PH) and Barisan Nasional (BN). PN's campaign rhetoric aggressively branded the PH coalition as a bastion of secular liberalism and neoliberal orthodoxy, accusing it of prioritizing cosmopolitan capitalist interests and multiculturalism at the direct expense of the Malay-Muslim working class (Shukri, 2023b). Conversely, the UMNO-led BN was relentlessly vilified as the epitome of endemic kleptocracy and elite betrayal, permanently tainted by the 1MDB financial scandal. This dual-pronged attack strategy allowed PN to position itself as the sole legitimate defender of the ummah (the global Muslim community) against both the "corrupt traditionalists" and the "neoliberal reformists." As Zakaria (2005) observes in his critique of Islamist movements, the mythologization of an impeccably pious leadership often serves to delegitimize secular opponents by shifting the political discourse away from complex macroeconomic policy debates toward easily digestible moral absolutes (Shukri, 2023).

This moral-economic synthesis was explicitly codified within PN's official election manifesto, which offered a distinct departure from the conventional, strictly theological agendas historically associated with PAS. The manifesto strategically prioritized immediate economic relief promising targeted subsidies, youth employment initiatives, the cancellation of specific settler debts, and enhanced welfare interventions all woven seamlessly into the broader discourse of Islamic social justice and maqasid al-shari'a (the higher objectives of Islamic law) ("PAS's Decades of Hard Work Paid off with the Green Wave in Malaysia's GE15," 2023). PN's Chairman, Muhyiddin Yassin, consistently reiterated the coalition's commitment to forming a government with absolute "integrity" that would aggressively tackle the "cost of living crisis" facing ordinary citizens. This rhetoric functioned as a sophisticated manifestation of Islamic populism; it directly addressed the immediate material deficits ignored by the neoliberal consensus, while simultaneously promising a governance model inoculated

against corruption by unwavering religious piety ("PAS's Decades of Hard Work Paid off with the Green Wave in Malaysia's GE15," 2023).

Ultimately, the manipulation of economic discontent through religious framing allowed PN to transcend the historical limits of Islamist electoral appeal in Malaysia. By successfully equating anti-corruption protocols and economic welfarism with an overarching Islamic duty, PN's alternative development rhetoric captivated a broad spectrum of the electorate, particularly the newly enfranchised youth voters (the Undi18 demographic) who were disproportionately affected by post-pandemic economic precarity (Zain & Din, 2022). The "Green Wave," therefore, was less a spontaneous religious awakening and more a calculated political dividend yielded by a highly effective populist strategy. PN and PAS demonstrated that in an environment characterized by severe development deficits and a crisis of elite legitimacy, Islamic populism provides a potent, highly resonant vocabulary for expressing subaltern class resistance and demanding equitable, moralized state intervention.

Consolidating Power at the Grassroots: Asserting Identity and Welfare

While the articulation of an alternative developmental rhetoric was crucial for Perikatan Nasional at the macro-political level, the structural durability of the "Green Wave" relies fundamentally on meticulous, localized institutional entrenchment (Kamal, 2023). Aligning with Buehler's (2016) conceptualization of 'Activism in Democracy', Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) has adeptly utilized the structural spaces afforded by electoral democracy and administrative decentralization to consolidate its infrastructural power at the grassroots. Rather than relying solely on abstract ideological appeals or top-down national campaigns, PAS has systematically engineered a robust, faith-based welfare infrastructure. In rural and peri-urban constituencies where the formal state apparatus has retreated a retreat exacerbated by neoliberal restructuring and the collapse of UMNO's traditional, state-funded patronage networks PAS operates effectively as a "shadow state" ("PAS's Decades of Hard Work Paid off with the Green Wave in Malaysia's GE15," 2023). By positioning itself as a reliable alternative provider of socio-economic services, the party directly addresses the material anxieties of disenfranchised communities that the formal government has neglected.

The architecture of this shadow state is highly sophisticated, encompassing comprehensive networks of Islamic education, charitable distribution, and emergency relief. Central to this grassroots strategy is the proliferation of PAS-affiliated educational institutions, most notably the PASTI (Pusat Asuhan Tunas Islam) kindergartens, which offer affordable, morally grounded early education to lower- and middle-income families ("PAS's Decades of Hard Work Paid off with the Green Wave in Malaysia's GE15," 2023). Furthermore, the party's highly disciplined volunteer corps, such as the Jabatan Amal (Department of Charity), frequently outpaces formal state agencies in delivering disaster relief, food aid, and community assistance during localized crises, including the severe post-pandemic floods. By embedding themselves intimately within the quotidian survival mechanisms of the Malay electorate, PAS activists organically displace the state's developmental role. This localized activism starkly exposes the acute welfare deficits generated by the incumbent Islamic Leviathan (Nasr, 2001), demonstrating to the grassroots that the central state is no longer the sole, nor the most efficient, guarantor of communal survival.

Crucially, this faith-based welfare infrastructure functions as a highly effective instrument of political economy. Unlike the transactional, cash-driven clientelism historically utilized by secular-nationalist elites to secure votes, PAS's welfare distribution is inextricably intertwined with moral socialization and communal solidarity (Alias & Hamil, 2023). The material assistance provided is discursively framed as an enactment of Islamic socio-economic justice and religious duty, thereby transforming recipients not merely into dependent political clients, but into ideologically committed constituents. When the neoliberal consensus fails to

insulate the vulnerable from market volatilities and pandemic shocks, the alternative welfare networks managed by Islamist actors provide a tangible, material safety net (Washida, 2023). This grassroots welfare provision acts as the material anchor that validates the party's broader populist claims, proving to the electorate that their vision of a "Clean and Stable" Islamic governance yields concrete socio-economic dividends.

Through these localized operations, the assertion of Islamic identity is practically synthesized with the demand for equitable welfare, empirically validating Tibi's (2002) assertion that 'Political Islam' operates as a potent counter-hegemonic ideology. For the rural Malay working class, political Islam is not experienced merely as a theoretical critique of Western neoliberalism or globalized capitalism; rather, it is encountered as a lived, functional alternative that delivers social security where the secular developmental state has unequivocally failed (Rimmer, 2022). By seamlessly integrating the assertion of religious identity with the provision of essential social services, PAS effectively monopolizes the moral high ground of social justice. This allows them to successfully cast the secular and reformist state elites not only as morally deficient, but as administratively incompetent in managing the welfare of the ummah.

The grassroots consolidation of power by PAS illustrates that the electoral shocks of GE-15 were not spontaneous outbursts of religious conservatism, but the culmination of rigorous institutional capacity building at the sub-national level ("PAS's Decades of Hard Work Paid off with the Green Wave in Malaysia's GE15," 2023). The strategic deployment of a faith-based shadow state allowed the party to weaponize the nation's severe development deficit, transforming state failure into a localized structural advantage (Shukri, 2023b). By operationalizing Islamic populism through concrete welfare interventions, PAS successfully converted transient economic grievances into entrenched, long-term political capital, ensuring that their electoral ascendancy is undergirded by a resilient political economy of faith-based patronage.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the "Green Wave" witnessed during Malaysia's 15th General Election fundamentally challenges the reductionist narratives that attribute contemporary electoral realignments in the Muslim world solely to rising religious conservatism or ethno-nationalist chauvinism. As this analysis has demonstrated, the unprecedented ascendancy of *Perikatan Nasional* and PAS is not merely a theological revival, but rather a profound grassroots protest and a populist resistance against the structural inequities engendered by decades of elitist, neoliberal development. The collapse of the traditional Islamic Leviathan (Nasr, 2001) which historically co-opted religion to sanitize state capitalism and the subsequent post-pandemic welfare crisis created a severe development deficit. Islamic political actors astutely capitalized on this vacuum, translating acute material grievances and class disenfranchisement into a potent moral lexicon. By embedding an alternative development rhetoric within a functional, faith-based welfare infrastructure at the local level, Islamic populism effectively weaponized the economic anxieties of the rural and working-class electorate, transforming systemic state failure into entrenched political capital. Beyond the immediate context of Malaysian electoral dynamics, these findings carry profound theoretical implications for international development studies and the broader Global South. The Malaysian phenomenon empirically substantiates that Islamic identity politics has evolved far beyond defensive cultural posturing; it now serves as a primary, highly sophisticated channel through which subaltern populations in developing nations articulate coherent anti-neoliberal critiques. When the secular promises of market-led growth fail to deliver equitable prosperity and dismantle social safety nets, religion emerges as the most accessible and resonant counter-hegemonic framework (Tibi, 2002) for demanding distributive justice. Ultimately, until the architects of global development recognize and rectify

the profound structural inequalities inherent in the neoliberal consensus, they will remain intellectually blind to a defining political reality of the twenty-first century: the most formidable and resilient challenges to market fundamentalism in the Global South will continue to be waged not under the banner of secular socialism, but wearing the uncompromising mantle of divine justice.

REFERENCE

- Alias, A. Y., & Hamil, J. H. (2023). Keberkesanan Strategi Perikatan Nasional dalam Pilihan Raya Umum ke-15 di Semenanjung Malaysia: Penonjolan Golongan Islamis (The Effectiveness of Perikatan Nasional's strategy in the 15th General Election of Peninsular Malaysia: The Prominence of Islamists). <https://doi.org/10.17576/jebat.2023.5004.05>
- Buehler, M. (2016). *The politics of Shari'a law: Islamist activists and the state in democratizing Indonesia*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Case, W. (2010). Political Legitimacy in Malaysia: Historical Roots and Contemporary Deficits. *Politics and Policy*, 38(3), 497–522. <https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1747-1346.2010.00245.X>
- Chan, N. (2023). Rethinking the causes of Islamisation: Ontological (in)security, postcoloniality, and Islam in Malaysia. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022463423000450>
- Dahlan, M. N. A., & Idid, S. A. (2020). Understanding The Results of 14th Malaysian General Election Through Islamic Perspectives: A New Challenge in Islamizing Political Understanding. 21(3), 13–27. <https://doi.org/10.37231/JIMK.2020.21.3.503>
- Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Hadiz, V. R. (2014). A New Islamic Populism and the Contradictions of Development. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 44(1), 125–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2013.832790>
- Hadiz, V. R., & Teik, K. B. (2011). Approaching Islam and politics from political economy: a comparative study of Indonesia and Malaysia. *Pacific Review*, 24(4), 463–485. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2011.596561>
- Hamayotsu, K. (2010). Crises of Identity in PAS and Beyond: Islam and Politics in Post 8 March Malaysia. *The Round Table*, 99(407), 163–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358531003656313>
- Heydarian, R. J. (2018). *The rise of Duterte: A populist revolt against elite democracy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Juego, B. (2018). The Institutions of Authoritarian Neoliberalism in Malaysia: A Critical Review of the Development Agendas Under the Regimes of Mahathir, Abdullah, and Najib. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 11(1), 53–79. <https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-2018.1-4>
- Kamal, W. A. (2023). Youth vote shattered old shibboleths in Malaysia's GE15. *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 112(3), 337–338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2023.2219530>
- Nadzri, M. M. N., & Azlan, A. A. (2023). UMNO in GE15: factionalism and its effects. *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 112(3), 273–285. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2023.2219536>
- Nasr, S. V. R. (2001). *Islamic Leviathan: Islam and the making of state power*. Oxford University Press.

- PAS's decades of hard work paid off with the Green Wave in Malaysia's GE15. (2023). The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs, 112(3), 339–340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2023.2219531>
- Rimmer, M. (2022). Explaining PAS's Dominance in Kelantan. <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789815011968>
- Saravanamuttu, J. (Ed.). (2010). Islam and politics in Southeast Asia. Routledge.
- Shatkin, G., Mishra, V., & Khristine Alvarez, M. (2023). Debates Paper: COVID-19 and urban informality: Exploring the implications of the pandemic for the politics of planning and inequality. *Urban Studies*, 60(9), 1771–1791.
- Shukri, S. F. M. (2023a). In Limbo: Islamist Populism and Democratic Stagnation in Malaysia. 93–115. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-9811-9_4
- Shukri, S. F. M. (2023b). Islamist Civilizationism in Malaysia. *Religions*, 14(2), 209–209. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020209>
- Soares, M. W. (2025). *Inequalities in marginalised urban areas—An analysis of Bolsonaro's COVID-19 politics in Brazilian favelas*.
- Tibi, B. (2002). Islam between culture and politics. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Washida, H. (2023). Voting behaviour after the collapse of a dominant party regime in Malaysia: ethno-religious backlash or economic grievances? The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs, 112(3), 249–272. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2023.2219524>
- Welsh, B. (2018). “Saviour” Politics and Malaysia's 2018 Electoral Democratic Breakthrough: Rethinking Explanatory Narratives and Implications. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 37(3), 85–108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/18681034180370030>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). Case study research and applications: Design and methods (6th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Zain, M. I. M., & Din, Mohd. D. M. (2022). Democratic Dilemma of Malay Islamic Party: PAS, Coalition Pattern, and Rising Social Issues. *Studia Islamika*, 29(1), 83–109. <https://doi.org/10.36712/sdi.v29i1.16330>
- Zakaria, F. (2005). Myth and reality in the contemporary Islamist movement (I. M. Abu-Rabi', Trans.). Pluto Press.