

Religious Structures
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Surau and Mosques in Malaysia

One major issue in the current programme of Islamization in Malaysia is the construction of Islamic institutional infrastructures in new growth centres. In Bandar Baru Bangi, a new town close to Kuala Lumpur, both the State and its Muslim residents address the issue by building mosques and *surau* (communal prayer places). Outstanding as an Islamic symbol and sanctuary in the town is not a mosque, but rather a *surau* that is endowed with vast human and financial resources mobilized through grassroots operations, upon which it continues to function. The growth of mosques and *surau*, and differences in their identities in Bandar Baru Bangi, may not represent typical trends in Malaysia, but they do reveal the on-going competition between State and society to promote the Islamization cause.

Urbanization that took place in Malaysia soon after the country achieved independence in 1957 was associated with the development of new growth centres where industrial villages, administrative centres and housing units were to be built. Bandar Baru Bangi is one of these centres. It is located in the district of Hulu Langat in the state of Selangor and is about 25 kilometres from Kuala Lumpur. Bandar Baru Bangi was developed in stages starting in 1977. The land on which it grew was originally covered with secondary jungle and oil palm plantations. These were gradually cleared to make way for houses, shops, factories, a shopping complex, offices and a golf course. The population of the town now stands at approximately 40,000. Malays make up 85 percent of the total population and belong to the professional, managerial, administrative, technical and sales categories of occupation.

UKM Mosque

When Bandar Baru Bangi was being developed, Islamic fundamentalism (or *dakwah*) was on the rise in Malaysia. Close to the town was Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), one of the hotbeds of *dakwah* movements. There student associations were influenced by the reform ideas of the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (led then by Anwar Ibrahim), the Islamic Representative Group, and the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PAS). The associations regularly organized socio-religious activities to increase awareness amongst students of the central role of Islam in society. Likewise, lecturers arranged for seminars calling for the Islamization of knowledge. UKM thus served as the fount of Islamic dynamism from which the first group of Bandar Baru Bangi residents, who moved into the town in 1978, drew ideas and guidelines to help them organize their religious life in the evolving new community.

Leading them in the process were several lecturers and administrative officials of UKM, who were deeply committed to actualizing the fundamentalists' call for Muslims to reach back to Islamic history and teachings for alternative ideology and practical solutions to help counter the secularizing influences of the West. They accomplished this by mobilizing economic resources from within and outside Bandar Baru Bangi to construct *surau* in the few neighbourhoods that had developed in Section 1 of the town.

Organization and identities

A *surau* is actually a place for prayer. Irrespective of its size, state authorization is required for its establishment. The first of these, Surau Al-Umm, was created in 1979. It was originally a room in a semi-detached house that belonged to the state agency that developed the town. A few years later, the residents collectively purchased the house and turned it into a *surau*. Later, Surau An-Nur was built in another neigh-

bourhood in the same section, followed soon after by Surau Damai in Section 2. As Bandar Baru Bangi grew in size and population, more *surau* were built. This was generally done upon the initiative of the members of a particular neighbourhood. To date the town has 12 *surau*, six of which are found in Section 1 and all of which are administered by a community-elected committee of volunteers.

Bandar Baru Bangi is also served by two mosques: the UKM Mosque and the Masjid Jamek Bandar Baru Bangi. Both owe their existence to the State. The UKM mosque was built in 1982 and functions as an ancillary of the university. Mosques constructed in the university actually represent a modern phenomenon very much in line with the State's Islamization policy. Being part of UKM, the management of the mosque is entrusted to a special unit in the office of the chancellor. This unit is manned by a few officials who work at UKM and is therefore identified with the university bureaucracy. For religious matters, the unit relies on lecturers of the Faculty of Islamic Studies.

The state mosque is headed by a professional *imam*, who is assisted by the *nazir* (supervisor), *bilal* and *siak* (caretaker). All four mosque officials are appointed by the Selangor Department of Religious Affairs (Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor, JAIS) and receive pay from the government. Helping to link the mosque and the community is the mosque committee, comprised of ten people. In theory, members of the mosque committee are elected by the community. However, in practice, JAIS 'appoints' them based on the recommendations of the *imam*. Thus the administrators of the state mosque are identified with the state religious bureaucracy where all details concerning sermons, types of mission work and categories of preachers are handled by administrators and clerks responsible to the government.

Surau An-Nur

A *surau* or a mosque is generally thought of as a place for obligatory prayer and other religious assemblies. However, in the context of current Islamization in Malaysia, both institutions have the additional responsibility of doing mission work (*dakwah*) in view of heightening the people's consciousness of the relevance of Islam in modern times. Thus the ability of a *surau* or a mosque to organize a range of socio-religious activities for this purpose greatly affects its identity, character and status as an Islamic sanctuary. In this regard, the earlier mentioned Surau An-Nur stands out. Regarded as the most active religious institution in Bandar Baru Bangi, this *surau* regularly runs Quran and *tafsir* classes for men and women, conducts *tahlil* sessions and systematically schedules religious talks on a range of topics that deal with spiritual matters and current social problems. These talks are delivered by preachers with outstanding Islamic credentials, some of whom make allusions to issues of social justice and truths, sometimes with stark candidness. The *surau* too is able to garner large amounts of donations sufficient for setting up its own foundation to provide financial assistance to needy students and the poor. Because of its increasing popularity, Surau An-Nur has been recently enlarged to accommodate the hundreds arriving from within and outside Bandar Baru Bangi to perform the Friday noon prayer and participate in its activities.



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Surau An-Nur's prominence may be attributed to three factors. First is its location in the elite section of Bandar Baru Bangi whose residents are generally economically well endowed and who donate generously to the *surau*. Second is the leadership and patronage of Ustaz Harun Din, a highly esteemed *ulamak* in Malaysia, that the *surau* enjoys until today. A former professor at the Faculty of Islamic Studies, UKM, Ustaz Harun Din played a crucial role, especially in the early years of the *surau*, in helping members of the neighbourhood to run the *surau* and by networking with other *ulamak* and Islamic organizations. Thirdly, there is a high level of religious sentiment sustained by the people living in that neighbourhood. Most of these belong to the generation of Malays who were exposed to the Islamic fundamentalist currents of the 1970s and early 1980s. Imbued with a high level of religious commitment, they dedicate themselves to making Surau An-Nur the focal point of their own religious life. Furthermore, many of them work at UKM and can therefore easily cooperate on religious matters.

The other eleven *surau* are pale by comparison to Surau An-Nur. Many do not organize religious talks on a regular basis and a few function as arenas for individuals to compete for status. As such, they do not attract many people and only come to life during Islamic festivities.

Both UKM and the state mosques have the resources to conduct Quran classes and arrange for preachers to provide religious talks. Between the two, the latter attract less attention. In the popular view, the state mosque exists for the use of state agents to elaborate Islamic orthodox teachings and legitimize government acts and policies. Being a state agent, the *imam* imparts comments on controversial religious or political issues, such as the Anwar Ibrahim case, through indirect references. Furthermore, he plays up the social distance between himself and members of the congregation. In contrast, the UKM mosque is not viewed as a mouthpiece of the State. Mission work through sermons and religious talks attract large audiences, but these activities do not provide sufficient opportunity for groups to consolidate and help generate a vibrant religious situation in and around the mosque.

In conclusion, suffice it is to say that mosques and *surau* are the legitimate institutions of religious expression in the urban

setting in present-day Malaysia. *Surau* construction undoubtedly represents grassroots operations to either support or compete with state structures, i.e. the mosques. However, what makes one *surau* more prominent than another depends to a great extent on its resources, both human and financial. The success of Surau An-Nur in becoming the religious hub of the town, is facilitated by some peculiarities of the neighbourhood within which it is located, in particular the charisma of Ustaz Harun Din and the sustained high level of religious sentiment among the residents.

The Bandar Baru Bangi experience also shows that the autonomy and scope of locally initiated religious institutions do not shrink in the face of an expanding state apparatus. Although a *surau* cannot exist without authorization from the Department of Religious Affairs, it does not have to depend on the latter to operate. Thus a *surau* such as that of An-Nur, when sufficiently developed in terms of size, popularity, funding, goals and contacts, has the potential to eclipse a mosque. ♦

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