

# The Muslim Community in a New Town: With Special Reference to the Role of *Suraus* in a Malaysian Suburb<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

This paper attempts to examine the formation of the Muslim community in a new town in Malaysia. The purpose of my study is to present how Muslim residents establish a sustainable community in a newly developed residential area where people of different origins live side by side. For this purpose, I will identify the significance of the role of *suraus* in creating cohesion among Muslim inhabitants of a Bandar Baru Bangi, a suburban new town in the State of Selangor, Malaysia. *Surau* is a Malay word for a small Muslim prayer house or hall, which is called as *musalla* in Arabic. It does not have the same status as mosque or *masjid*. In most cases the special Friday prayers are not held in a *surau* but in a *masjid*.

In recent years, several studies have been made on the creation of Muslim communities in urban and suburban areas in Malaysia. For example, Abdul Rahman Embong (2002) and Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan (1999; 2001a; 2001b) suggest that the *surau* has a pivotal role in community-building among the new Malay middle class. While these previous studies are based on research conducted in the 1990s, this study tries to examine the more recent development of the role of *surau* in the formation of the Muslim community in a new town. The findings of this study are based on a series of short-term field research on the *surau* and the Muslim community in Bandar Baru Bangi between 2002 and 2010. Special attention will be paid to one of the *suraus* in Bandar Baru Bangi, namely, Surau An Nur, which Sharifah Zaleha (2001a; 2001b) takes as a case.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. The Growth of the Malay Middle Class and the Resurgence of Islam in Malaysia

Malaysia is a multiethnic and multi-religious country. In 2010 the total population of Malaysia was 28.3 million. Among them 26.0 million are Malaysian citizens. Of this total Malays made up 54.6%, other Bumiputera or indigenous peoples 12.8%, Chinese 24.6%, Indians 7.3% and Others 0.7% (DSM 2011, 15). Among the Malaysian citizens, Islam is the most widely professed religion with the proportion of 60.6%. Other religions embraced are Buddhism (21.0%), Christianity (9.2%), Hinduism (6.3%), and Traditional Chinese Religion such as Confucianism and Taoism (1.3%) (DSM 2011, 85). The Federal Constitution of

Malaysia declares that Islam is the religion of the Federation, but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation. According to the definition of “Malay” in the Constitution, all ethnic Malays are considered Muslim (*Federal Constitution* 2009).

Malaysia’s political society has been characterized by a coalition between major ethnic/local-based political parties. United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and other mainly ethnic/local parties form Barisan Nasional (BN), a coalition which has ruled the federal government for many years. On the other hand, an opposition alliance Pakatan Rakyat (PR) consists of Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), Parti Keadialn Rakyat (PKR) and Democratic Action Party (DAP). These opposition parties claim to be non-ethnic or multi-ethnic, but PAS is considered as Malay-Muslim-based while DAP as Chinese dominant. PKR can be regarded as more multi-ethnic in composition. In 2013 general election, BN managed to retain the federal government with only 47 percent of popular votes. At the state level, BN currently controls ten of thirteen states while PR rules the rest three states. PR seized the Selangor State for the first time in 2008. In 2013 election it won 44 state seats against BN’s 12 to retain the state government.

Rapid industrialization since the 1970s has been followed by marked urbanization in Malaysia. Malaysia’s urbanization rate has risen dramatically from 26.8% in 1970 to 34.2% in 1980 to 50.7% in 1991 to 62.0% in 2000 to 71.0% in 2010 (DSM 2005, 28; DSM 2011, 13). This fast urbanization has been accompanied with “suburbanization,” or the remarkable growth of the areas at the edges of main cities. Many of such suburbs, particularly new residential areas, have residents of different origins. State-led industrialization and pro-Malay/Bumiputera New Economic Policy or NEP since 1971 also resulted in the rapid growth of urban middle classes, particularly the urban Malay middle class. A growing number of the Malay middle class people constitute the main part of residents in suburban new towns in Peninsular Malaysia.

While the Malay middle class people have adapted themselves to a modern, cosmopolitan way of life, on the one hand, many of them, on the other hand, have become more religiously inclined particularly since the Islamic resurgence of the 1970s. The majority of the Malay middle class in urban and suburban areas frequently attend religious activities and some of them also participate in religious organizations such as ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia) and JIM (Pertubuhan Jamaah Islah Malaysia).

In Malaysia, where Islam is the sole official religion, Islam has been an important factor in the governmental administration. The government has promoted Islamic values in such areas as Islamic missionary, welfare, and foreign policies. Particularly after Mahathir Mohamad became the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia in 1981, the government’s Islamization policy has been implemented in various fields such as education, finance, mass media, etc. For

instance, the government has established Islamic educational institutions such as International Islamic University and has promoted Islamic banking and insurance (Hussin 1990, 127-152). Mahathir's successors, namely Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Mohd. Najib Abdul Razak, also have attempted to propagate progressive and moderate Islam.

## **2. Bandar Baru Bangi as a New Town in the Suburb of Kuala Lumpur**

The origin of the development of new towns in the suburb of Kuala Lumpur can be traced back to 1952 when the British colonial government began to develop Petaling Jaya as a satellite township of Kuala Lumpur. Petaling Jaya was planned, based on the concept of "garden city" in Britain. In 1963 the development of Shah Alam was commenced as the second new town in the suburb of Kuala Lumpur. In 1978 Shah Alam officially became the capital of the State of Selangor after Kuala Lumpur's incorporation into Federal Territory in 1974 (Ikuta 2000, 8; Lee 2000, 34; Ishizutsu 2000, 52-55).

Bandar Baru Bangi, which means "Bangi New Town," is about 30 km away from Kuala Lumpur. The Selangor State Development Corporation (Perbadanan Kemajuan Negeri Selangor: PKNS) began the development of Bandar Baru Bangi as the third new town in the suburb of Kuala Lumpur around 1975 before the National University of Malaysia or UKM opened the new campus in Bangi in 1977 (Sharifah Zaleha 2001a, 123-125; PPBBB 1998, 3-4). Bandar Baru Bangi is located in Mukim Kajang in the District of Hulu Langat in the State of Selangor. Kajang Municipal Council is the local authority for Bandar Baru Bangi area. The new town is included in the Bangi state constituency as well as in the Serdang parliamentary constituency. The estimated total population of Bandar Baru Bangi is approximately 70,000.<sup>3</sup>

Bandar Baru Bangi has characteristics as a satellite town, industrial town and academic research town. As a satellite town, Bandar Baru Bangi has large residential and shopping areas. It also has an industrial estate where a number of factories are located. One of the most significant features of the town is that it has some universities such as UKM and research institutes. In view of this, the Selangor state government officially acknowledged Bangi as *Bandar Ilmu* (Knowledge City) in 2008.

Though there is no available statistical data on ethnic composition in Bandar Baru Bangi, the Malays are definitely predominant. According to a state assembly person's estimation, ninety percent or more of the total population of Bandar Baru Bangi are Malay Muslims. This reflects that those who work at educational institutions, government agencies, factories and even shops in the town are predominantly Malay. But, Bandar Baru Bangi also has small number of ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indian residents as well as non-Malaysians such as foreign workers and students from Indonesia, Thailand, Bangladesh, the Middle East, and so on.

While the middle class population constitutes the main part of the residents of Bandar Baru Bangi, we can still find class differentiation within the residents. This class differentiation is

reflected in the different types of housing such as low cost flats, medium cost terraced houses, and high cost bungalows. In 2005, among 15,500 housing units in Badar Baru Bangi, low-cost and low-medium-cost housing units made up 40 percent, medium-cost housing units 22 percent and high-cost housing units 38 percent (Malaysia 2005, 6).<sup>4</sup>

### 3. The Development of the Muslim Community in Bandar Baru Bangi

From the late 1970s to the mid 1980s, many of early residents in Bandar Baru Bangi consisted of the families of young Malay academic and administrative staff who worked at nearby educational and research institutes. As Muslims, they followed religious practices including daily prayers and fasting during the Month of Ramadan. They also celebrated Islamic festivities such as *Aidil Fitri* and *Aidil Adha*. According to the *Syariah*, they made marriages and conducted funerals (Sharifah Zaleha 2001a, 125-126).

When these early residents settled in Bandar Baru Bangi, Islamic resurgence was visible in Malaysia. It should be noted that UKM was one of the centres of Islamic revivalism in the early 1980s. In UKM a number of Muslim scholars and students, not only from the Faculty of Islamic Studies but also from other faculties and institutes, committed themselves to Islamic revivalism, called *dakwah*. Moreover, they also played a major role in disseminating *dakwah* among local Muslim residents in Bandar Baru Bangi. They helped to organize a number of small study circles, called *usrah*, where Muslim residents discussed Islamic teachings. A number of voluntary benevolent societies, called *kumpulan khairat*, were also formed especially to give the neighbours assistance in times of death or serious illness (Sharifah Zaleha 2001a, 126-127).

There had been no *masjid* in Bandar Baru Bangi before 2001 when the first *masjid* was built in its township. Therefore, early Muslim residents of Bandar Baru Bangi usually attended nearby *masjids* in Kajang or in the campus of UKM in Bangi for the Friday prayers. On the other hand, the first *surau* in Bandar Baru Bangi was built in 1981. In 2010 there were 24 *suraus* in its township. Each *surau* is managed by a committee comprising of about ten people. These *suraus* are expected to play a central part in the religious affairs of the community. We will conduct a case study of a *surau* in Bandar Baru Bangi later.

Islamic intellectuals or *ulamas* have played a key role in Islamization and community building in Bandar Baru Bangi. Probably the most striking example of influential and charismatic *ulama* is Ustaz Haron Din. He had received Islamic religious education in Malaya and Egypt. Having returned from Egypt, he became a lecturer in Islamic theology in the Faculty of Islamic Studies, UKM. In 1984 Haron moved to Bandar Baru Bangi and helped to establish a *surau*, called Surau An Nur, in the neighbourhood. Since then Haron has held religious classes in Surau An Nur. He has been very popular not only as an Islamic scholar but also as a practitioner of Islamic medicine. By employing curing techniques based on medical

knowledge in the Quran, Haron has been believed to have healing powers. He is also well-known as one of the spiritual leaders of the Islamic Party or PAS (*Darussiyafa' Online*; Sharifah Zaleha 2001a, 128-130).

Bandar Baru Bangi Residents' Association (Persatuan Penduduk Bandar Baru Bangi: PPBBB), which was established in 1978, is a community association which covers the whole area of Bandar Baru Bangi while there are also many residents' associations of particular residential districts in the town. PPBBB organizes various kinds of activities. One of the most striking characteristics of PPBBB is its strong commitment to Islam. In fact, the association manages an Islamic religious school. Among approximately 1,000 registered members of the association in 2009, all but five members were Malay Muslims. The members of its executive committee are all Malay Muslims. The president and vice president of PPBBB are also in charge of the management of a religious school and *suraus*. Though these community leaders are not necessarily Islamic intellectuals or *ulama*, there is little doubt that they have a firm religious commitment.

Muslim political leaders too have an important part in the formation of the Muslim community in Bandar Baru Bangi. Shafie Abu Bakar of PAS is the former Selangor state assemblyperson for Bangi. As a lecturer of UKM, Shafie started to stay in Bandar Baru Bangi in 1977. After retiring from UKM in 1999, he had served as a Selangor state assemblyperson for Kajang between 1999 and 2004 and for Bangi between 2008 and 2013. Shafie made constant efforts to have close ties with Muslim residents in Bandar Baru Bangi. He frequently visited *suraus* in his constituency and attempted to develop close contacts with religious leaders and ordinary Muslim residents. He offered annual subsidies of RM500 to each *suraus* in the Bangi constituency. He did not stand as a candidate in 2013 general election. The new assemblyperson for Bangi, Mohd. Shafie Ngah (PAS), who won against a BN-UMNO candidate in the recent election, also has close rapport with local Muslim residents as a *Syariah* court lawyer.

#### **4. A Case Study of Surau An Nur**

As mentioned above, *surau* is a place or a house for Muslim communal prayers. But, the Friday prayers are usually not held in *suraus* but in *masjids*. Besides daily prayers, various kinds of activities such as religious classes in Islamic teachings and religious talks (*ceramah agama*) are held in *suraus*. As stated earlier, there were 24 *suraus* in Bandar Baru Bangi in 2010, but our focus is on Surau An Nur, which has played an important role as the centre of these *suraus* and as one of the most active *suraus* in Bandar Baru Bangi.

##### **(1) Background**

Surau An Nur was established in 1985 in Section 1, which is the oldest section in Bandar

Baru Bangi. At that time, the *surau* used the building owned by an Islamic organization ABIM. But, in 1995, it was moved to a nearby land which had been endowed as a *waqf*. The construction and the reconstruction of the building were also based on donations from individual Muslims. As mentioned above, Haron Din played a major role in establishing Surau An Nur. The *surau* is very near to Haron's house and clinic. Haron was respected by many residents as a charismatic religious scholar and healer and called *tok guru* (Sharifah Zaleha 2001a, 130). Currently he still plays an important role as the spiritual leader of Surau An Nur and the Muslim community in Bandar Baru Bangi.

## (2) Organization

Surau An Nur is probably the most well organized *surau* in Bandar Baru Bangi. In 1987 the An Nur Islamic Welfare Association (PKIAN) was officially registered as an NGO. The main purposes of PKIAN are to provide mutual aid and welfare services and to supervise Surau An Nur. PKIAN consists of several committees including the Surau An Nur Administrative Committee, the Welfare Committee, the Women's Committee, the Education Committee, and the Finance Committee. The committee which is in charge of the management of Surau An Nur is the Surau An Nur Administrative Committee. The head of the Administrative Committee is also the Vice President of PPBBB.

Currently PKIAN has about 140 permanent members who reside in Bandar Baru Bangi and about 60 associate members who live outside Bandar Baru Bangi. In 2003 there were 13 central committee members consisting of the Chairman, the Secretary General and other members who were responsible for particular committees. Of these 13 central committee members, two were females. Many of the central committee members were educated intellectuals. 10 were those who worked at universities or research institutes and five of them possessed PhD degrees. But, it should be added that most of them are not educated in Islamic studies but in natural sciences such as engineering and agriculture.

According to leaders of the *surau*, Surau An Nur probably has the most solid financial basis among *suraus* in Bandar Baru Bangi. Its main financial resources are donations, public subsidies, and annual membership fees. The most important part of financial assistance comes from donations. As most of the neighbourhood residents are upper middle-class people, Surau An Nur is in a good position to receive a handsome contribution. For instance, the *surau* managed to raise RM 2.2 million in donations for the reconstruction of its building. Besides such private donations, Surau An Nur receives public subsidies, too. The Selangor State Government gives RM50,000 to PKIAN as an annual subsidy for an NGO. The state assemblyperson Shafie Abu Bakar also allocates RM 500 annually to each *surau* in his Bangi constituency. Finally, the *surau* also receives annual membership fees from the members of PKIAN, but their contribution to its finance is very limited as an annual membership fee is just



RM30.

### **(3) Activities**

Surau An Nur has a wide range of activities. The principal activity is to hold five daily prayers. According to a *surau* official, usually about 150 to 200 people have *Maghrib* and *Isyak* prayers at the *surau*. Though Friday communal prayers are usually allowed to be conducted only in *masjids*, the Selangor State Government has given their special permission to Surau An Nur to hold Friday prayers. One of the notable features of the *surau* is its performance of the special prayer called *solat hajat* to ask Allah to realize particular wishes of the group of people, for instance, their request that their children be successful in examinations (Sharifah Zaleha 2001a, 132).

One of the important factors that make Surau An Nur very popular is that the *surau* offers various kinds of attractive lectures and religious talks. Besides Haron Din, the *surau* can invite many other popular preachers to give lectures and talks on Islamic jurisprudence, the interpretation of the Quran and Sunnah, and so on. On the basis of its abundant financial resources, the *surau* can afford to pay about RM 150 to each preacher. In addition to these lectures and religious talks, the *surau* also organizes a wide range of other services. For instance, it offers travel arrangements for Muslim residents to make their pilgrimages, charitable assistance to orphans, needy students, new converts, and so on (Sharifah Zaleha 2001a, 132).

Surau An Nur has given information on its activities through its own media. In the early 2000, the *surau* issued its newsletter to give information. Since then, however, it has introduced some technological innovation. Currently the *surau* has its own website and Facebook page while it no longer issues the newsletter.

### **(4) Political Contestation and Surau**

While Surau An Nur and PKIAN are supposed to be nonpartisan, in fact many people consider them as pro-PAS in view of the fact that Haron Din is a PAS leader and that many of the central committee members are PAS supporters. The former state assemblyperson Shafie Abu Bakar (PAS) had established a close rapport with the *surau* leaders. It is true that political rivalry, particularly between UMNO and PAS, often affects grassroots social relations among Malay Muslims in Bandar Baru Bangi. Even so, *suraus* in Bandar Baru Bangi are not totally divided by party affiliation. Some of the supporters of UMNO also participate in Surau An Nur's activities.

### **Discussion: Surau as a Centre of the Muslim Community**

Surau An Nur has played a role as the centre of its Muslim neighbourhood as well as the hub

of *suraus* in Bandar Baru Bangi. But, it does not mean that all *suraus* in Bandar Baru Bangi are as active as Surau An Nur. Some *suraus* do not offer a variety of activities but are used only as places for prayers and Islamic festivities. Surau An Nur has been an active religious centre due to the following reasons.<sup>5</sup>

First, the founder of Surau An Nur, Haron Din, is a charismatic religious leader who are respected by many Muslims residents as a religious scholar and healer. Haron's charismatic leadership has attracted local Muslim people and thus has played a key role in making Surau An Nur a religious centre in Bandar Baru Bangi.

Second, many of the Muslim inhabitants of an area around Surau An Nur are educated, devout Malay Muslim middle class people. They were influenced by Islamic revivalism since the 1970s and some of them have served as academics or officials at nearby universities and research institutes. Under the guidance of Haron Din, they were qualified to become the leaders of the *surau* called as *orang surau* (*surau* person or *surau* people) (Sharifah 2001b, 83).

Third, Surau An Nur has successfully invited many popular preachers and held attractive religious talks. The *surau* can afford to ask them to give religious talks due to the personal ties between *surau* leaders and them and the *surau's* solid financial basis. In this way, the *surau* not only has played as a religious centre in Bandar Baru Bangi but also has connected local Muslim residents with religious intellectuals outside the town.

Finally, Surau An Nur has adapted itself to organization and technological innovation. The *surau* has organized and structured its own NGO, PKIAN. There are no other *suraus* in Bandar Baru Bangi that are as well organized as Surau An Nur. It has also utilized internet technology and social networking service.

Yet, we also have to pay attention to challenges to Surau An Nur. First, the *surau* leaders face the problems of how to rejuvenate its leadership. Most of the current *surau* officials are in fifties or sixties or above. Haron Din is 73 years old now. Thus, the renewal of its leadership will be inevitable in the near future. For this purpose, they need to recruit more young Muslims. Some *surau* leaders, however, pointed out that young residents were less enthusiastic about the *surau's* activities than older generations were.

Second, we can discern the widening of class and ethnic differentiation among Muslim residents in Bandar Baru Bangi. Some residents pointed out that many of the upper class people who lived in huge bungalows were not very active in *suraus* in Bandar Baru Bangi. On the other hand, increasing numbers of foreign Muslims from Indonesia, Thailand, Bangladesh, etc., live in Bandar Baru Bangi, particularly in low-cost housing units. Some of these foreign Muslim residents attended daily prayers at Surau An Nur. It is still not very clear to what extent these foreign Muslim residents are absorbed into the *surau*.

Finally, I should add a reservation to my argument. While *suraus* can be the centres of the



Muslim communities in suburban Malaysia, they may not be able to play a significant role in creating cohesion between Muslims and non-Muslims. Very few non-Muslims visit places of worship for Islam such as *suraus* or *masjids*. Thus, in order to examine the possibilities and limitations of multi-ethnic or multi-religious co-existence in suburban Malaysia, we should pay attention to other spaces. This will be a topic for my next project.

## Notes

- 1 This is a revised and abridged version of my previous publication in Japanese (Soda 2012). I wish to thank Kato Tsuyoshi, Kuroda Keiko, Sadayoshi Yasushi, Shiozaki Yuki, Shioya Momo and Watanabe Akiko for their valuable comments on the draft of my original paper. The responsibility for any error or omission in this work is solely my own.
- 2 To conduct my research at Bandar Baru Bangi, I am greatly indebted to Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan, Mohamed Yusoff Ismail, Shafie Abu Bakar, Tajul Ariffin Noordin, Mohd. Ghazali Abbas, Abdul Rahman Mohd. Yasin, and Nasharudin Mat Isa.
- 3 According to the census of 2000, the population of Mukim Kajang, which includes Bandar Baru Bangi, is 229,655 (DSM 2001, 323). While the census provides demographic data at the local authority area, mukim and administrative district levels, it does not show the population of Bandar Baru Bangi, which does not correspond to a local authority, a mukim or an administrative district.
- 4 Based on the definition by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, the house price categories can be divided into low-cost housing (below RM 42,000), low-medium-cost housing (RM 42,001–RM 60,000), medium-cost housing (RM 60,001–RM 100,000), and high-cost housing (more than RM 100,001) (Tan 2011, 63).
- 5 The following discussion owes much to Sharifah Zaleha (1999) as well as to the insights I have gained through my discussion with Shiozaki Yuki.

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