

# HOW TO STUDY SOCIAL PHENOMENA IN MUSLIM SOCIETIES?: IDEAS, ISLAMIC REVIVALISM, AND POLITICAL SCIENCE<sup>1</sup>

Ermin Sinanovic\*

## Introduction

Studying social phenomena from the perspective of political science in the Muslim world is one of the most important tasks of contemporary social scientists. The job becomes even more important having in mind the turbulent times we are now witnessing in the Muslim world. As Muslims, we are often confronted with having to defend Islam on the one hand, and to remain objective social scientists on the other. This frequently results in an unfortunate apologetic leaning so prevalent among many Muslim scholars. I contend that this happens due to two reasons: (1) the unavailability of proper methodology of political science that would fulfill the requirements of both social sciences and Islamic value-framework<sup>2</sup>, and (2) the lack of proper social science training<sup>3</sup> among many Muslims who write on these issues. Admittedly, there were several attempts to frame and develop the methodology of political science from an Islamic perspective. Yet, these works were basically the general surveys and

---

\* The author is a Phd. candidate at the Department of Political Science, Syracuse University.

1. This article has won the 1st place for the Islamic Political Science Academic Writing Competition 2005 organized by The Institute of Islamic understanding Malaysia (IKIM).
2. On how to conduct a value-based social science research see Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*, trans. Steven Sampson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
3. By 'proper social science training,' I mean the ability to explore, understand, and develop the latest theories in social sciences. It is unfortunate that many Muslim advanced degree holders in political science do not seem to pay enough attention to the importance of the latest theories, methods, and methodologies in the discipline. This is why many works produced by Muslim social scientists cannot be published in top refereed journals in their fields of study. The outcome is that Muslim voices are almost completely absent in global social science circles.

exploratory works.<sup>4</sup> In short, they were the promising beginnings, but the beginnings nonetheless.

In this paper, I attempt to rectify the above deficiencies by developing a methodology of studying contemporary Islamic revivalism. I combine latest methodological developments in political science with the field of Islamic studies, and base my inquiry on an Islamic value framework. As such, I hope to provide an antidote to both Western social scientists who frequently misunderstand the phenomenon, and to Muslim social scientists who often write in apologetic and unconvincing manner. I chose Malaysia as a case study, since this is the area with which I am most familiar. However, I believe that this methodology is both generalizable and replicable on various cases around the Muslim world. A brief note is in order here. I use the Malaysian example as an illustration, not as a full-fledged case study. The latter would require a voluminous work, outside the scope of the present paper. Nonetheless, the brief and occasional references to Islamic revivalism in Malaysia serve as pointers in demonstrating the potentials and applicability of the methodology I developed.

In the following sections, I outline my argument by developing ideational logic of explanation. First, I consider some of the reasons behind the misunderstanding of Islamic Revivalism. Second, I show my indebtedness to several areas of humanistic and social sciences. Third, I explore why—until recently—ideas did not receive enough attention in political science, and I also trace the current ideational turn in the field. Next, I develop ideational logic of explanation, by explaining its mechanism, defining what I mean by ideas, and accounting for ideas and norm diffusion in domestic and international politics. Finally, I talk about the methodology of my study.

---

4. See Abdul Hamid A. Abu Sulayman, *The Islamic Theory of International Relations: New Directions for Islamic Methodology and Thought*, Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1987.

## Background

The famous Palestinian-American scholar, Edward Said (d.2003), has shown how the coverage of Islam in general, and Islamic Revivalism in particular, is deeply rooted in sensationalism and Muslim-bashing.<sup>5</sup> After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, this trend not only continued, but it increased and deepened in every possible form. It is important to point out that the media almost exclusively relied on some obscure personalities, military analysts, and journalists in trying to explain to the American people and the world, the carnage that took place on that day. In spite of having numerous centers for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies around the country and in the world's most prestigious universities, America was getting its 'Islam 101'—including Islamic theology, history, civilization, culture, and politics—not from the long-established scholars with strong credentials in teaching and research on things Islamic, but from the above-mentioned instant experts, many of whom are well known for their dislike of Islamic culture and its peoples. Likewise, the coverage of Islamic Revivalism is inevitably centered on the radical groupings within the phenomenon. More people in the United States know about Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the like Muslim extremists, than about the personalities of Rashid al-Ghannoushi<sup>6</sup>, Yusuf al-Qaradawi<sup>7</sup>, Tariq Ramadan<sup>8</sup>, Sayyid Muhammad Naquib al-Attas<sup>9</sup>, Fethullah Gullen<sup>10</sup>, Abdul Karim Soroush, Anwar Ibrahim, or Amien Rais. This in spite of the fact

- 
5. See Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, rev.ed., New York, NY: Vintage Press, 1997. Also *Idem*, *Orientalism*, New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1978.
  6. Tunisian thinker and activist, leader of the al-Nahda (Renaissance) Movement, who lives in exile in London.
  7. Egyptian-born scholar, and influential Islamic thinker. He lives and teaches in Qatar.
  8. A Swiss scholar. Perhaps a more influential voice among the European Muslims.
  9. A Malaysian Muslim scholar/philosopher whose genesis of ideas on the Islamization of knowledge influenced generations of Muslim scholars and activists worldwide.
  10. Turkish-born thinker and activist currently living the United States.

that the number of followers of the latter group of thinkers and activists is measured in tens, if not hundreds, of millions, whereas—even by the most liberal estimates—the number of those following the extremist groups is probably measured in tens of thousands<sup>11</sup>, i.e. less than a tenth of one percent of all Muslims in the world. One could argue that it is natural for the coverage of the Muslim world to focus on extremist groups and personalities, given that they have caused great loss of life and property around the world and that they pose a huge security threat. Yet, there is much more to Islam and Islamic activism than these radical groups.

More importantly, from the perspective of a social and political scientist, this work uses ideas as an explanatory variable in trying to account for the rise of Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia. This, again, goes contrary to the prevalent approaches to studying the phenomenon, namely those that explicate Islamic Revival as an irrational reaction to Western modernity, or as a refuge from poverty, urbanization, lack of education—in short, modernization. The thinking that the rise of Islamic consciousness is caused by the above mentioned factors is deeply steeped in the secularization thesis<sup>12</sup> which proclaims secularism as the natural outcome of man's social development. Since Islamically-minded people resist this movement they are dubbed irrational, and their thinking is therefore antithetical to modern and progressive development.<sup>13</sup> Those who acknowledge the importance of ideas tend to focus on the radical and the extreme within Islamic thought.<sup>14</sup> There are very few attempts to understand Islamic Revival on its own terms, which is precisely what I set out to accomplish in this work.<sup>15</sup> The reasons for this lacuna in studies

- 
11. "Al-Qaeda camps 'trained 70,000'," BBC News Online, URL:< <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4146969.stm>>, accessed on January 24, 2005.
  12. For a Muslim critique of secularism see Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, reprint 1993; first impression 1978.
  13. See Dina Abdelkader, *Social Justice in Islam*, Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2000.
  14. Martin Kramer, *Arab Awakening & Islamic Revival: The Politics of Ideas in the Middle East*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996.
  15. For a discussion on the necessity of understanding Islamic activism on its own terms see Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

on contemporary Islamic Revival are numerous, but they mostly have to do with sociology of knowledge within social sciences. Western social science has very strong secular, and frequently anti-religious roots and biases.<sup>16</sup> According to some statistics, the percentage of those who believe in the Divine among the social science scholars is lowest among all disciplines of human knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Admittedly, we are all victims to preconceived notions and we tend to look at the world through the prism of the values we hold and cherish.<sup>18</sup> Many pioneers of social science, such as August Comte, Emil Durkheim, Ferdinand Toennies, Max Webber, and Karl Marx, held that religion was on its way out and it was only a matter of time before forces of rationalism, rationalization, secularism, and materialism displace religion and lead to its ultimate demise.<sup>19</sup> Based on this background, later social scientists created theories of development and modernization which, although weakened in the last decade or two, still exert a lot of influence in the academia and policy-making circles.<sup>20</sup> Secularism, both as a worldview as well as a principle of political organization, is portrayed as the norm in social science textbooks and writings in general.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the study of religion was not seen as necessary for an understanding of social phenomena. This was definitely the case in the 1960s and 1970s, during the heyday of the modernization theory. The outcome was that for decades, the study of Islam was largely neglected and confined to a few scholars. More than thirty years ago when he

---

16. See Jonathan Fox, "Religion as an Overlooked Element of International Relations," *International Studies Review* (2001): pp. 53-73, especially pp. 54-59; also Rodney Stark, "Why Gods Should Matter in Social Science," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 49, Issue 39, B7. According to Stark, Post-Durkheimian social science has focused mostly on rites and rituals.

17. Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002.

18. For a popular account of this phenomenon see David Brooks, "Kicking the Secularist Habit: A six-step program," *The Atlantic Monthly*, (March 2003), pp. 26-28.

19. Jonathan Fox, "Religion as an Overlooked Element of International Relations", *op. cit.*, pp. 54-55.

20. Among the most representative examples are Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*, New York, NY: Free Press, 1958; David Apter, *The Politics of Modernization*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1965; and Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968.

21. Jonathan Fox, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58.

published his excellent *Weber and Islam*, Bryan Turner—formerly of Cambridge University—lamented over the lack of the study of religion in social science circles:

An examination of any sociology of religion text-book published in the last fifty years will show the recurrent and depressing fact that sociologists are either not interested in Islam or have nothing to contribute to Islamic scholarship. ...Any sociologist who takes seriously the view that sociology of religion must be concerned with comparative religion, history of religions and phenomenology will find himself in the embarrassing position of facing a massive gap in his knowledge of world religions.<sup>22</sup> [emphasis added]

The situation did improve in a few years after this book, thanks largely to the Iranian Revolution. Just like today, social scientists struggled trying to explain and understand the then contemporary events. How could a bearded and turbaned cleric reverse the 'natural' progression of history? In due course, social scientists produced a number of books—some sophisticated, and some less so—not only on the Revolution, but also on other aspects of the Islamic religion, history, and society. John Esposito, a Georgetown University professor whose writings are widely read both in the West and in the Muslim world, frequently quips that he owes his academic career to the Ayatollah. Yet, in spite of these changes, the importance of studying religion did not penetrate the wider social science circles. For better or for worse, the study of religion remained confined to selected specialists, while the overwhelming majority of social scientists did not include it in their repertoire of independent variables. John Voll, professor of Islamic history and director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, succinctly summarizes the issue:

In general terms, the social sciences have had more difficulty in covering the religious dimensions of contemporary history than in providing insight into economic processes or concrete socio-political developments. Most social

---

22. Bryan S. Turner, *Weber and Islam: A Critical Study*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974, pp. 1-2.

scientists themselves accept the assumptions of the secularist worldview and, as a consequence, find it necessary to "explain" religious belief as a secondary phenomenon related to "real" motivations involving material gain, class interest, or other non-religious aspects of human experience.<sup>23</sup>

Voll concludes this paragraph by quoting Craig Calhoun, a New York University professor and the president of the Social Science Research Council:

Few eras have been shaped more profoundly by religious activism than the last fifteen years. But the *presumption of unbelief* is so basic to much of modern academe that it is hard for scholars to take religion altogether seriously ... That an understanding of economic action is essential for sociologists and political scientists is all but unquestioned; that religion should be accorded similar centrality is all but unconsidered.<sup>24</sup>

To contemplate that modernization does not necessarily result in secularization was until recently almost unheard of in social science circles. Yet, the developments in international affairs in the last several decades—in particular, religious revivals around the world—are slowly creating the opportunity to explore other, non-secular exits at the end of the modernization roads.<sup>25</sup> The story of modernization is often narrated through the usage of non-human agencies, such as differentiation and rationalization. The picture that is painted with this approach is that secularization, an outcome of modernization, is a natural, agentless

---

23. John O. Voll, "Foreword," in Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993, pg. xii.

24. Craig Calhoun, "Introduction", in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Comparative Social Research: A Research Annual*, 13 (1991), pp. ix-x, quoted in *ibid*. Emphasis added by John O. Voll.

25. See Emile Sahliyeh, ed., *Religious Resurgence and Politics in the Contemporary World*, New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990; Peter L. Berger, "Secularism in retreat," *The National Interest*, (Winter 1996/1997), pp. 3-12; and Scott M. Thomas, "Taking Religious and Cultural Pluralism Seriously: The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Society", *Millennium* (2000), pp. 815-841. Perhaps the most courageous, and some would say outrageous, claim is made by Rodney Stark who argues that it is secularization that is on its way out. See Rodney Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P.", *Sociology of Religion*, (Fall 1999), pp. 249-273.

progression of human society, as being led by a Hegelian Spirit. In this vein, it is not difficult to understand why someone like Fukuyama would then proclaim the end of history, at least in terms of social development, with liberal democracy as the crowning achievement of man's political ingenuity.<sup>26</sup> But, was all that so natural? In other words, were there human agents, interests, social and political movements that actively sought to establish the secular paradigm as the dominant way of thinking? This question would lead inquiry in an entirely different direction. And, it seems that some social scientists are finally trying to examine these issues. In a recent volume, a group of scholars does exactly this.<sup>27</sup> The editor of the book summarizes the project as follows:

The central claim of this book is that the historical secularization of the institutions of American public life was not a natural, inevitable, and abstract by-product of modernization; rather it was the outcome of a struggle between contending groups with conflicting interests seeking to control social knowledge and institutions. My intent is to move agency, interests, power, resources, mobilization, strategy, and conflict to the foreground in our understanding of macrosocial secularization—a topic until now largely framed by abstract and agentless terms like *differentiation* and *rationalization*.<sup>28</sup> [italics in original]

In the same vein, my paper looks at the phenomenon of Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia as a product of ideas, actors, and mobilization strategies, and not as a result of an irrational opposition to modernization. In fact, one could easily talk about Islamic Revivalism as an attempt to make modernity on its own terms. Therefore, I focus primarily on agency and the way in which actors actively shaped and transformed the realities surrounding them in order to suit their ideational tendencies.

---

26. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, NY: Perennial, 1993.

27. Christian Smith, ed., *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003.

28. *ibid.*, "Preface", pg. vii



Though my paper focuses on ideas and argues that they have a causal logic in bringing about the phenomenon of Islamic revivalism, it does not deny the importance of contextual and situational factors in Malaysian politics and society. As such, this is an attempt to narrow the gap in the ideational-structural debate, waged between those who believe that it is about the ideas all the way down, and those who deny ideas any causal power whatsoever.

### Comparative Politics, International Relations, and Islamic Studies

To situate it more precisely, this work uses cultural/ideational logic of explanation as it is known in comparative politics.<sup>29</sup> It also argues for the importance of values and norms, which any student of international relations would classify primarily as constructivist.<sup>30</sup> I have also benefited from the social movement literature, but I have to state clearly that mine is not a social movement study. I do not look into all aspects of Malaysian Islamic social movements the way social movement studies do. In addition, some of the actors I focus on belonged to established political parties, such as the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS). My work is primarily focused on ideational influence, especially on the way in which Islamist elites<sup>31</sup> used revivalist ideas to generate a renewed understanding of Islam which, in turn, was used to mobilize Muslim around those ideas and ideals. Having said this, my work is indebted to social movement

- 
29. Though not without its critiques, Lichbach and Zuckerman's edited volume is still used as a general overview of comparative politics. See Mark Irving Lichbach and Alan S. Zuckerman, ed., *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. On cultural approach see Marc Howard Ross, "Culture and Identity in Comparative Political Analysis," in Lichbach and Zuckerman, *Comparative Politics*, *ibid.*, pp. 42-80. For more on ideational logic of explanation see Craig Parsons, "Showing Ideas as Causes", *International Organization*, (Winter 2002), pp. 47-84; and Sheri Berman, *The Social Democratic Moment: Ideas and Politics in the Making of Interwar Europe*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 14-37. Even the realists have started affirming the importance of ideas in international relations. See Michael C. Williams, "Why Ideas Matter in International Relations: Hans Morgenthau, Classical Realism, and the Moral Construction of Power Politics", *International Organization*, (Fall 2004), pp. 633-665.
30. See Emanuel Adler, "Constructivism in International Relations," in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons, eds., *Handbook of International Relations*, London: Sage Publications, 2002, pp. 95-118.
31. I use terms Islamist and Islamic activist interchangeably.

theory, particularly in relation to framing processes. Framing refers to the way in which leaders of social movements choose to package and sell issues and ideas they care about. It is an interpretive process, in which meanings and ideas are reiterated and reinterpreted in order to suit the environment in which they are presented. Some scholars believe that frame theory has difficulty in explaining how ideas gain a foothold in social movement.<sup>32</sup> In a modest way, my work contributes to filling this hole. Hopefully, it will contribute to moving social movement theory away from what was called 'structural biases'.<sup>33</sup> Foreign policy decision making is another area of international relations my work has benefited from. Scholars in this field talk about occasions for decision.<sup>34</sup> This refers to a point in time in which decision makers are to make decisions on whatever issues they are confronted with: negotiations, armed conflict, decision to enter into war and the like. This particular part of foreign policy literature is of crucial importance to ideational theory. Any good theory has to account for why a certain decision was made at any point in time where there existed numerous other alternatives and solutions for the same problem. I will explain later in detail why, for instance, Islamic revival took place in Malaysia even though it was not the only option or direction in which society was about to move. As a matter of fact, the government proposed completely different options, such as the New Economic Policy, which did not have anything to do with Islam. Even though it was more costly to choose an alternative path, Islamic revivalists—

- 
32. Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 15-16. Wickham studies Islamist movements in Egypt from a social movement perspective. Hers is a sophisticated work, seeking—among other things—to fill gaps in social movement theory, especially on social movements in authoritarian societies and on role of ideas in framing processes. This is one of the few, but growing examples of literature that looks at Islamic movements by using social movement theories. See also Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed., *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004.
33. Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, "Caught in a Winding, Snarling Vine: The Structural Bias of Political Process Theory", *Sociological Forum*, (March 1999), pp. 27-54; also Franscesca Polletta, "Snarls, Quacks, and Quarrels: Culture and Structure in Political Process Theory," *Sociological Forum*, (March 1999), pp. 63-70. For a critique see Charles Tilly, "Wise Quacks," *Sociological Forum*, (March 1999), pp. 55-61, and David S. Meyer, "Tending the Vineyard: Cultivating Political Process Research," *Sociological Forum*, (March 1999), pp. 79-92.
34. Margaret G. Hermann, "How Decision Units Shape Foreign Policy: A Theoretical Framework," *International Studies Review*, (Summer 2001), pp. 47-81, especially pp. 54-56.

*contra* rationalist/structuralist expectations—opted for such an alternative to the government's policies. Naturally, my work claims that this particular choice was made because of a belief in certain ideas.

Finally, this work profited from humanistic approaches, namely Islamic studies. One of the reasons why many social scientists—and here I mean, in particular, political scientists—have not focused on the importance of revivalist ideas is probably due to their unfamiliarity with revivalist thought and ideas as expressed over fourteen centuries of Muslim history. This is one of the reasons why there are only a few works providing a systematic account of what Islamic revivalism is, and—crucially—what it means to Islamic revivalists themselves.<sup>35</sup> Most of the time social scientists have tried to explain what revivalist ideas meant *for them*.<sup>36</sup> Again, Euben's advice<sup>37</sup> that we need to study revivalist thought for what it represents to those who espouse those ideas seems critical. Seen in this light, I am trying to integrate among disciplines and subfields on two levels. On one level, I am using methods of both humanities and social sciences. On the other, and I see this as important for political science, I am seeking to incorporate methods and theories from comparative politics and international relations. Namely, I am using ideational/cultural logic of explanation from comparative politics, the importance of norms and values as developed in constructivist theory of international relations, the role of framing from social movement theories, and decision making tools from foreign policy decision making. I hope it will lead to

---

35. Notable exceptions are John O. Voll, "Renewal and Reform in Islamic History: Tajdid and Islah," in John L. Esposito, ed., *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 32-47; Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi, *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World*, Brockport, NY: SUNY Press, 1995; Armando Salvatore, *Islam and the Political Discourse of Modernity*, Berkshire: Garnet Publishing Limited, 1997, especially pp. 81-96, and M.A. Muqtedar Khan, "The Political Philosophy of Islamic Resurgence," *Cultural Dynamics*, (2001), pp. 211-229. Yet, we are still lacking a systematic study of classical revivalist ideas and their influence on contemporary Islamic activists. More importantly, this lacuna makes it impossible to distinguish between the old and the new in contemporary revivalist discourse. It is this distinction that is crucial to ideational argument, as I explain later.

36. Charles Kruzman, "Conclusion: Social Movement Theory and Islamic Studies," in Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed., *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, *op. cit.*, pp. 289-303.

37. See Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*, *op. cit.* pp. 15 - 35

more studies which are trying to integrate different subfields in political science which—until the emergence of constructivism—sometimes appeared as hermetically sealed in terms of their methods of inquiry and subject of study.

### Ideational Logic of Explanation

For a long time, ideas have been largely neglected in political science. To be sure, no one said that ideas did not matter. However, they were not given the same kind of treatment that rationality, structure, or institutions enjoyed. While political scientists used to acknowledge that ideas and culture matter, even those who were most vocal in supporting ideational and cultural approaches did not develop cogent ideational theories of explanation and/or causation.<sup>38</sup> The situation started changing over the last fifteen years. Due partly to the resurfacing of ethnonationalism in Central-Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the ensuing identity politics that enveloped many of these countries, political scientists started paying more attention to the role of ideas in nationalist and religious resurgence and in the formation of ethnic, national, and religious identities.<sup>39</sup> After the fall of communism in Central-Eastern Europe, some scholars in the fields of political economy, foreign policy, and security studies started writing works on the impact of ideas in these disciplines.<sup>40</sup> During the same period, the field of international relations witnessed the development of a constructivist research programme.<sup>41</sup> Social movement theorists have also contributed

---

38. Sheri Berman, *The Social Democratic Moment: Idea and Politics in Making of Interwar Europe*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 14-16.

39. See Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, Reno, NV: The University of Nevada Press, 1993; Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism*, New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994.

40. See, for instance, Peter A. Hall, ed., *The Political Power of Economic Ideas*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989; Robert Keohane and Judith Goldstein, eds., *Ideas and Foreign Policy*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991; Kathryn Sikkink, *Ideas and Institutions: Developmentalism in Brazil and Argentina*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991; Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996; Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996.

41. For a recent review of constructivism, together with ample references, see Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Social Constructivism in Global and European Politics: A Review Essay," *Review of International Studies*, (April 2004), pp. 229-244.

to this ideational renewal, especially in regard to the role of culture and ideas in framing processes.<sup>42</sup> The confluence of these diverse subfields, theories, and approaches brought back ideas into mainstream political science. While there are still skeptics as to whether ideas really cause anything, and probably there always will be,<sup>43</sup> those who support ideational logic of explanation are trying to put it on equal footing with other such logic, both in comparative politics and in international relations.

One of the reasons why some social scientists have found it hard to accept ideas as independent variables—thus having their own logic of explanation and causation—was the claim that ideas are always caused by some structural factors which, in turn, produce ideational shifts or encourage the emergence of new ideas. But if we use this criterion for determining independent variables, then we would end up having no such variables at all. One could argue that both structure and institutions can be understood as being caused by some other, underlying causes or factors. If we are to trigger this causal chain regressively, we would end up debating the proverbial chicken and egg phenomenon. A more appropriate criterion for establishing an independent nature of variables would be to inquire into whether any given variable can be reduced to other variables *at the time of inquiry*. If an ideational variable cannot be reduced to structure or rationality in the contemporary system, then we would have a very strong case for considering ideas as independent variables.<sup>44</sup> In that case, we would need to carefully trace the development of an idea; its sources, evolution, acceptance, and dissemination. Furthermore, we would have to establish that this idea became independent,

---

42. See Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Reviews in Sociology*, (2000), pp. 611-639; Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, "Interests, Ideas, and Islamist Outreach in Egypt," in Quintan Wiktorowicz, op. cit., pp. 231-249.

43. Albert S. Yee, "The Causal Effect of Ideas on Policies," *International Organization*, (1996): pp. 69-108.

44. My discussion here was strongly influenced by Sheri Berman, *The Social Democratic Moment*, op. cit., pp. 16-19, and Craig Parsons, "Showing Ideas as Causes," *International Organization*, (Winter, 2002), pp. 48-52. I am also indebted to Craig Parsons for sharing with me his unpublished manuscript "Logics of Explanation: How to Map Arguments in Political Science."

taking a life on its own, thus influencing social and political actions over a period of time. Parsons' words are instructive here:

Psychological or historical factors may help explain why actors came to hold certain ideas, but neither factor invalidates the claim that subjective ideas are now causing variation in behavior. In other words, explaining the distribution of ideas as dependent variables is legitimately separate from showing their presence and effect as independent variables.<sup>45</sup>

Seen in this light, ideas can be accepted as causes under the criteria that are as strict as that used for any other commonly accepted argument in political science. However, one should not be satisfied merely with stating a correlation between ideas and behavior under study. One should also make sure to outline how ideas affect actions in reality. As Berman puts it:

Determining causality, in other words, requires two things: first, establishing a *connection* between the proposed independent and dependent variables, and, second, explaining why this connection exists - showing precisely how the independent variable influences the dependent one.<sup>46</sup>

Another important step is to fulfill Hume's second condition of causality, namely temporal precedence of cause over effect.<sup>47</sup> Having fulfilled the above conditions—showing that an idea cannot be reduced to other variables in the contemporary system and that it affects political behavior—we also have to demonstrate that the same idea existed at time  $T_0$  and influenced behavior at time  $T_0+1$ . If these conditions are met, there is no reason why ideas cannot be accorded the same status with other independent variables and logics of explanation in political science.

---

45. Craig Parsons, "Showing Ideas as Causes," *ibid.*, pg. 51.

46. Sheri Berman, *The Social Democratic Moment*, *op. cit.*, pg. 18.

47. First condition is spatial proximity, and the third is what Hume called necessary connection. See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Brigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 75-82.

## What Do We Mean by Ideas?

So far, I have been talking about ideas without specifying what I mean exactly. Ideas include a wide range of beliefs, values, norms, and symbols. At one extreme of ideational range are such meta-ideas as worldviews and ideologies. Examples include modernity, Christianity, Marxism, and liberalism. At the other extreme we find very specific ideas, like policy positions or preferences. For instance, views on gay marriage and abortion are rather exact policy standpoints. The middle position between these extremes is of most importance to ideational theorists. Worldviews and ideologies are too broad to allow for a meaningful causal inference. For example, to say that a person is a Christian does not help us in determining whether she supports or opposes abortion, for we can find Christians who stand at both ends of the spectrum with regard to this issue. On the other hand, her approval or opposition to gay marriage, a very specific idea, is not enough to infer much about this person's broader political orientation. There are both religious and non-religious people, liberals and conservatives, gun-owners and those who oppose gun ownership in both of these camps.

Middle-range ideas, residing between meta-ideas and specific policy standpoints, lend themselves to the kind of political inquiry that seeks to establish causal relations. This is what Berman calls 'programmatic beliefs,'<sup>48</sup> while Campbell names it 'programmatic ideas.'<sup>49</sup> They share abstractness and systematic vision of worldviews and ideologies. But programmatic beliefs, unlike ideologies and worldviews, can be clearly defined. They also prescribe, proscribe, determine, and influence specific social and political actions by stating clear policy positions and preferences. Furthermore, a person's affiliation with such ideas informs us about the possible range of his actions and responses to particular situations and settings. Another advantage of programmatic beliefs is that we are able to identify social and political actors who subscribe to

---

48. Sheri Berman, *op. cit.*, pg. 21.

49. John L. Campbell, "Ideas, Politics, and Public Policy," *Annual Review of Sociology*, (2002), pp. 21-38, especially pp. 28-29.

these beliefs. Based on their affiliation with such programs, it would then be possible to examine whether these actors' behavior in any given situation was based on ideas or some other possible causes.<sup>50</sup> For instance, by stating that Islamic activists are Muslims does not tell us much about their behavior and actions. There are Muslims who comply with Islamic teachings and those who do not. Some Muslims drink alcoholic drinks, in spite of religious prohibition against it, while others don't. Some believe that establishing an Islamic state with the full application of Islamic law is crucial to their being Muslims, while others do not share this opinion. However, stating that these activists are Revivalists, in addition to being Muslims, can tell us much more about their actions, provided they have defined their beliefs and ideas in advance. In that way, we would be able to assess and analyse their behaviour and look for ideational causal patterns in their speech, behavior, and actions. Hence, differentiating between meta-ideas, such as Islam, and programmatic beliefs, such as Revivalism, is crucial for establishing ideational argument.

Programmatic beliefs are very useful in studying formal social and political organizations, such as political parties, social movements, and nongovernmental organizations. They can also be used in analysing individual behavior as long as a person belongs to a political organisational structure, thus indicating her acceptance of stated programmatic beliefs. However, one has to be careful before jumping to conclude, that simply because a person belongs to a certain political party, her policy positions and decisions will follow a pre-determined fashion. Unlike in studying natural phenomena, social scientists study individuals who have free will and can, therefore, alter pre-established patterns and choose a completely unexpected course of action. But, as long as a person subscribes to a certain set of ideas and states that she acted based on such ideas, we can form the case for ideational argument.

There is another crucial element of ideational argument, especially in explaining the causal mechanism of ideas that has been established for a long time. For example, if I am to say that certain Islamic ideas are

---

50. Methodology by which we can discern this is discussed at the end of this article.



causing Islamic revival in Malaysia, this would not only sound tautological, but would also fail to explain why these ideas became so important at that particular moment in time. In other words, if these ideas were there all the while, why do they matter only now or only at certain moments in Muslim history? In order to make my ideational argument valid, I would need to show that there are certain new ideas introduced within the Islamist discourse - or a new interpretation of old ideas - which make these ideas become relevant again. This could be through novel interpretations of the Qur'an, the introduction of new ideas based on classical Islamic sources and concepts, or renewed emphasis on certain parts of the Islamic tradition. Since these tasks are done through the human agency, it is important to understand the background, history, and normative framework of these individuals. Ideational theorists also have to pay attention to the structural and material environment which may have served as catalysts for this renewed importance of ideas. Therefore, distinguishing between the old and the new within a Revivalist discourse, in my case, is an essential element of my ideational argument.

### **Ideas, Motivations, Goals, and Range of Actions**

Ideas, in general, provide people with motivations for their actions and outline objectives and ends they should strive for and achieve through such activities. Programmatic beliefs, being a middle-range set of ideas, also give guidelines for political action and supply solutions for actual problems which political actors are facing. In other words, they outline a proper way to connect ideas (theory) with political actions and goals (praxis).<sup>51</sup> But, ideational theorists also need to state that ideas not only provide goals, they also frequently specify the means through which goals are to be achieved, as well as the *range of acceptable actions* which define and constitute these means. By defining what is considered acceptable, ideas set limits and clearly specify *unacceptable* means and goals. In addition, ideas also provide a sense of ranking preferences in terms of acceptability of a certain action from that which is considered necessary to that which is deemed unacceptable.

---

51. Sheri Berman, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

Looking at Islamic Revivalists, for instance, one can clearly see that their programmatic beliefs strongly assert the importance of Islamic law. In fact, given the centrality of Islamic law in Revivalist thought—as based on formative Islamic sources, and interpreted and understood through centuries—it is instructive to pay attention to legal thinking in Islam in order to understand how Revivalists define range of actions based on normative thinking. It is important to note that Islamic law, as it developed over time, did not differentiate between the moral and legal, i.e. between moral teachings and positive law.<sup>52</sup> Islamic legal scholars, and theologians who followed their suit, held that God's commandments and prohibitions do not only constitute required course of actions, or the prohibition thereof, but also moral imperatives. Embezzling property of orphans, for example, is both legally prohibited and morally blameworthy. However, Muslim jurists were quick to realize early on in the development of Islamic legal thought, that human behavior cannot be placed in only two categories: commands and prohibitions. They understood that there are many actions which, in terms of both their moral content as well as their legal implications, fall in between these two basic categories. Consequently, they divided legal (and therefore moral) obligations and actions into five different categories:

1. Obligatory (*Wajib, Fard*)
2. Recommended (*Mandub, Sunnah*)
3. Permissible (*Mubah*)
4. Reprehensible (*Makruh*)
5. Prohibited (*Haram*)<sup>53</sup>

---

52. 'Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence' (*usul al-fiqh*) is the name of the discipline which studies the sources of law and rules of legal interpretation. It can rightly be considered as the science which contains Islamic epistemology, and is—therefore—of highest importance to both Muslims as well as non-Muslims who want to understand the religion of Islam and its followers.

53. Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev.ed., Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Ilmiah Publishers, 2004, pp. 323-335; Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunni Usul al-Fiqh*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 40-42; for sources in Arabic see Abdul Karim Zaydan, *Al-Wajiz fi Usul al-Fiqh*, 5th ed., Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risalah, 1996, pp. 31-49; Wahbah Al-Zuhayli, *Usul al-Fiqh al-Islami*, 2 Vols., Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 2004), pp. 44-93. Many Muslims learn these concepts at an early age, usually about the same time they learn how to pray.

Subscribing to this idea concerning the range of actions could also be understood as the ordering of preferences. A person who complies with this framework may choose to do that which is commanded first, recommended actions second, and likewise in order of preference, while at the same time avoiding that which is prohibited. I should stress that this order of preference is not always static. Actually, it could be reordered by a person's interpretation of change in structural pressures and environment. Sometimes, this reordering is done not due to structural change or pressure, but because of a change in an individual's perception. To give an example, consuming pork is prohibited in Islam. However, if a person faces death due to hunger and she has no other food but pork, she is allowed to eat it only inasmuch to survive.<sup>54</sup> In this case, that which is prohibited becomes permissible as long as such circumstances warrant. Once there is other food available, consuming pork returns to the original position, which is prohibited. Another example is eating onion or garlic before going to the mosque. While eating garlic or onion is permissible in itself, it becomes reprehensible if consumed prior to attending congregational prayers since it could disturb other worshippers. Drawing on an example from the Egyptian Islamist social movement, Wickham discusses what she calls 'the transvaluation of values,'<sup>55</sup> or "a reordering of the priorities that guide individual action."<sup>56</sup> She shows how Egyptian Islamists managed to obtain greater support by a rearranging and reordering of the priorities. Therefore, structural conditions—or person's interpretation thereof - may necessitate altering in the order of preference, but the way of reordering is still governed by an ideational or normative framework. In the above examples on eating pork or garlic, this framework is provided by scriptural evidence.

---

54. The Qur'an states: "*He [God] has forbidden to you only carrion, and blood, and the flesh of swine, and that over which any name other than God's has been invoked; but if one is driven by necessity—neither coveting it nor exceeding his immediate needs—no sin shall be upon him: for, behold, God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace*" (2:173). I use Muhammad Asad's translation of the Qur'an.

55. Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, "Interests, Ideas, and Islamist Outreach in Egypt," in Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism, op. cit.*, pp. 239-245.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 240.

If understood in this fashion, ideational theory includes the possibility that preferences are not always fixed, as classical realist and liberal theories of international relations believed.<sup>57</sup> Preferences have to be taken seriously, as Moravcsik claims,<sup>58</sup> but it should be admitted that interest and preference formations are not always caused by material incentives. This task can also be performed by ideas, norms, or values.<sup>59</sup> An ideational theory, therefore, is not only able to account for an interest formation and reordering of preferences, but it can also explain how this process is undertaken.

A critic could say that subscribing to a particular programmatic belief or ideational structure does not necessarily mean that person will act on or follow such normative basis. This objection is acceptable since human beings have individual will which can flout structural, institutional, or ideational expectations.<sup>60</sup> Yet, as long as a person affiliates oneself with particular programmatic beliefs, acts in accordance with such norms, and states that one's actions were motivated or instructed by that framework, we have as good a case as any in social science to claim that ideas indeed caused one's behavior. Another objection to my argument could be raised on the grounds of justification of one's behavior. In other words, people frequently justify their actions *retrospectively*. However, if their attachment to a set of programmatic beliefs *preceded* their actions, we have a relatively strong case to believe that ideas caused such actions. My claim would only be weakened, or falsified, if we found out that a person started believing in or accepting a certain set of ideas after she did a certain action.

- 
57. It was this methodological commitment that made it impossible for these two groups of theories - in their classical forms - to predict, or account for, the end of the Cold War. See Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Ideas do not Float Freely: Transnational Coalitions, Domestic Structures, and the End of the Cold War," *International Organization* (Spring 1994), pp. 185-214.
58. Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* (Autumn 1997), pp. 513-553.
59. Audie Klotz, *Norms in International Relations: The Struggle Against Apartheid*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995, pp. 16-20.
60. For this reason, it would be hard to justify claims stating general or covering laws in social science.

The strongest possible version of an ideational argument would be to establish that a person had several possible courses of action at his or her disposal at the time of decision-making. If his or her choice was in line with what we could expect based on that persons programmatic beliefs - i.e. the choice is geared toward objectives outlined by such beliefs, or behavior based on that choice is within range of actions delineated by those beliefs - and she claims that it was his or her beliefs or ideas that caused him or her to made a particular choice, then the burden of proof that it was something other than ideas that made that person choose that particular action or behavior would not be on ideational theorists anymore, but on those who are trying to put forward an alternative explanation.

### **Ideas Diffusion or How Ideas and Norms are Spread?**

So far, I have been establishing the case for ideational logic of explanation, i.e. how individual behavior can be caused by ideas. However, my claim about Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia also needs to account for the spread of ideas and norms, and for the acceptance of these norms by a wider segment of the society. In other words, I need to answer how ideas and norms spread, and why they are being accepted?

Ideas, of course, do not operate on their own. They need carriers. These are people who, through their influence in society, are able to put forward their ideas and promote them as the proper direction for action, behavior, or policy. Their influence depends on their status within a given social and political system. They need to have credibility, knowledge, intelligence, and—perhaps most importantly—they need to know how to present their ideas in a way that would be acceptable to their targeted audience. In other words, they must have knowledge of local society and its symbols, so that the ideas they are promoting are presented in a manner which is understandable and acceptable to the audience. This is where leadership plays very important role in influencing political and social choice. In addition to being able to present their ideas, these carriers should have the ability for consensus-building by orienting actions in such a manner as to ensure political socialization along the ideas they are promoting. Ideational theorists have to account for this process. Most importantly, they need to explain how ideas and

norms which were previously held by a small group of carriers, become accepted among a wider group of people.<sup>61</sup>

In recent years, international relations scholars have forwarded a number of views regarding the problem of norm diffusion, acceptance, and compliance. At present, there is a tendency to try to combine rationalist and constructivist approaches by admitting that various factors play a role in these processes.<sup>62</sup> Among these factors are transnational movements and networks,<sup>63</sup> 'norm cascade' and political socialization,<sup>64</sup> actors and framing processes,<sup>65</sup> social learning and argumentative persuasion,<sup>66</sup> domestic salience of international norms,<sup>67</sup> norm localization and congruence building,<sup>68</sup> and organizational culture.<sup>69</sup>

Here, I will provide a brief overview of norm diffusion, acceptance, and compliance among Muslims in Malaysia to illustrate the importance

- 
61. This missing dimension has plagued some of the important ideational works. See Mark M. Blyth, "Any More Bright Ideas? The Ideational Turn of Comparative Political Economy," *Comparative Politics*, (January, 1997), pp. 229-250, especially pp. 235-238.
  62. See Kate O'Neill, Jörg Balsiger, and Stacy D. VanDeveer, "Actors, Norms, and Impact: Recent International Cooperation Theory and the Influence of the Agent-Structure Debate," *Annual Review of Political Science*, (2004), pp. 149-175.
  63. Kathryn Sikkink, "Human Rights, Principled Issue-Networks, and Sovereignty in Latin America," *International Organization*, (Summer, 1993), pp. 411-441; Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998; Audie Klotz, "Transnational Activism and Global Transformations: The Anti-Apartheid and Abolitionist Experiences," *The European Journal of International Relations*, (March, 2002), pp. 49-76.
  64. Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization*, (Autumn, 1998), pp. 887-917.
  65. See John L. Campbell, "Ideas, Politics, and Public Policy," *op. cit.*, pp. 26-28 and pp. 29-30.
  66. Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Why Comply? Social Learning and European Identity Change," *International Organization*, (Summer 2001), pp. 553-588
  67. Andrew P. Cortell and James W. Davis, Jr., "Understanding the Domestic Impact of International Norms: A Research Agenda," *International Studies Review*, (Spring 2000), pp. 65-87.
  68. Amitav Acharya, "How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism," *International Organization*, (Spring 2004), pp. 239-275.
  69. Jeffrey W. Legro, "Which Norms Matter? Revisiting the "Failure" of Internationalism," *International Organization*, (winter 1997), pp. 31-63

of the above factors in these processes. The rest of my work talks about these issues in detail. Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia was spurred by factors that had both domestic and international origins. While influence of international factors was perhaps stronger, domestic factors also played a significant role. More importantly, interplay between these two groups of factors and their congruence created the social phenomenon of Islamic Revival. During the 1960s, several Malaysian academicians, most notable among whom was Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, started calling for a renewed commitment to the Malay and Islamic cause. Muslim student associations, such as the National Association of Muslim Students in Malaysia (PKPIM, Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar-Pelajar Islam Malaysia), adopted some of those ideas. In 1969, the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM, Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia) was formed as an outgrowth of PKPIM. One of their main goals was to promote the understanding of Islam as *al-din* (pronounced 'dean'), i.e. as a complete way of life. Now, PKPIM did not have in its charter this particular goal. The question is, where did this shift come from? I show how this idea of 'Islam as *al-din*' was developed by al-Attas during the 1960s, and it found its way to his most important book in the 1970s. Al-Attas was perhaps the greatest local influence on revivalists in ABIM. He was instrumental in drawing the ABIM charter, and designed the ABIM logo as well.

The same understanding of Islam as a way of life was previously outlined by Islamic revivalists elsewhere in the Muslim world. The initiator of the idea was Hasan al-Banna (d.1949), the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. This notion was later also expounded by Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi (d.1979). Through my interviews, I have established that their books were widely read among Muslim students in Malaysia in the 1960s and 1970s.

Another impetus for Islamic Revivalism came in the wake of the New Economic Policy (NEP) which the Malaysian government promulgated after the 1969 crisis. The policy helped Malay-Muslim students with scholarships to enter universities, both in Malaysia and abroad. While abroad, many of those students became active in Muslim student associations. The interesting thing is that this socialization took place mostly in universities in the US and the UK. At that time, revivalist

ideas dominated these student associations. Once back in Malaysia, these graduates plugged themselves into the existing social and political organizations with Islamic tendencies, such as ABIM, the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS), and Dar al-Arqam. This transnational movement of people and ideas reinforced the pre-existing local understanding of Islam. It also created a critical mass of followers which boomed during the 1970s. It should be noted that these were not ordinary people. These were people who were previously student leaders, and who held degrees from both local and prestigious international universities. As such, they fulfilled the criteria that idea carriers and entrepreneurs need to have to make their ideas and beliefs accepted.

But transnational revivalist ideas and norms needed to be framed in such a way to make vernacular politics<sup>70</sup> relevant. The crisis in Malaysian social and political fabric provided a platform for revivalists to offer their views on social, political, and economic problems in the society. The problem was not simply one of poverty and inequality of wealth distribution, as the government claimed, but it ran deeper. The problem, according to Malaysian revivalists, was a lack of adherence to Islam, both on a personal as well as on a societal level. Poverty and wealth distribution inequality were only symptoms. The social, economic, and political system of the country should be based on Islam in order to avoid those and other problems. But to achieve this, a renewed commitment to Islam was needed among Muslims. In this way, transnational revivalist ideas and norms were localized, and the congruence of local and international norms played an important role in the spread of Islamic revivalism.

On another level, revivalists adopted the organizational culture of social learning, socialization, and argumentative persuasion from their counterparts in other countries. For instance, both ABIM and PAS used *usrah*<sup>71</sup> methods to spread their ideas among their followers and sympathizers. The method was first used by the Muslim Brotherhood

---

70. Vernacular politics is based on everyday concerns and interpersonal relations. See Jenny B. White, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2003.

71. *Usrah* is an Arabic word for family.



in Egypt. The followers of the movement were grouped into smaller groups, with each group having its leader (*naqib*), usually a very committed person whose personal piety, good character, and education allowed him/her to have an influence on *usrah* members. In these small, informal settings, group members studied the Qur'an, Prophetic traditions, offered prayers together, and read works of al-Banna, Seyyid Qutb, Mawdudi, al-Attas, and other Muslim thinkers and activists. It was in these settings that social learning, socialization along revivalist lines, and argumentative persuasion<sup>72</sup> took place. Checkel's five hypotheses<sup>73</sup> seem well-fulfilled in this setting. Through persuasion and by providing personal good examples, Malaysian revivalists invited students and their work colleagues to join Islamic movements and parties. Once the invitations were accepted, they were socialized and persuaded through the informal setting of *usrah* to become committed workers for the Muslim cause.

### Methodology and cases

Process tracing<sup>74</sup> is usually suggested as the most useful methodology in arguing along ideational lines. It allows researcher to retrace steps taken by a decision-maker before taking decisions. Process tracing permits us to open 'the black box' of decision-making processes. Through careful retracing of actors' moves, we should be able to ascertain which variables played role in their decisions. This process also enables us to reconstruct actors' motivations, and their assessment of situations.<sup>75</sup> Process tracing is a part of comparative-historical methodology which is especially useful in non-statistical social science studies.<sup>76</sup> Comparative-

---

72. Jeffrey T. Checkel, *op. cit.*, pp. 560-564.

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 562-563.

74. See Andrew Bennett and Alexander L. George, "Process Tracing in Case Study Research," available at Andrew Bennett's website, <<http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/bennetta/PROTCG.htm>>.

75. Sheri Berman, *The Social Democratic Moment*, *op. cit.*, pg. 34.

76. James Mahoney, "Comparative-Historical Methodology," *Annual Review of Sociology*, (2004), pp. 81-101.

historical methodology requires a great amount of data studied over time to infer causal mechanisms. As Mahoney puts it, "a common view is that the analysis of processes over time is the central basis for causal inference in comparative-historical research."<sup>77</sup> Therefore, understanding temporal context and how social processes develop over time is crucial to this approach.<sup>78</sup> Understanding decision-making processes is also necessary in process tracing. As I already stated, I use some of the approaches identified by scholars in the field of comparative foreign policy decisions.<sup>79</sup> Constructing a narrative is also an important part of ideational argument. By focusing on both abstract and detailed descriptions and narratives, ideational theorists are able to construct parsimonious accounts of the story they are telling.<sup>80</sup> Narrative explanations could, then, be looked at as another type of explanation in social science.<sup>81</sup>

As for comparative method, it is essential in small-N studies. It is a substitute for large-N samples and experimental studies that are available in other scientific fields. For ideational theorists to isolate ideas as variables, the ideal scenario would be to find two cases which are equal in everything except in ideas which the actors in those two cases hold.<sup>82</sup> However, such ideal cases are rare to find. Furthermore, my study focuses on only one country. Therefore, I need to apply within-case analysis. By focusing on the Malay middle class and the elites, I am able to obtain comparative cases. For instance, why have some members of the Malay

---

77. Ibid., pg. 88.

78. For the importance of temporal context see Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.

79. Margaret G. Hermann, "How Decision Units Shape Foreign Policy: A Theoretical Framework," *International Studies Review*, (Summer 2001), pp. 50-51.

80. See Paul F. Steinberg, "New Approaches to Causal Analysis in Policy Research," paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, September 2-5, 2004. The paper is available at <http://www.humsoc.hmc.edu/paulweb/approaches.pdf>.

81. Peter Abell, "Narrative Explanation: An Alternative to Variable-Centered Explanation?," *Annual Review of Sociology* (2004), pp. 287-310.

82. A close approximation of this case is Richard Biernacki, *The Fabrication of Labor: Germany and Britain 1640-1914*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995.

middle class opted for a path that was different and, in terms of material incentives, less rewarding? Here we have Malays belonging to the middle class who share most of the characteristics and formative experiences, yet the outcome of their policies were different. I argue that it was variation in ideas between these two groups which explains their differing policy positions. I chose as my cases the establishment of the Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement (ABIM), the New Economic Policy, and the Islamic Party of Malaysia's (PAS) reinvention as an Islamic movement.

ABIM, as I already mentioned, took as central to its struggle 'establishment and propagation of Islam as *al-din*.' This was a novel approach in the Malaysian social environment and I study what made this shift possible, and how this new norm was institutionalized. The New Economic Policy (NEP) was proposed as a solution for the social and economic problems of the Malays. Despite standing to benefit most from this policy, some middle class Malays criticized it severely. What accounts for this rejection? I posit that, since the NEP was not within the range of actions defined by revivalists' programmatic ideas, they rejected it and criticized it as 'un-Islamic.' Their alternatives were accepted by a sizeable number of Malaysian Muslims, through processes of norm diffusion which I discussed above. Finally, what made the Islamic Party's policy to reinvent and present itself as an Islamic movement, in addition to it being a political party? Again, the application of my methodology shows the causal impact of ideas. These developments worked in unison to produce the phenomenon of Islamic revivalism in Malaysia in the 1970s.

This methodology is not just a contribution to ideational logic of explanation. It should be seen as a general contribution to the study of Islamic revivalism, the role of Islam in Muslim societies, the role of religion in politics, Muslim political development, Muslims' interaction with modernity, Southeast Asian and Malaysian studies, and the importance of norms in transnational and domestic politics. As such, I hope it is a modest, but multifaceted, contribution to political science in general.

## References

1. Abu-Rabi, Ibrahim M., *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World*. Brockport, NY: SUNY Press, 1995.
2. Huntington, Samuel, *Ideas and Foreign Policy*. Eds. Robert Keohane and Judith Goldstein. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.
3. Ignatieff, Michael, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994.
4. Sikkink, Kathryn, *Ideas and Institutions: Developmentalism in Brazil and Argentina*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.
5. Stark, Rodney, "Why Gods Should Matter in Social Science," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 49, Issue 39, B7.