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The Governor, the Cow-Head, and the Thrashing Pillows: Negotiated "Restrictive Islam" in Early Twenty-First Century Southeast Asia?

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Abstract: There are obviously several ways to explore the issue of Islamic radicalism in Southeast Asia. Instead of focusing on explicit violence such as those carried out by jihadi groups or those associated with them, this research article chooses to examine three empirical cases of Muslims' expression of "restrictive Islam" that have taken place in the public sphere in both majority and minority Muslim contexts of Southeast Asia. They are: Muslims' calling for the removal of an elected Chinese Christian governor of Jakarta on account of blasphemy in Indonesia; Muslims' cow head protest to intimidate Hindus in Malaysia; and some Muslims' thrashing of pillows at a hospital for COVID-19 patients as an expression of vehement faith-based refusal and protest in Buddhist Thailand against health protocols issued by Thai officials in the current fight against the pandemic in Southern Thailand. This article argues that the "restrictive" lives that some Muslims lead in Southeast Asia today have to assume a negotiated form that is a mixture of "high artificiality", recently adopted from a version of purist Islam they claim to be authentic, and the "pure normality" resulting from a combination of political reality informed by existing forms of governance in these countries and the legacy of how historical Islam arrived in this land. The result is that the "restrictive Islam" espoused by many Southeast Asian Muslims could not be overly "extreme" or "radical" but tends to appear in a somewhat "negotiated" form.

Keywords: "restrictive Islam"; negotiation; Southeast Asian Muslims; protests; high artificiality; pure normality

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1. Introduction

On 17 November 2021, while discussing the contested issue of religion and science using the German movie "*The Physician*" (2013) as a platform in my "Religion and Politics" online class at Thammasat University, a fourth-year Political Science student who just went through an internship program with the Thai Ministry of Interior remarked: "But the Muslims did not want to get vaccinated to protect themselves against the pandemic". He explained that his internship involved going through all official documents coming from civil servants working in the three Southernmost provinces of Thailand, Pattani (official spelling), Yala, and Narathiwat, where the majority of the population are Muslims, meaning some 80% of approximately 2 million people. When asked what had happened, he responded: they did not want to get vaccinated because it is considered injecting alien materials into "our sacred God-given bodies" and that "these vaccines may be contaminated with pork substances". In Yala, people refused to follow medical protocols following the death of their relatives: instant burial of COVID-19-related deaths without the Islamic bath rite. They exhumed the bodies, gave them a ritual bath and *Janaza* prayer (ritual prayer for a dead Muslim), then put the bodies back in the ground in the "proper burial" manner. The student reported that, as a result, there was a new pandemic cluster in Yala during the month of July 2021. When asked what happened to the suggested religious protocols advocated by the official Head of Muslims in Thailand—Office of the *Shaikh-ul-Islam* (*Chularajmontri*), that religious congregations such as Friday prayers should be

abandoned during the height of the pandemic, and other ritual congregations including *Janaza* prayer avoided, the student said, "They sneaked into some mosques for Friday prayers because they did not believe in the *Shaikh-ul Islam*'s authority" (Yusuf 2010).

The episode above suggests a puzzle: to what degree is this Southern Malay Muslims' defiance of medical protocols a result of a form of "extreme" religious belief that convinced people to risk it all in the face of a deadly pandemic? If such is the case, how do such "extreme beliefs" work in different "contexts"? By "contexts" I mean both the problems facing Muslims and the geo-cultural contexts that are not exactly the center of attention when the issues of radicalism, extremism, and deradicalization are normally considered. To that end, this research article is an attempt to explore how different guises of Muslims' "restrictive Islam", understood here as the understanding and practices of Islam that makes it difficult for them to relate cordially with non-Muslims, are expressed among largely Malay Muslims of Southeast Asia, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, and Southern Thailand. These three local contexts were chosen for the obvious demographic reasons of the Muslim population in these countries being the overriding majority, moderate majority, and minority groups, respectively, which inevitably results in different power relations in these societies. For Indonesia, the so-called "Governor Ahok court case" is chosen to examine how Indonesia, a country with the highest number of Muslims and which is normally believed to reflect the image of "moderate Islam" dealt with the issue of blasphemy brought against a member of a "micro religious minority group" (Narkurairattana 2013), who happened to be its Chinese Christian governor of the capital city, Jakarta. The 2009 cow-head protest case in Malaysia will be examined to construe how a group of Malaysian Muslims became the guilty party in committing sacrilege against the minority Hindus. The thrashing pillows case at a hospital in Southern Thailand by unknown Muslim COVID-19 patients, on the other hand, is selected to show how angry minority Muslims expressed their opposition to the government medical protocols in combating the pandemic threatening the country and the world at present. In choosing these various cases from Southeast Asia, the home to more than a fifth of the world's Muslims, the different ways by which some Malay Muslims negotiate their "restrictive" versions of being Muslims could be subtly understood, and possibly an alternative sense of being Muslims explored.

This research article can be conceptualized into four movements: thesis, methodology, cases, and negotiation. It begins with a brief discussion elucidating the thesis, followed by a brief note on the concept "restrictive Islam" and the methodology used here. Then the three cases studies from Indonesia, 2013; Malaysia, 2009; and Thailand, 2021, will be discussed to illustrate how some Muslims expressed their "restrictive Islams" in different contexts. Finally, how these "restrictive" Muslims have to negotiate their belief and extreme practices will be underscored taking into account the realities of governance and the historical life of Islam in Southeast Asia.

2. The Thesis

Sixteen years ago, I wrote a book discussing the ways in which Muslims as a minority group "negotiate" their lives in a non-Muslim society, focusing on myriad sites where their identity as Muslim were contested while facing various challenges that, in turn, call into question their connectedness with the local, national and global contexts. The notion of "negotiated life" I used then does not only mean steering a difficult path between a dominant universal idiom and an ethnocentric-particular resistance, however. Leaning on the idea Oakeshott proposed in his fascinating *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* (Oakeshott 1959), I maintained that for many Muslims in Thailand, the life of this world emerges as a "negotiated life" through the tension between seriousness and playfulness as they participate in human conversation, learning that theirs were but one among so many voices (Satha-Anand 2005, p. 3).

Writing a few years after the 9/11 incident to assess its impact and the ensuing global war on terrorism in Southeast Asia, Angel Rabasa argues that in order to place

the question in proper perspective, there is a need to explore the varieties of Islamic practices and the history of interfaith/intercommunal relations in this region (Rabasa 2004, pp. 367–412). Pursuing Rabasa's argument, in this research article, I am interested in understanding the ways in which so-called "radical" Muslims express their versions of "restrictive Islam", understood here as petrification in beliefs and practices in different Southeast Asian societies, with their particular political realities and grounded more or less in the common history of how Islam arrived in this part of the world some 700 years ago. In so doing, it calls for a different rendition of "negotiation".

The notion of "restrictive Islam" to be used throughout this paper instead of "*Wahhabism*" or "*Salafism*" commonly used elsewhere needs some clarification, however. While "*Wahabism*" denotes a movement begun by Muhammad Ibn Abd al Wahab in 18th century Arabia in its personalized origin, "*Salafism*" suggests the basis of authority that movement has relied on. The ground of legitimacy of "*Salafism*" has been its quest for pristine Islam guided by "authentic" application of divine messages espoused in the holy *Qu'ran*, then lived by the Prophets, and the succeeding age of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs (632–661) (Moussalli 1999, p. 113). Such legitimation relegates other forms of legitimation to insignificance, or at best-marginal importance. Combining a quest for purity with the practices of "authentic Islam" only until the end of the reign of the *Rashidun* caliphate results in "restrictive Islam" that is at once narrow in terms of textual interpretation in particular, and limited in terms of institutions producing Islamic knowledge. By idealizing "the golden age in Islam", adherents ignored or were uninterested in the ways in which Islam as a religion has lived through world history (Abou El Fadl 2005, p. 76). More importantly, for the purpose of this study, while "*Wahabism*" and "*Salafism*" as concepts are theologically and historically inclined, "restrictive Islam" underscores the effects those ideas have produced in the ordinary lives of Muslims-in choosing friends or foes, tolerating other's religious symbols and practices, as well as the ways a Muslim's life could/should be carried out in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It should also be noted that when compared to many others, a Muslim's life in following Islam will necessary be restrictive in some respects, such as food consumption, work chosen, or entertainment enjoyed. But this very fact allows the concept to be reality-oriented because one could discuss lives of ordinary Muslims as less or more dynamic. Importantly, owing to the work of the late Russian/Dutch sociologist W.F. Wertheim's *Evolution and Revolution: a rising waves of emancipation* (Wertheim 1974), "restrictive Islam" practiced by some Muslims in its negotiated forms might theoretically open up a possibility of thinking about "emancipatory Islam" in the future.

Echoing the life of a young male in a Catholic school that Robert Musil wrote about in 1906 Europe (Toibin 2020, p. 37), I would argue that the lives that some "restrictive" Muslims lead in Southeast Asia today have to assume a negotiated form that is a mixture of "high artificiality" recently adopted from a version of purist Islam they claim to be authentic and the "pure normality" resulted from a combination of political reality informed by existing forms of governance in these countries and legacy of how historical Islam arrived in this land. The result is that the "restrictive" Islam espoused by many Southeast Asian Muslims could not be overly "extreme" or "radical" but tends to appear in a somewhat "negotiated" form, also reflecting others' voices.

In order to arrive at this thesis, this article will examine three case studies in three different societies of Southeast Asia. The analytical reasons for selecting these particular three cases, and the ways by which they will be analyzed will be discussed next.

3. A Note on Methodology

In a review of Weintraub's *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia* (2011), Aljunied writes that by focusing on the ways in which Muslims negotiate and assert their Islamic identity through modern and popular media channels in these two countries, the academic gaze has been insightfully shifted from the Middle East and Europe to "a relatively neglected region" (Aljunied 2012, pp. 257–59). While the academic shift

in such cultural geographical focus is to be commended, it is important to point out that this "neglected region" that is Southeast Asia has one-fifth of the world's Muslim population. It is home to countries with the largest or relatively large Muslim majority that are Indonesia and Malaysia, respectively, as well as a significant Muslim minority population in the Philippines, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand. To see how some Muslims negotiate their religious identities and the ways in which they express their "restrictive Islam", it is interesting to look at such phenomena in the contexts where Muslims are both majority and minority so that shades of being restrictive Muslims who produced these "extreme" expressions could perhaps be appreciated. Thailand is selected not only because of my propinquity with the case and, therefore, allows some direct data collection and engagement, but also because it is a country where violence in the deep south between the Malay Muslims, a large majority in the region but a small minority in the country, and the Thai government, which re-exploded since 2004 and has claimed more than 7000 lives with no end in sight at the time of this writing in 2022 (https://deepsouthwatch.org/index.php/en/node/12815, accessed 27 December 2021). In addition, selecting the case of the Muslim minority in Thailand and not the Philippines, where the majority are Catholic, might help one easier discern the troubled Buddhist–Muslim relationship in other *Theravada* Buddhist societies in Asia that include Myanmar, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka as well.

The three cases selected here are the so-called governor "Ahok" blasphemy protests in 2017 in Indonesia; the cow head protest in front of the Selangor state government headquarters in 2009 in Malaysia; and the thrashing of the pillows as a protest expression against COVID vaccinations in 2021 in Southern Thailand. While the perpetrators in these three cases were most likely Malay Muslims, meaning Muslims with a strong ethnic Malay cultural legacy, those who have become their targets are the Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist (governments), respectively. Analyzing different religio-cultural dynamics in these cases, and when seen together, would illuminate how these Malay Muslim protesters negotiate their versions of "restrictive Islam" in Southeast Asia's complex governance and cultural contexts.

It is important to note that the amount of data for these cases varies. There has been a large amount of data as well as studies, some truly remarkable, in the Indonesian governor case, including an excellent book-length work by Peterson based on his Ph.D. dissertation (Telle 2021, pp. 268–71), whereas, in the cow head protest case, there have been less both in English and Bahasa Malaysian. For the thrashing pillow Thai case, while much of the data came from my personal communication with some volunteers currently working on the pandemic in Thailand's Deep South, I will also rely on a small piece of research on how Malay Muslims in Southern Thailand has dealt with the pandemic which I initiated in 2021, but was conducted by the Cultural Literacy Project that I have been associated with for the last ten years (Satha-Anand 2020, pp. 156–60).

It goes without saying that there are various ways to study these three cases. For example, Daniel Peterson uses the "law and society" approach to analyze the Ahok blasphemy case in his recently published Ph.D. dissertation. Not only did he carefully unpack the Indonesian blasphemy law, but also connects how such law is used in practice along the line of noted legal and Indonesian specialists such as Eugen Ehrlich's "living law", Clifford Geertz's "pattern of law", and Daniel Lev's "theory-practice gap" (Peterson 2020, p. 13).

The methodology for this research, influenced by Johan Galtung's critical peace research, is different because it does not distinguish the factors responsible for a social phenomenon in terms of spheres of influence such as "law and society", but that of layers of variables, not unlike archaeology of knowledge (Satha-Anand 2021, pp. 5–11). "Archaeology of knowledge" used here as methodology needs to be elucidated, however.

When Michel Foucault wrote his *Archaeology of Knowledge* in the early 1970s, he explained that his archaeological method, which he later abandoned, was an attempt to decipher meanings that rest on the "intrinsic description" of the object under study (Foucault 1972, p. 7). The notion of "layers" used here, on the other hand, conveys a sense of

analysis as an excavation of knowledge, not unlike that in the field of archaeology. The first layer, easily visible, is that of agency which could be construed with agency-related theories such as the theory of action. The second layer, less visible, is that of structures and institutions, which includes laws, education, economics, and governance, among others, which serve as sources of the phenomenon under study. Finally, the third layer, invisible and near pertinent, is the cultural layer which legitimizes the other two. It is the complex domain of belief systems that include religions, language, and history (Galtung 1996, pp. 201–7).

What I am proposing here is to view these three case studies as constituted by these three layers, with special attention to the second and the third. These structural and especially cultural layers, where religious legitimation is buried, needs to be excavated if the ways in which shades of "restrictive" Islam are to be construed. I would argue that it is the dynamics between these two layers that take the "restrictive" version of Islam and put it in control of some Muslims' actions. But this "restrictive" version of Islam is not without contestations, and hence "high artificiality", which came from the "normal" history of how Islam arrived in the region and the institutional structure of governance in different cases, which are also historical products. This is a sense of "negotiated" restrictive Islam in Southeast Asia that renders it arguably different from other parts of the world.

Each of these three case studies will be presented in four steps. First will be the general description of the case to be followed by incidents that are responsible for the outcome of each case: a street protest when the Jakarta governor faced a relatively "light" sentence, the Malaysian cow-head protesters sparingly charged, and pillow trashers who protested against the vaccination project by Thai government only attacked online. Then the reasons given by Muslim perpetrators in each case, when available, will be discussed. Each case ends with an analysis of how the reasons given by Muslim perpetrators work in tandem with the institutional structure of governance and the historical reality of Islam. The article then ends with a brief discussion of alternatives to "restrictive Islam" as a way to possibly foster more cordial interfaith relations.

4. The Governor: Ahok and the Blasphemy Charge

Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, widely known as "Ahok", was the governor of Jakarta, the megacity that is the capital of Indonesia. While some may consider him a most committed reformer and effective, yet controversial governor to have ever led the capital, what makes him most unique in Indonesian history is the fact that Ahok is at once a Christian and an ethnic Chinese, a "double minority" governing a city where 83% of its population are Muslims. His Jakarta governorship began on 19 November 2014 and was supposed to last until October 2017. He lost the gubernatorial run-off election on 19 April 2017. Less than a month later, on May 9, he was convicted of blaspheming Islam and *Al-Qur'an* and sentenced to two years in jail. (Peterson 2020, p. 1). For the purpose of this research, it is important to first clearly show how Ahok was initially indicted, how this case engendered the largest protest demonstrations in the last two decades in Indonesia, and how despite heightened attack against the governor with the protest's violent rhetoric, the blasphemy verdict was considered mild.

Ahok's predicament began on 27 September 2016 when he made an official visit to the Thousand Islands, off the coast of Jakarta. While speaking to about 100 people, mostly fishermen, he asked why they did not support his development programs since he only got one vote from them in the previous elections. Some of them responded that according to Quranic teaching in *Surah* (chapter) *Al-Maidah*, *Ayah* (verse) 51, they could not vote for him. At which point, he told them: "You don't have to vote for me and you probably won't, if you've been misled by those using *Surah Al Maidah* 51". It should be noted that this verse has often been understood as a warning for Muslims against having Jews and Christians as their "*auliya*", meaning "friends" (Butt 2017).

On 6 October 2016, Buni Yani, a former academic in Jakarta and an outspoken critic of Ahok uploaded a 30 seconds video excerpt of Ahok's remark. Yani entitled the video: "Defamation of Religion" with an edited transcript attached. The uploaded transcript left

out one word: "use" (*pakai*) from what Ahok originally said (Peterson 2020, p. 1). Ahok claimed in a later interview with *Al-Jazeera* that his remark was taken out of context since he spoke for 6000 seconds and not 30 as posted (Al-Jazeera, "AHOK: Indonesia's religious tolerance on trial?" 9 May 2017 https://www.aljazeera.com/program/talk-to-al-jazeera/2017/5/9/ahok-indonesias-religious-tolerance-on-trial accessed on 27 January 2021). As a result, the meaning of Ahok's statement shifted from "Verse 51 was used by people to mislead (others)" to "Verse 51 was misleading". With the word "*pakai*" (use), the criticism of misuse was directed towards the *ulama* (religious scholars); without it, the criticism was directed at the *Qur'an* itself. (Butt 2017) Five days later, on October 9, 2016, Indonesia's Council of Ulama (the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia*: MUI) issued a "Religious Opinion and Stance" declaring Ahok's remarks to be "*haram*" (forbidden) (Peterson 2020, p. 3).

On 4 November 2016, the National Movement to Defend the MUI *Fatwa* organized a mass protest with some 150,000 people in front of the presidential palace (*Istana Negara*) demanding Ahok's conviction (Butt 2017; Peterson 2020, p. 3). Then on 2 December 2016, more than 500,000 people protested in Jakarta's central park, Medan Merdeka.

The main issue that is responsible for Ahok's charge, according to the prosecution, the court's verdict, and the protests against him both before and after the verdict, is blasphemy. "At the center of this issue lies Ahok's utterance quoting a *Qur'anic* verse, using *Surah Al Maidah* Verse 51" (Butt 2017).

The exact wording of this contentious verse according to *The Qur'an* is: "O YOU who have attained to faith! Do not take the Jews and the Christians for your allies: they are but allies of one another-and whoever of you allies himself with them becomes, verily, one of them; behold, God does not guide such evildoers." (The Message of the Qur'an 1980, pp. 142–43). The keyword is "*awliya*", which arguably could mean "allies", "friends" and/or "leaders". When asked by *Al-Jazeera* about this, Ahok maintained that "Gus Dur", the late President Abdurrahman Wahid-himself an Islamic scholar, told him in 2007 that the word has nothing to do with a gubernatorial election because it means "a guardian" or "a protector", while he identified himself as a "government administrator" or "a public servant" (Al-Jazeera Online 2017, "AHOK: Indonesia's religious tolerance on trial?" 9 May 2017 https://www.aljazeera.com/program/talk-to-al-jazeera/2017/5/9/ahok-indonesias-religious-tolerance-on-trial, accessed on 27 January 2021). Others suggested that a Quranic verse needs to be construed in the context when it was first revealed. In this case, it was the later years of sixth-century Medina. That was the time when the new Muslim community was persecuted and betrayed by Arab tribes, Christians, and some Jewish communities. In a context where the Muslims were outnumbered and politically weaker, siding or allying with them could endanger the still fragile Islamic community (Ropi 2016).

Different interpretations of this controversial verse notwithstanding, it is Ahok's statement that was the center of the Indonesian court's attention. With or without the word "*pakai*" (use), the status of the verse was seen either as a "tool to deceive the community" or "a source of deception itself". As a result, the court judged that Ahok had "belittled, degraded, and insulted" this verse in a *Surah* (chapter) of the holy *Qur'an* itself. In this sense, he had offended the Islamic holy book, therefore, blasphemy occurred. Ahok was found guilty of violating Article 156a of the Criminal Code for publicly expressing feelings insulting or defaming a religion practiced in Indonesia and sentenced to two years in prison (Butt 2017).

After Ahok was convicted on 9 May 2017, some Muslim protesters took to the street to denounce the "leniency" of his two-year sentence passed by the North Jakarta District Court. Some even called for his execution (Peterson 2020, p. 4). For example, a member of an extreme group *Hizb ut-Tahrir* told the BBC that: "He should have got the maximum of five years or better still have been beheaded" (BBC News Online 2017).

The Ahok case in Peterson's detailed study questions whether Indonesia's liberal democratic human rights legal framework could withstand the rise of "Islamist majoritarian sentiment". His study suggests how the Islamist majoritarian construction of human rights law could turn out to be successful in Indonesia (Peterson 2020). On the other hand,

using the concept "floating Ummah", Vedi Hadiz maintains that "there is no inherent contradiction between the drift to conservative morality and the fact that major Islamic mass organizations continue to operate fully with the democratic process" (Hadiz 2019, p. 4). In showing how it works in the context of changing Indonesian society, he contextualizes the Ahok case, not only in the face of apparent identity politics, but also on monstrous economic inequality where "a mere four of Indonesia's tycoons are worth as much as 100 million of their poorest countrymen" (Hadiz 2019, p. 8). Moreover, he situates the case in what many have called "the conservative turn in Indonesian Islam" characterized by the mainstreaming of highly rigid and conservative takes on Islamic morality. For example, nearly 88 percent of Indonesians at the time of his writing viewed LGBT orientations as a threat to the nation (Hadiz 2019, p. 5).

While such analyses are illuminating, what I consider quite unusual was that the prosecutors had initially indicted him for violating Article 156, which prohibits the expression of hatred or contempt for a particular group in society. While *the prosecutors had pursued a lesser charge* that could result in a suspended jail term (Lamb 2017), the court chose a harsher charge of two years in prison. But then, in the context of vehement protest from such extreme Muslim groups, the court *did not choose* to punish Ahok with the full extent of the law that would land him with a five-year term.

I would argue that the reason why the extremists' dissatisfaction expressed in loud public protests, calling for maximum punishment or even execution of the governor convicted of blasphemy against *Qur'an* and Islam, rang somewhat hollow is precisely that such fierce call at the agency layer was tamed by the legal dynamics working at the structural layer. In addition, when the violent call for Ahok's execution was expressed in a public demonstration, it had to be tempered down because such public protest had to follow relevant governing Indonesian laws residing in the structural layer.

Moreover, when Muhammad Rizieq Shihab, the leader of Indonesia's Islamic Defenders' Front—a radical Muslim group, together with a group of children, paraded through Jakarta carrying flame torches, they turned their call of '*bunuh-bunuh Ahok*' (kill Ahok) into a song (Peterson 2020, p. 4). Curiously the tune of the song they chose during the parade was a children's song: *Menanam Jagung di Kebun Kita* (Plant Corn in our Garden). While the call to kill operates at the agency level, and one can certainly see the sinister intent of the protest organizers in making such a baleful call coming from children, once such call takes the form of a children's song, it also operates at the cultural layer. Some would argue that it is the tune of the song that is more memorable. But since the song chosen was a widely-known children's song, it is highly probable that the tune the children sang would inextricably tie it with the popular song's lyrics. The lyrics of *Menanam jagung* reflects a love of the environment, work ethic, and diligent character. The cultivation of caring for the environment among children is a form of character education inculcating caring values on them (Gunawan and Zulaeha 2016). In this sense, while the tune of the song in the cultural layer makes it possible for children and the protesters to sing a violent message, its tune leads back to the lyrics of the children's song, which in turn, works by possibly toning the message down. The workings of both the structural and cultural layers engender a negotiated expression of restrictive Muslims' call in the blasphemy case of the Indonesian Chinese–Christian governor of Jakarta.

5. The Cow Head: The Muslims Protest against a Hindu Temple

When Indians came to Selangor, British Malaya, to work on the rubber plantations a century and a half ago during the colonial time, they erected the Sri Maha Miriamman Temple as one of their places of worship. In 2009, residents of Section 19 of Shah Alam, the capital city of the state of Selangor, Malaysia, wanted the temple to be relocated to Section 23 because some 80% of them are Malay Muslims. But local residents of Section 23, also overwhelmingly Muslims, did not want the Hindu temple relocated there either (Leong 2012, p. 32).

During the Muslims' holy month of Ramadan on 28 August 2009, after Friday prayers at the Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz state mosque, the largest in Malaysia, some 50

residents from Section 23 marched to the Secretariat Building to protest against the plan to relocate the Sri Maha Miriamman Temple there. They wanted to lodge their complaint, claiming that it was inappropriate to build a Hindu temple in a Muslim-majority area, to the Selangor *Menteri Besar* (Chief Minister) Tan Sri Abdul Khalid Ibrahim. The group was led by a protester carrying the still bloodied severed head of a cow, while shouting: "God is Great" through loudspeakers. They also carried banners, one of which read: "Islam for all, a temple for Khalid and Rodziah", (Rodziah Ismail, the state public affairs official). Reaching the state building, the protester laid the bloodied cow head in front of its gate, and some of the protesters were seen spitting and stepping on it. A speaker again called for relocating the Hindu temple to Section 22, not their 23. He said that this cow head was the present to the State government, a gift to Khalid Ibrahim and Rodziah. (Fong and Kit 2017, pp. 71–72).

The image of the severed and bloodied head of a cow, a holy animal in Hinduism, stepped and spitted on caused immense repercussion, notably condemnations from different groups both at the national and international levels. Mahyuddin Manaf, one of the leaders of the protest told the press that bringing the severed cow head was not done by the group of protesters he led. He said: "It was not our demand. We were also shocked". He denied the accusation that his group offended the Hindus who believed that the cow is a sacred animal, Lord Shiva's divine pet. He explained that the protester who brought the cow head must have done such a thing as a symbolic act to indicate that the temple relocation plan was foolish. In Malay culture, a cow is a symbol of stupidity. It was meant to direct at the stupid state leader (Malaysiakini Online 2009).

Soon after the incident, Malaysia's home minister, Hishammuddin Tun Hussein, defended the protestors. Echoing Manaf, one of the protest leaders, he claimed that protesters were unaware of the severed cow's head and hence, not to be blamed for any callous behavior. This caused much more disdain among the public. In an insightful work on the incident analyzing the politics of online representation in Malaysia, especially video footage of the protest on the internet, Susan Leong writes: "Watch closely and it is apparent from their general demeanor that the men involved were aware that their every word and deed was being observed and recorded for further dissemination. Keep watching to see several of the protestors holding up their mobile phones to snap amateur photos of themselves stepping on the cow's head—even as journalists rushed up for the headline shot" (Leong 2012, pp. 33–34).

In an obvious effort to diffuse the escalating conflict resulting from the pictures of the severed cow heads being stepped and spit on that went viral online, the Shah Alam City Council organized a public dialogue with Malay Muslim residents from Section 23 over the temple relocation in early September 2009. During the so-called "dialogue", some Malay Muslim participants shouted profanities at the then Selangor Chief Minister, Abdul Khalid Ibrahim, calling him "*MB bodoh*" (stupid Chief Minister) and "*Khalid babi*" (Khalid the pig). Some said "you should be ashamed of being a Malay". Amidst these profane intrusions which continued throughout the meeting, Hindu residents sat silently on the other side (Fong and Kit 2017, p. 84).

Though the police did nothing at the time when the protest took place, on 10 September 2009, twelve protesters were charged under the Sedition Act for carrying and stepping on the cow's head, as well as the Police act for organizing an illegal assembly (Fong and Kit 2017, p. 83). Eleven months later, on 27 July 2010, the Selangor Sessions Court issued its judgment. Eleven of the Muslim protesters were fined 1000 ringgits each after they all pleaded guilty to a charge of illegal assembly. In addition, two of them were found guilty of a sedition charge and were fined 3000 ringgits each, while only one of them received a week's jail term. Selangor state authorities eventually found a new site to build the controversial temple (*Hindustan Times*, 27 July 2010).

Hindu–Muslim relations is a subject widely studied in South Asia, due to the obvious demographic significance, historical tensions, and the geopolitical reality that resulted in at least three wars between India and Pakistan in the latter part of the twentieth century

(Varshney 2003; Sisson and Rose 1990). However, it is an area that has received much less visibility in Southeast Asia. In the case of Malaysia, what is perhaps more common are studies on Malay–Chinese or Muslim–Christian relations. (Yee and Liow 2013, pp. 107–29). Though some consider the 2009 cow head protest just a small incident (Talib et al. 2015), I would argue that focusing on this incident is important not only because the Hindu Muslim relations in Southeast Asia is academically under-studied, but it would also help one understand this issue at a time when the relationship has become increasingly deteriorating (Alatas 2021).

Though the visual image of the bloodied severed cow head was obscene when it took place in a country proud to call itself a multireligious society that represents the face of "moderate Islam", it was no doubt a strong gesture of how far some Malay Muslims, 60% of the Malaysian population, would go in asserting their cause against the Indian Hindu minority of some 7%. It has been argued that the reason for such action to be possible is because the Malaysian cultural order is colored by the notion of "*ketuanan Melayu*" (Malay supremacy), which appears in various aspects of daily life from education to religious affiliations, among others. (Leong 2012, p. 34). But I am curious about the ways in which such obscene behavior was punished. To what degree has such sacrilegious behavior been subdued?

To deal with the above question, it is useful to examine the structural layer from which this phenomenon appeared; that is the local Malaysian state politics. At the time of the protest, the state of Selangor was governed by *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR: People's Alliance), with the *Barisan Nasional* (BN: National Front) as its main political rival. The PR state government accused its rival BN, especially UMNO (United Malays National Organization) of instigating the cow head protest (Fong and Kit 2017, p. 72). This took place in the context of rising religious and ethnic tensions in Malaysia, not only between Malay Muslims and Hindus, but with others as well. For example, permits for Christian church building have been more difficult to acquire; conversion from Islam to Christianity has been designated a prerogative of the Shariah court, which made it almost impossible to occur; or non-Muslims, obviously Christians and Catholics, were banned from using the word "Allah" in their religious practices (Yee and Liow 2013, pp. 107, 113).

A Malay Muslim academic associated with *Jabatan Kemjuan*, (Office for Islamic Development, Office of the Prime Minister) maintains that Hindu–Muslims conflicts over places of worship occur more frequently than with other religious groups despite the fact that clear rules and official regulations are in place for the construction of religious places of worship. Islamic mosques or Christian churches generally followed them in securing official permission. In the case of Hindu temples, Indian worshippers began by setting up a small site or an object of worship first. Then a small spirit house might be built on privately-owned land. When the site became well known and more worshippers attended the sacred rituals, then they would ask for official permission to build a proper temple on the spot. This often led to conflict with local Malay Muslim residents. A number of Malay Muslims think that the Malaysian government usually accommodates the Hindu's demand to maintain peace and tries to avoid religious conflict at all costs. Some felt that it is improper since the places were often built illegally. Others found Hindu temples to be noisy and a nuisance to the surrounding communities. But the conflict has primarily been about political interests, especially in the state of Selangor, where Indian Malaysians are politically powerful. Local governments at the time belonged to the opposition party PR, which had several influential Hindus serving in important positions. As a result, Indian Malaysians who are Hindus were more influential in Selangor than elsewhere in Malaysia (Dureh 2021).

The above opinion may or may not be totally correct, but it certainly points to the governance reality of the state of Selangor, informed by the degree to which different religious groups follow government rules and regulations in their diverse ways. It is also important to underscore the fact that Malaysia's government structure is that of a Federation, comprising 13 states where most heads of states are monarchs who are held in

high regards due to their historical and cultural grounds, but for Malacca, Penang, Sabah, and Sarawak (Ahmad 1987). As a result, two other important players' voices showing their disapproval of the "extreme" expressive acts against Hindus need to be underscored. First, the Malaysian online news service "*The Star*" reported that on 3 September 2009, Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah of Selangor called upon the then Chief Minister of Selangor Khalid Ibrahim to "amicably settle the issues surrounding the relocation of the Hindu temple without hurting the feelings of both Hindus and Muslims" (Fong and Kit 2017, p. 85). On 5 September 2009, Prime Minister Najib Razak urged the people to refrain from condemning or insulting other religions and their believers. Speaking directly to Malay Muslims, he admonished them to follow the true Islamic teachings of showing respect to non-Muslims, pointing specifically that both *Surahs* (Chapters 5 and 6) "*Al-Maidah*", and "*Al-An'am*" of the *Holy Qur'an*, warning Muslims that if they went against others' religions, they would retort violently to the Muslims. He also cautioned the Muslims that they were forbidden from insulting or desecrating items considered sacred to followers of other religions, "so that, in turn, the non-Muslims would show respect to Islam" (Fong and Kit 2017, p. 85).

When the incident of the cow head protest is seen as both growing from and residing in such structural and cultural layers, it is difficult not to be left unpunished. What is happening when the Selangor monarch speaks, is that he does so with cultural authority grounded in hundred years of history of Malay kingdom that allows him to voice his public opinion as the hereditary ruler of Selangor. As the Head of the state of Selangor, and perhaps more importantly as its hereditary ruler, believing that he is respected by all inhabitants—Malay, Muslims, Indians, Hindus and everyone else—he called upon the Chief Minister to settle this issue "amicably" without "hurting the feelings of both the Hindu minority and the Muslim majority." Perceiving his role as the monarch of all people, not only for the Malay Muslims, he issued his "order" to be carried out by the Selangor Chief Minister.

Prime Minister Rajak, on the other hand, is the head of the Federal Government, a modern institution born at the advent of Malaysia as a nation state in its present form only in the 1960s. Yet, when he spoke on the subject quoting *Surahs* from *Al-Qur'an*, he certainly relied on the cultural fountain shared among Malay Muslims and not others. The *Surahs* were cited not in terms of fostering "amicable feelings" among people of differences but to warn the Malays that they must be careful in dealing with non-Muslims for they would reap what they sow, a much more universal message.

Maybe this is why two days later, on 7 September, the minister in the Prime Minister's Department Koh Txu Koon suggested that the police should have a standard procedure in dealing with public protest, in order to show that it is consistent and fair to all. He then addressed the Selangor police directly, saying that the cow head protest had created doubts and unhappiness among the people. Therefore "the police must be sensitive to public perception and not just carry out their duty as the image of the police is a reflection of the Government" (Fong and Kit 2017, pp. 84–85).

Three days after that, twelve protesters were charged and the legal procedure against them officially began. I would argue that this is another case when an incident that reflects the "restrictive" version of Islam, that offends people of other religious persuasion took place. Though grown out of the local political conflict, it will have to be contained by other forces existing in the very same structural layer. In this case, the voices that instruct the "restrictive" Islamic expression to be toned down came from elements that exist in the layer of structural governance of Malaysia: the Selangor Sultan and the Federation Prime Minister. That these voices work is due to its legitimacy born both from structural layer Malaysian constitution and laws, as well as the cultural layers where Malay history and Islamic culture sound the tone of amicable settlement of the conflict, taking into account feelings of those involved. It is the normal workings of elements in the structural and cultural layers that create conditions with both punishments and admonitions, where the

artificiality of this "restrictive" guise of Islam in Malaysia was forced to negotiate how to express itself in the normal public sphere.

6. The Thrashing of the Pillows: Against the COVID Vaccine in Southern Thailand

According to the Thai Public Health Ministry, in October 2021, the number of new COVID patients in the Deep South already exceeded that of Bangkok's new patients by almost 50% (BBC Thai Online 2021). Earlier on 5 January, the *Shaikh-ul Islam* Office (*Samnak Chularajmontri*), an official head of all Muslims in Thailand issued another of its directives regarding religious practices for Muslims to prevent the spread of the new wave of COVID-19 in the country. The directives include the followings: all mosques in provinces with high infection rates should abandon Friday *Juma'at* prayers; Provincial Islamic Committees should consult their respective provincial governors about the *Juma'at* services at mosques in those provinces; seek cooperation from all concerned parties to abstain from collective activities such as *Dawa'h* (inviting believers to the righteous path) or *Tabliq* (group visitation of Muslims to exhort them to be more observant), undertaking fundraising programs by mosques or associations, and to provide Islamic education for children at mosques. (Matichon Online 2021).

A few months earlier, a VDO clip of an Indonesian *Uztaz* addressing his *Dawa'h* group went viral in Southern Thailand. In this clip, the *Uztaz* said three things. First, we do not have to be afraid of coronavirus, it is the virus that has to be afraid of our congregation. Second, wherever there is coronavirus, send our "*jumaat*" there to quell them. Third, we should only fear *Allah*, not any other things, including the corona virus (Nation Online 2020). It would be interesting to contemplate how the pandemic has resulted in contestation between pertinent issues such as faith in God vs obedience to the government or its religious representation. Apart from the startling growth of the pandemic in the area, the ways in which Malay Muslims in Southern Thailand have dealt with the COVID-19 vaccine is selected as the third case study precisely because it is different from the other two from Indonesia and Malaysia discussed above.

First, this is the case of a Muslim minority in a Buddhist polity. Muslims officially constitute 5.8% in a country of some 69 million people, where more than 90% are Buddhists (Woodward and Scupin 2021, p. 4). Second, the Vaccine case under study here focuses on the area generally called the "Deep South" of Thailand, comprising three provinces: Pattani (Thailand's official spelling), Yala, and Narathiwat; the latter two share a border with three Northern Malaysian states: Kedah, Perak, and Kelantan. Here the Muslim population is ethnically Malay and constitutes approximately 77% of the three provinces' population of around 1.9 million (Jitpiromsri et al. 2018, p. 43). As a result, the Malay Muslims possess the characteristics of being both a national minority and a very large regional majority simultaneously. Third, there has been ongoing violence between the Bangkok government and the local insurgents in pursuit of some kind of independent political formation based on its glorious history of the Kingdom of Patani (local identarian spelling), once considered a gateway to Mecca as well as a seat of Islamic learning alongside Aceh in Indonesia centuries ago. Since 2004 when the deadly conflict re-exploded until November 2021, there have been 21,235 violent incidents in these three Southernmost provinces of Thailand, killing 7294 people and wounding 13,550. (Deep South Watch Database, up to November 3 2021). Not related to international jihadist violence, it has been argued that this violence resulted from the troubled power relations between Bangkok and the Muslim-majority in the Deep South, where Islam has served as a basis of the Malay Muslim governance legitimation (McCargo 2012). In short, the context of this Thailand's Deep South case study is ostensibly an ongoing violence compared to the relatively more stable and "normal" contexts of the Ahok Indonesian and the cow-head protest Malaysian cases discussed earlier.

On 18 July 2021, a Buddhist businessman who has been one of my closest friends for the last fifty years sent a picture of a totally messed-up hospital room for COVID patients in Southern Thailand to me via Line Application. All pillows in the room were thrashed, their inside panda spilled out like fluffy white blood. With the photo was the following

message saying: "Maybe we have to accept that people down there no longer believes that we could live as friends. Even if we do good deeds to them, they will not reciprocate. The government should reevaluate its (amiable) policy".

I responded by saying that upon careful inspection of the colorful pillows, there are two kinds: one with the British flag and the other with animal cartoon designs. Those who furiously thrashed the pillows might do so because they perceived that Muslims have been persecuted by Europeans, and that these "Christian" countries have been enemies of Islam for a long time. The British flag could be seen as a symbol of one of those countries. The animal cartoon design goes against the strict Islamic teaching that no image of living beings, animals as well as humans, is allowed in Muslims' abodes. When these were used at a time when they were sick in a hospital, they might have felt exasperated. He wrote back to me saying that he understood how I tried to explain away these Muslims' action, but he insisted that these (the pillow thrashers) are ignorant people who returned other people's kindness who had provided them with care and hospital services with such despicable acts. They could only be perceived as enemies because friends do not do such things. As a result, the Thai government should change its policy (Private communication via Line Application, 17–18 July 2021).

To understand how local Malay Muslims have felt about the pandemic and the Thai government's response to it, and hence the thrashing pillows and the messed-up hospital rooms, I encouraged some colleagues working on the cultural fluency project in the Deep South to conduct small research work on this very issue. What follows is primarily my analysis based on what I have learned from Walai Buppha's intensive research in Pattani and Yala from April until October 2021 on this project (Buppha 2021).

When the congregation was prohibited by orders of the *Shaikh-ul Islam* Office, *Juma'at* prayers (Friday's prayers) were canceled in many local mosques. In July and August 2021, voices of dissenting villagers were heard because they could not perform their Friday prayers in their mosques. There were some Yala residents who believed that COVID did not exist and that it was the Thai government's ploy to prevent people from coming together to offer their Friday prayers. Among the village elderlies who would spend a lot of time engaging in small-talk every day, they said that COVID is the Will of *Allah*. When some village heads warned those who organized Friday prayers that it was obviously in violation of the Thai government's instruction not to do so, they were charged as "acting like a *Kafir* (non-believer)". There were also cases of Muslim health volunteers warning villagers about congregation during Friday prayers who were met with a threat of physical violence for stirring a storm in a teacup. As a result, all Malay Muslim volunteers decided to stop delivering protective masks, alcohol gel, or warning villagers against religious congregation at local mosques because they would be severely reproached as moving away from Islam. Consequently, in some villages, Friday prayers at local mosques continued unabated, clearly in defiance of government order. One of the local elderlies' most damning remarks about the government's religious congregation prohibition was "Why can't I go to perform *Juma'at* Friday prayers, while Big C (hyper store) is open"?

On the surface, such questioning seems to echo the Indonesian *Uztaz*'s clarion call for the Muslims to choose between fearing Allah or the virus. Malay Muslims have to choose to follow public health-oriented directives issued by the state and its associated religious bodies mentioned above or God's command. But then the data also revealed something else, namely how villagers' lives suffer tremendously at the hands of the government and its associates. When the government locked down a village in Yala for a month by creating an earth wall to prohibit villagers from coming in and out, the villagers protested, saying that the virus was not killing them, but locking them down had robbed them of all decent living conditions. More importantly, when the government decided to close down occasional markets while allowing supermarkets and hyperstores to open, this policy hurt the local poor because their everyday lives depend on occasional markets more due to their limited daily income. The sometime squabble between local and national bureaucracies about how to best organize the fight against the pandemic that occasionally reflected in the

tussles over enormous budget allocated in the process, negatively contributed to how the villagers perceive the need to get vaccinated against the almost surreal pandemic that has lasted so long.

I would argue that as a result of these terrible economic and living conditions as well as the bureaucratic squabble, the villagers' prevalent condemning comparison between government's policy towards hypermarkets, occasional markets and mosques, that is, opening the ones with large capital while closing the others as well as places of worship is understandable. Combining such economic calamity with the belief in the theory that COVID is unreal, and that it is just the Thai government's plan to create disunity among Muslims, then it is little wonder why many refused to get vaccinated. Some went as far as to assert that "(We) don't know what they put into the vaccine. Vaccines will kill Muslims. It is a genocide against Muslims".

In September 2021, a colleague of mine who has headed the Cultural Fluency Project in the Deep South to foster Buddhist–Muslim relations for a decade informed me about how some local Malay Muslims who refused to get vaccinated for a different reason. One of their most pronounced reasons was that the vaccine was originally concocted by "the Jews" with ill intention towards the Muslims (Chinvorasopak and Satha-Anand 2021). In a sad and twisted tale of modern antisemitism, "the Jews" have again become the culprit of sending deadly vaccines in a genocidal project against the Muslims of Southern Thailand. Though the fact is that the vaccine was discovered by two Turkish scientists in Germany, I told her that it is futile to confront such a hateful tale with facts, because such a tale is backed by a conspiracy theory about the pandemic that was grounded in a form of Islamic theological reading as well as a rather simplistic historical understanding of Muslim-Jewish relations. In fact, this is how the rumor with its floating quality works as a form of local resistance in confronting the state's encroachment into private lives of people (Satha-Anand 2006, pp. 134–43).

The thrashing of the pillows and the messing up of the hospital room, as an expression of "restrictive Islam", could be seen in the context of Southern Malay Muslims' rejection of the COVID vaccine. Though the anonymous actor or actors' motivation remains mysterious, the act certainly grew out of the sorry state of living conditions many are living through while some government authorities, Islamic and otherwise, provincial and national, are seen as fighting for a larger share of the government budget. It could also be legitimized by the belief that the vaccine is dangerous to Muslims because it has been concocted by enemies of Islam, and that even without the vaccine, Muslims should not be afraid of the pandemic because it is *Allah* alone that Muslims should fear. But then, even among some Malay Muslims in the Deep South of Thailand who have been living under the shadow of deadly conflict for almost two decades, why is it that such "restrictive Islam" chooses to express itself merely with "the thrashing of the pillows"?

Since I do not have the data about who did the act of "thrashing" that has generated so many vitriolic responses online, therefore the analysis offered above might be speculative. I also do not have the answer for the question raised. But based on the data about the Malay Muslims' rejection of the Thai government's vaccine project elaborated earlier, a case could be made that what occurred is yet another incident of "restrictive Islam negotiated". Consider the story of a woman name "Yah" as an example.

Yah is a married Malay Muslim woman who works in a restaurant in the Deep South. Like many Malay Muslims there, she refused to get vaccinated. The restaurant owner tried to persuade her to get the COVID vaccine, pressuring her that without proof of getting vaccinated, she would be dismissed. Facing the possibility of unemployment, she decided to comply with her employer's condition. At home, she faced pressures from another direction. This time her husband criticized her and forbade her from taking the shot. Yah negotiated with her husband that without getting vaccinated, if she got sick from COVID and died, her body, without a proper Islamic bathing ritual, will be buried in the cemetery by strangers in PPE (personal protective equipment). But with the vaccine, when death comes, her body will receive the proper Islamic bathing rites. Most importantly, her cold

mayyit (dead body) could receive a loving goodbye kiss from her husband and loved ones. She asked her husband to choose. Today she continues to work for that restaurant in Pattani (Buppha 2021).

Yah's husband's earlier decision to forbid his wife from getting vaccinated based on his religious belief exists in the structural layer, in this case the local economy and the likelihood of his wife's unemployment, as well as the cultural layer- the possibility of his wife's death without proper Islamic burial rites. His later decision to allow her to comply with the employer's condition reflects how the artificiality of his "restrictive" Islam had to negotiate its expression with the normality of existing economic condition(s) of his wife's unemployment and the cultural possibility of an absence of a proper and local Islamic death rite.

7. Conclusions: Restrictive Islam Negotiated?

It is often suggested that Islam spread all over the world at the point of the sword, in pursuit of territorial conquest. Though this understanding has often been called into questions in academia, it is still spreading more vigorously in the world where Islamophobia seems to gain ground. Resonating Talal Asad's concept of Islam as a discursive tradition, Aljunied writes, "(Islam) travels from place to place, not as a force that uprooted all that came in its path . . . but as an evolving set of discourses, practices and communities that were constantly being remade by those who encountered them" (Aljunied 2022, p. 3).

In a study on women's participation in "Islamist" political parties, comparing the cases of the two largest Islamist political parties in Malaysia and Indonesia: PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamist Political Party) and PKS (Prosperous and Justice Party), Witri Elvianti found that in PAS, women are now more independent in determining the program to undertake gender advocacy in line with Islamic principles, while PKS opens up its party structure to provide wider spaces for their woman politicians to transform their ideas into action (Elvianti 2014). One of the reasons why this has been the case is because these parties have to operate within these countries' democratic rules of the game, which probably necessitates them to adopt a more accommodationist position in terms of creating an alliance with non-Muslim parties and contextualist in terms of their application of Islamic teachings (Elvianti 2014, pp. 164–65). It seems to me that the research direction Elvianti took in her study, and this is the issue I wish to emphasize, is quite different from those of Peterson on the Ahok case (Peterson 2020) or Leong's on the cow head protest (Leong 2012). While Peterson's study underscores the Islamization of human rights law in Indonesia and Leong focuses on visual politics led her to point out that such spectacle would threaten the image of Malaysia as a moderate Muslim nation that is both multiethnic and multireligious, Elvianti accentuates the ways in which the governance structures in respective political societies create conditions for the Islamist parties to transform themselves regarding the important issue of Muslim women's roles in politics.

Along the same line, when operating within the public sphere, both governmental and civil, the Islamist protesters in Indonesia, the Muslim cow head protesters in Malaysia, and the anonymous Muslim pillow thrashers in Southern Thailand could probably not express their dissension with more intolerant guises or even outright violence. Their expressions of "restrictive Islam" have to appear in negotiation with the structural layers that allow them to operate long before the incidents and will continue afterwards. Beneath the structural layer also lies the cultural layer, meaning the religious history of how Islam came to Southeast Asia.

While conversion to Islam in different parts of the world differ, many argue that in some contexts the process occurs gradually, and often-times in exchange for a Muslim divine's bureaucratic, religious, and education services. In Dar Fur, Eastern Sudan, for example, the process took the form of Islam's continuity rather than conflict with previous cultures (O'Fahey 1979, pp. 189–206). In Southeast Asia, due to its unique location connecting major civilizations such as Indian, Middle Eastern, and European on one side with Chinese and Japanese on the other, it has long benefited from lucrative international east-west

maritime trade. With trade came new religions, especially Islam, that were incorporated into the indigenous beliefs through a process some called "localization" (Andaya 2022, p. 25).

The prominent Dutch historian and scholar of Malay Studies, Rudolf Aernoud Kern (1875–1958), maintains that the coming of Islam to the Malay world and the Islamization that followed was a gentle, long, and complex process, which appealed to elites as well as the lowest section of the Malay–Indonesian societies. Ref. (Gordon 2001) To picture how Islam negotiated its way into the existing Malay culture, it is instructive to consider Kern's classic study of the famous Trengganu Stone. Normally used as a reference point to mark the arrival of Islam into the Malay world, Kern's meticulous research notes that the Jawi script on the stone does not mention the word "*Allah*" but refers to God in full Sanskrit phrase as "*Dewata Mulia Raya*", meaning "noble God" (Noor 2002, p. 18). Equally important, if not more, is the fact that since the 7th century, it was the trade route that connected Southeast Asia with the heartland of Islam in Arabia. With trade came Arab and Indian Muslim merchants who not only negotiated their goods but also their Islamic beliefs and practices with the local Malays. In short, it was the cultural rule of negotiation through trade that was largely responsible for the advent of Islam in Southeast Asia.

Within such a layer, cultural force drawn from history could serve as an affecting landscape where memories of past negotiations could inform the present. But within the cultural layer, one also finds the treasure that comes from Islamic religious teaching. When governor Ahok went to jail for blasphemy, the Jakarta court ruled that it was because he quoted a verse from *Al-Qur'an*, *Surah* "*Al-Maidah*" which is often used to warn Muslims from connecting with non-believers, especially Christians and Jews, as "*awliya*" or friends. During the heat of the cow head protest against the Hindu Temple in Selangor, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak admonished Muslims to follow the "true Islamic teachings" of showing respect to others' religious objects by citing *Al-Qur'an*, specifically *Surahs Al-Maidah* and *Al-An'am* (Chapters 5 and 6). He reminded Muslims that they are forbidden from insulting or desecrating items considered sacred to others because only then would non-Muslims show respect to Islam (Fong and Kit 2017, p. 85). Since there was no report on which verse he specified exactly, I believe it might be verse (*Ayah*) 108 in *Surah Al An'am*, which states that, "But do not revile those (beings) whom they invoke against God, lest they revile God out of spite, and in ignorance." (The Message of the Qur'an 1980, p. 188). By drawing on this verse, the reason is given why a Muslim should be considerate to how non-Muslims respect their own sacred objects is based on the reciprocity principle.

But to move "restrictive Islam" in a direction reminiscent of historically negotiated Islam in Southeast Asia, it is advisable to also remember that *Al Maidah* is a *Qur'anic Surah* with 120 verses. Verse 8 reads: "O YOU who have attained faith! Be ever steadfast in your devotion to God, bearing witness to the truth in all equity; and never let the hatred of anyone lead you into the sin of deviating from injustice. Be just: this is closest to being God-conscious." (The Message of the Qur'an 1980, p. 143) What this verse means is to remind Muslims that the closest to *Takwa* or "God conscious", the constant wish of every Muslim, is to be just. God also warns Muslims that it is hatred of other human beings, regardless of whether he/she is a Christian, a Jew, a Buddhist, or a Hindu, or anyone, that is the source of sin of injustice. Contemplating such a verse from *Al-Qur'an*, and there are many other, would perhaps create a condition conducive to a movement from "restrictive Islam" towards a more "emancipatory Islam" among Southeast Asian Muslims, and beyond.

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