

COMPETING ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS IN MALAYSIA:
ANALYSIS OF ABIM, IKRAM AND ISMA

ALIYE NUR KELESOGLU

FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
UNIVERSITI MALAYA
KUALA LUMPUR

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MALAYSIA: ANALYSIS OF ABIM, IKRAM AND ISMA**

ALIYE NUR KELESOGLU

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Name of Candidate: **Aliye Nur Kelesoglu**

Matric No: **S2005437**

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the competition between three prominent Islamic movements in Malaysia —Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia (*Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia*, ABIM), Malaysia Ikram Movement (*Pertubuhan Ikram Malaysia*, IKRAM), and the Malaysian Muslim Solidarity Front (*Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia*, ISMA)—to understand how they construct their identities and social realities and utilise strategies to assert dominance within a complex socio-political landscape of Malaysia. These movements heavily influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, but their approaches diverge significantly, reflecting unique visions for Islam's role in a multicultural Malaysia. ABIM advocates a pluralist and inclusive approach, ISMA champions an ethno-nationalist Islam that emphasises Malay-Muslim supremacy, while IKRAM positions itself as a reformist *dakwah* movement advocating compassion and inclusivity. This competition spans both discursive and non-discursive domains, highlights the fluid dynamics of political Islam in Malaysia and highlights the intra-movement diversity. Employing a qualitative approach, this study draws on frame theory and discourse theory to analyse how these movements define themselves, their opponents, and their target audiences, construct discourses that appeal to varying segments of society, and establish strategies for competition. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and textual and audio-visual documents produced by each movement as primary data sources. Frame theory provides a framework for examining the identity fields and core framing tasks, while discourse theory illuminates ideological contestations as struggles for hegemony. The findings reveal that, firstly, ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM strive to establish a unique identity by actively differentiating itself from the *others*. This differentiation reinforces their appeal to specific audiences and frames each movement as a distinct ideological force within Malaysia's Islamic landscape. Additionally, these movements exhibit a notable adaptability, shaping their identities to align with the socio-political demands of

the time. This flexibility shows the fluid and dynamic nature of their identities, allowing them to remain relevant and responsive to shifting societal needs and expectations. Second, each movement utilises core framing tasks to define their diagnosis, prognosis and motivational frames. ABIM and IKRAM's diagnosis frames focuses on religious and ethnic extremism as societal threats, while ISMA presents a narrative where Malay-Muslim identity is under threat. This framing shapes how each movement seeks to legitimise its agenda and mobilise support, reflecting broader debates meaning-making processes rooted in Islamic values, symbols, and norms. Finally, the competition strategies of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA are various. Each movement compete over resources, public legitimacy, and influence, and strategic alliances, all embodied in their hegemonic projects. These strategies underscore the complex interplay of discursive and non-discursive elements where competition for influence involves both ideological framing and tangible resource mobilisation. By situating this analysis within Malaysia's socio-political context, this study contributes to a detailed understanding of political Islam as a dynamic field shaped by competing actors striving for dominance. It also advances discourse theory and frame theory by applying these frameworks to competing Islamic movements, offering theoretical insights into the power dynamics shaping Malaysia's Islamic landscape.

Keywords: Islamic Movements, ABIM, ISMA, IKRAM, competing social movements.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneliti persaingan antara tiga gerakan Islam utama di Malaysia — Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), Pertubuhan Ikram Malaysia (IKRAM), dan Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (ISMA) — bagi memahami bagaimana mereka membentuk identiti dan realiti sosial masing-masing serta menggunakan strategi untuk menegaskan pengaruh dalam landskap sosiopolitik Malaysia yang kompleks. Gerakan-gerakan ini dipengaruhi secara mendalam oleh Ikhwanul Muslimin, namun pendekatan mereka berbeza secara ketara, mencerminkan visi yang unik tentang peranan Islam dalam Malaysia yang berbilang kaum. ABIM menyokong pendekatan pluralis dan inklusif, ISMA memperjuangkan Islam berteraskan etno-nasionalisme yang menekankan keunggulan Melayu-Muslim, manakala IKRAM pula menampilkan diri sebagai gerakan dakwah reformis yang menekankan kasih sayang dan keterangkuman. Persaingan ini merentasi domain diskursif dan bukan diskursif, menyerlahkan dinamika politik Islam yang sentiasa berubah-ubah di Malaysia serta menunjukkan kepelbagaian dalaman antara gerakan. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan berasaskan teori bingkai (frame theory) dan teori wacana (discourse theory) bagi menganalisis bagaimana gerakan-gerakan ini mentakrifkan diri, pihak lawan, serta khalayak sasaran mereka; membina wacana yang menarik kepada segmen masyarakat yang berbeza; dan merangka strategi persaingan. Pengumpulan data melibatkan temu bual separa berstruktur serta analisis dokumen bertulis dan audio-visual yang dihasilkan oleh setiap gerakan sebagai sumber data utama. Teori bingkai digunakan untuk meneliti medan identiti dan tugas bingkai teras, manakala teori wacana mendedahkan pertarungan ideologi sebagai perebutan hegemoni. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa, pertama, ABIM, ISMA dan IKRAM berusaha membentuk identiti tersendiri dengan secara aktif membezakan diri antara satu sama lain. Pembezaan ini mengukuhkan daya tarikan mereka terhadap khalayak tertentu dan membingkai setiap gerakan sebagai kekuatan ideologi yang unik dalam landskap

Islam Malaysia. Selain itu, gerakan-gerakan ini menunjukkan tahap adaptasi yang tinggi, membentuk identiti mereka selaras dengan tuntutan sosiopolitik semasa. Fleksibiliti ini menunjukkan sifat identiti mereka yang dinamik dan sentiasa berubah, membolehkan mereka kekal relevan dan responsif terhadap keperluan serta harapan masyarakat yang sentiasa berubah. Kedua, setiap gerakan menggunakan tugas bingkai teras untuk mentakrifkan bingkai diagnosis, prognosis, dan motivasi mereka. Bingkai diagnosis ABIM dan IKRAM memberi tumpuan kepada ekstremisme agama dan etnik sebagai ancaman kepada masyarakat, manakala ISMA menampilkan naratif bahawa identiti Melayu-Muslim sedang terancam. Pembungkahan ini membentuk cara setiap gerakan mengabsahkan agenda masing-masing dan menggerakkan sokongan, mencerminkan perdebatan makna yang berakar dalam nilai, simbol dan norma Islam. Akhir sekali, strategi persaingan ABIM, IKRAM dan ISMA adalah pelbagai. Setiap gerakan bersaing untuk mendapatkan sumber, legitimasi awam, pengaruh dan membentuk pakatan strategik, yang kesemuanya terkandung dalam projek hegemoni mereka. Strategi-strategi ini menekankan hubungan kompleks antara elemen diskursif dan bukan diskursif, di mana persaingan untuk pengaruh melibatkan kedua-dua pembungkahan ideologi dan mobilisasi sumber yang nyata. Dengan meletakkan analisis ini dalam konteks sosiopolitik Malaysia, kajian ini menyumbang kepada pemahaman yang mendalam tentang politik Islam sebagai satu medan yang dinamik, dibentuk oleh pelbagai aktor yang bersaing untuk pengaruh. Ia juga memperkaya teori wacana dan teori bingkai dengan menerapkannya kepada gerakan Islam yang bersaing, sekaligus menawarkan pandangan teori tentang dinamika kuasa yang membentuk landskap Islam di Malaysia.

Kata kunci: Gerakan Islam, ABIM, ISMA, IKRAM, gerakan sosial bersaing.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABIM:	Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (<i>Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia</i>)
ACCIN:	Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs
AQAP:	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AKP:	Justice and Development Party (<i>Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi</i>)
ALIRAN:	The National Consciousness Movement Society (<i>Persatuan Aliran Kesedaran Negara</i>)
AMEC:	Asia and Middle East Centre
AMANAH:	National Trust Party (<i>Parti Amanah Negara</i>)
BERJASA:	Pan-Malaysian Islamic Front (<i>Barisan Jemaah Islamiah Se-Malaysia</i>)
BERSIH:	The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (<i>Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil</i>)
CPM:	Communist Party of Malaya
CSO:	Civil Society Organisations
HALUAN:	Organisation of Graduates of Educational Institutions, Malaysia (<i>Pertubuhan Himpunan Lulusan Institusi Pendidikan Malaysia</i>)
HARMONI:	Malaysian Harmony Youth Association (<i>Persatuan Belia Harmoni Malaysia</i>)
HIKAM:	Malaysian Islamic Movement Association (<i>Himpunan Gerakan Islam Malaysia</i>)
ICERD:	International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
IKRAM:	Malaysia Ikram Movement (<i>Pertubuhan Ikram Malaysia</i>)
IRC:	Islamic Representative Council
IRF:	Islamic Renaissance Front
ISA:	Internal Security Act
ISIS:	The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISMA:	Malaysian Muslim Solidarity Front (<i>Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia</i>)
JIM:	Jemaah Islah Malaysia

LGBT:	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender
MACSA:	Malaysian Alliance of Civil Society Organisations in the UPR Process
MB:	Muslim Brotherhood (<i>Ikhwan-ul Muslimin</i>)
MENA:	Middle East and North Africa
NEP:	The New Economic Policy
NGO:	Non-governmental Organisations
NSM:	New Social Movements
NSMT:	New Social Movements Theory
PAS:	Malaysia Islamic Party (<i>Parti Islam Se-Malaysia</i>)
PEMBINA:	National Islamic Youth Association (<i>Persatuan Belia Islam Nasional</i>)
PH:	The Alliance of Hope (<i>Pakatan Harapan</i>)
PKPIM:	National Union of Malaysian Muslim Students (<i>Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar Islam Malaysia</i>)
PKR:	People's Justice Party (<i>Parti Keadilan Rakyat</i>)
POS:	Political Opportunity Structure
RMT:	Resource Mobilisation Theory
UMNO:	United Malays Nationalist Organisation
UMREC:	Universiti Malaya Research Ethic Committee
WADAH:	The Movement for an Informed Society Malaysia (<i>Wadah Pencerdasan Umat Malaysia</i>)
YADIM:	The Malaysian Dakwah Foundation (<i>Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia</i>)

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

No one can follow a soccer game who concentrates on the performance of one team without taking into account that of the other team. One can only understand the actions and the feelings of one team's members if one observes independently the other teams' actions and feelings. One must distance oneself from the game to recognise that the actions of each team are constantly intertwined and that, therefore, the two opposing teams form a single configuration.

(Elias et al., 1994, p. 70)

On December 8, 2018, over 55,000 people gathered in Kuala Lumpur to protest the *Pakatan Harapan* (PH) government's plans to ratification of United Nations' agreement on the elimination of racial discrimination and the promotion of understanding among all races, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) (Azaman, 2018). The protesters argued that the ICERD would undermine the special position of Malays and Islam in the country. Rally supporters were overwhelmingly connected with the opposition parties, mainly the Malaysian Islamic Party (*Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*, PAS) and the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Some civil society actors played a significant role in the organisation of the rally. As one of Malaysia's most vocal *dakwah*¹ movements, the Malaysian Muslim Solidarity Front (*Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia*, ISMA) was among these actors (Ahmad Fauzi & Razali, 2023). The rally's slogan, "Malays Unite, Islam Sovereign" (*Malayu Sepakat Islam Berdaulat*), was originally ISMA's invention.²

¹ This concept refers to the idea that "Islam is a comprehensive way of life." As *dakwah* movements, these Islamic movements promote *dakwah* to transform the social, political and economic spheres in accordance with Islamic rules and values. For a more detailed discussion, see, p. 18.

² For a detailed background of the slogan, see, ISMA, *Behind the slogan 'United Malays, Sovereign Islam'*. <https://isma.org.my/di-sebalik-tabir-slogan-melayu-sepakat-islam-berdaulat/>, (2020, October 16).

On the other hand, some of the Islamic movements³, such as the Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia (*Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia*; ABIM) and Malaysia Ikram Movement (*Pertubuhan Ikram Malaysia*; IKRAM), which are known for their pluralist Malaysia visions, were positioned alongside with the PH government (IKRAM, 2018; Free Malaysia Today, 2018). In this respect, the ICERD protest became a concrete example of the divergence of Islamic movements in Malaysia, each staking out distinct positions and strategies. On the one hand, ISMA's ethno-nationalist Islam approach; on the other hand, ABIM and IKRAM's cosmopolitan Islam and plural Malaysia approaches, the divergence of these movements highlighted the complex interplay between religion, politics, and ideology in Malaysia, where competing visions of Islam clashed openly on the national stage (Hew, 2018).

As a plural society with a significant non-Malay and non-Muslim population, Islam plays a major role in the social and political life of Malaysians. Malaysia has undergone a process of Islamisation since 1980s, drastically changing the habitus of both individuals and the state (Liow, 2009, pp. 4-10). Political actors have been at the centre of this process even before independence. However, Islamic movements have also been among the major players by constructing a discourse of their Islam understandings to promote their own "common good" for seeking influence and power (Ahmad Fauzi & Razali, 2020; Müller, 2014).

Influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) movement of Egypt and the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1969, Islamic movements were encouraged to change and

³ The literature on Islamic movements has no consensus on the terminology used to define them. Various terms have been used, including "Islamist", "fundamentalist", "jihadist", "reformist" and "revivalist". Although the literature increasingly refers to "Islamist movements" rather than "Islamic movements", the term "Islamic movements" is used in this study. This is because, as Asef Bayat has noted, Islamic movements refer to various social, political and religious movements or organisations whose identity or agenda are largely shaped by Islamic norms and values. On the other hand, "Islamist" movements are those that specifically advocate for the establishment of an Islamic state or political system, where governance is based on Islamic law (*Shari'a*) and principles. However, the concept of an "Islamic movement" encompasses the complexity and diversity of these Islamic-oriented social movements without imposing normative judgments or assumptions about their goals or strategies, as the term "Islamist" does (See e.g., Bayat (2022)).

challenge the post-colonial order and global status quo, deeming it evil and corrupt (Liow, 2009). They have successfully replaced secularism's hegemony within the Malaysian state and its institutions with Islamic rules and teachings. Shamsul (1994) described this process as a gradual and bottom-to-top transformation:

The visible presence of young Malay *dakwah* students and professionals in major Malaysian institutions, their mobility, their sheer numbers have had a widespread impact on the Malay-Muslim community. Besides the change to more "Islamic" dress, there has been a decline in social interaction between sexes. At religious talks, whether held at home or at public places, men and women gravitate to their own segregated sections of the room... Today, a large number of Malay-Muslim secretaries and officials in many government offices have become *dakwah*. Religious talks are organised regularly at prayer times, often during office hours. (p. 100)

As portrayed by Shamsul (1994), the everyday lives of Malaysians became increasingly intertwined with religious practices, while a parallel transformation in Malaysian politics occurred on a larger scale. In this process, the vocabulary and language of politics were redefined. Islamic movements, like ABIM, *Darul Arqam* and *Jemaah Islah Malaysia* (JIM), contested the established terms and introduced alternative interpretations of Islamic thought and political action. This discursive shift created a new field of competition, transforming Malaysia's political landscape. As Farish Noor (2014) noted, in the early 1970s, "the emergence of groups like *Darul Arqam* and ABIM meant that the discourse of Islam was now being contested by new actors and agents eager to enter the same discursive-political arena and to define Islam and Islamism as well." (p. 81).

The emergence and development of Islamic movements in Malaysia were part of a broader global Islamic resurgence. Since the 1980s, the Islamic resurgence movements globally have manifested in a wave of religious revivalism that emphasises the importance of social movements advocating for political change (Casanova, 1994; Berger, 1999). Reflecting this trend, scholars have shown a growing interest in Islamic

movements and Islamic activism within the framework of social movement theory (Koopmans et al., 2005; Snow & Byrd, 2007; Wiktorowicz, 2004). Despite this, the study of political Islam has often developed in isolation from social movement theory, although there are increasing signs that researchers are beginning to bridge these fields, recognising the value of applying social movement frameworks to understand Islamic movements (see e.g., Kavrakis, 2023; Munson, 2001a; Westphal, 2017).

Globally, Islamic movements have emerged as influential political and social forces, particularly in the countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The primary motivations behind these movements have been largely political. Nevertheless, Islamic movements have evolved into diverse and often competing entities, shaped by shared conceptual frameworks, rituals, and symbols rooted in Islamic teachings but heavily influenced by the specific sociopolitical contexts in which they operate (Moaddel, 2002). Islamists across the world, from the MENA to Southeast Asia, reflect these sociopolitical contexts, which complicates simplistic categorisations of their ideological positioning on the global political spectrum (Cevik, 2016; Samman, 2011).

This complexity is underscored by the diversity of ideological trends within political Islam, which cannot be neatly mapped onto a conventional left-right political spectrum (March, 2015). In fact, Islamists are often more divided and polarised than unified. As Karagiannis (2018) highlights, the antagonism between groups like the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the Salafis in Egypt, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Milli Gorus movement in Turkiye, and al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) exemplifies the fragmentation of political Islam into localised entities that vie for political and ideological supremacy (Karagiannis, 2018). As Karagiannis (2018) pointed out they “compete in all dimensions: they seek physical space to consolidate their activities; they defend and promote their interests, ideas, and norms in the mental space;

and they define and maintain, with the help of religious leaders, interpretations of reality in social space” (p. 9).

Regionally, political Islam manifests in diverse ways, particularly in Southeast Asia, where countries like Indonesia and Malaysia have seen the rise of both moderate and conservative Islamist movements (Ahmad Fauzi & Razali, 2016; Barton et al., 2021; Hakim, 2023; Hew, 2020; Liow, 2022). The goals of moderate and conservative movements range from striving for political power to the broader Islamisation of society and state laws (Otto 2010). Malaysia, in this regard, serves as a key example of this complexity, illustrating how Islamic movements interact with both state, society, and each other. This study focuses on the competing discourses employed by the *dakwah* movements in Malaysia, namely ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM. This competition leads them to construct a discourse with distinct subject positions, the strategic use of framing, and contestation for resources, legitimacy, influence and hegemony. Using David Snow and Robert Benford’s frame theory and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s discourse theory on this competition, this study explores the complexities of Islamic movements and the dynamics of their competition.

In Malaysia, Islamic movements have developed in response to both local and global sociopolitical dynamics, creating a competitive landscape where these movements compete for influence over the direction of the country’s Islamic discourse (Ahmad Fauzi & Razali, 2020). This competition over the interpretation of Islamic teachings reflects Moaddel’s (2002) argument that political Islam is not a unified ideology, but rather a discourse that means different things to different people depending on their sociopolitical context. In the Malaysian context, Islamic movements use shared religious symbols and language to craft distinct visions of society, positioning themselves in opposition not only to secularism but to each other, creating a vibrant yet contested political and religious

landscape. Thus, understanding this competition and its dynamics requires examining different actors involved in this competition, as Elias et al. (1994) pointed out in their football metaphor.

Although there are numerous Islamic movements in Malaysia, ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA were selected mainly for being *dakwah* movements sharing a similar ideological approach that originated from the MB in Egypt. Drawing inspiration from the MB, they each have similar religious ideals, such as considering Islam as a way of life and supporting the full implementation of *Shari'a* (Ahmad Fauzi & Razali, 2015, 2016). However, their methodologies and approaches toward the realities of Malaysian society and their position toward multiculturalism are considerably different (Ahmad Fauzi & Razali, 2016; Liow, 2022). For example, ABIM, considered a traditionalist-pluralist, promotes a vision of “*Bangsa Malaysia*” (literally ‘the Malaysian nation’), which emphasises pluralism and the traditional Malay approach to Islam. Whereas ISMA, a traditionalist-nationalist, offers the vision of “Malays Unite, Islam Sovereign” (*Melayu Sepakat, Islam Berdaulat*), which underlines the superiority of ethnic Malays and Islam over other ethnic and religious groups. IKRAM, on the other hand, is a pluralist and modernist/reformist movement that describes its vision as “*Negara Rahmah*” (a nation based on compassion and benevolence).

Most of the Islamic movements in Malaysia are not actively involved in politics. However, they may have tacit alliances with political parties. For example, ISMA coordinated with the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Front (*Barisan Jemaah Islamiah Se-Malaysia*, BERJASA), while IKRAM and ABIM are strongly associated with People's Justice Party (PKR) and The National Trust Party (AMANAH) (Ahmad Fauzi, 2018c). Moreover, these movements have had members in the Malaysian parliament, such as Zambry Kadir, Sanusi Junid, Dr Zulkifly Ahmad, and Dr Maszlee Malik, which shows

the close relationship between civil society, particularly the Islamic movements and the Malaysian state (Osman & Saleem, 2016). Having the necessary resources they need, these Islamic movements engage in various discursive efforts, frames, and counter-frames that wield significant influence over the political discourse and strategy, mainly observed during election processes (Ahmad Fauzi & Razali, 2020). These endeavours often reveal attempts to contest the proposed ideal forms of Islam.

The competition between ISMA and IKRAM is a noteworthy example. Even though both movements share the same MB version of Islam understanding and the same organisational root, ISMA and IKRAM are explicitly competing movements (Ahmad Fauzi, 2018b). ISMA positions itself as Malay-centric and conservative, and it promotes *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) ideology. IKRAM, in contrast, amplifies the voices of progressive Malays who support multiculturalism in Malaysia. ISMA's political ideology combines ethnic and religious identities, and it gained a reputation with its arguments framed in pro-Malay terms (Osman & Saleem, 2016). In this respect, ISMA held up online campaigns, such as the "Voter Awareness Movement" to vote for credible Muslim candidates supporting and upholding the Malay-Muslim agenda, and offline rallies, such as *Himpunan 812*, with the support of PAS and UMNO to discredit pluralists and moderate Islamists, such as ABIM, IKRAM and their allies in politics (Ahmad Fauzi & Razali, 2020).

As the literature discussed above has shown, Islamic movements selected in this study do not actively engage in politics as political society agents do, nor hold hegemonic powers in the Gramscian sense. Yet, they have been influential by using Islamic norms, values and symbols, constructing social and political identities, establishing new discourses, and engaging in hegemonic struggles over cultural and ideological dominance. Consequently, they have led changes and transformations in Malaysia's

social and political life. Their influence extends beyond electoral politics, shaping societal values and public discourse on national identity and governance. While most studies on social movements have focused on interactions between movements and the state, this study shifts the lens to the internal competition among Islamic movements. These movements produce alternative discourses that not only resonate with the broader society but also influence Malaysian political elites. By contesting their ideal visions of Islam, they actively shape and transform both social narratives and electoral strategies, redefining the nation's socio-political landscape.

This study, therefore, investigates how the *dakwah* movements in Malaysia—namely ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM—employ competing discourses and diverse strategies, including framing, resource mobilisation, legitimacy building, and influence-seeking, to establish distinct subject positions and contest for hegemony. By examining both discursive and non-discursive strategies, this study highlights the multifaceted nature of their competition and its broader implications for societal and political dynamics.

1.2 Problem Statement

It has been explicit that the political Islam landscape in Malaysia, both civil and political, has been increasingly complex and fluid (Hew, 2022). In the political arena during the election, competition has taken place between candidates who mostly have an Islamist background. Similarly, all Malay political parties, including UMNO, have a political Islam agenda as a result of a growing politicisation of Islam.

This competition is not confined to the political arena alone but also extends to the civil arena. On the one hand, there is the principle of Malay-Muslim supremacy and conservative Islamist ideologies. On the other, there are pluralist and moderate Islamist ideologies. The competition for hegemony has transformed the civil-political arena into a battlefield where Islamic social movements attempt to impose their particular and often

irreconcilable goals. This kind of prevalent relationship between competing groups, according to Chantal Mouffe (1993), is part of a hegemonic struggle because each group “attempts to create specific forms of unity among different interests by relating them to a common project and by establishing a frontier to define the forces to be opposed, the ‘enemy’” (p. 50). Therefore, considering the competition in both political and civil arena, the broader discursive and social struggles need to be examined.

Historically, Islamic movements played an essential role in transforming the Malaysian state and society from a secular country into an Islamic one. While internal conflicts were still present among the Islamic movements in the 1970s, they positioned themselves as counter-hegemonic powers. By gradually influencing societal norms, values, and policies, Islamic movements managed to unsettle the common sense of the “secular” Malaysia, and they replaced it with the one they constructed. However, establishing Islam as the new common sense, the competition between the Islamic movements is far from over. Instead, each movement has its own set of beliefs, values, and goals and shapes the discourse around critical issues, such as inter-religious relations, minority rights, and the role of religion in public life.

Despite the significant influence of Islamic movements on Malaysian civil society and political discourse, there remains an important shortcoming in the study of political Islam in Malaysia: the narrow perspective that limits the idea of “political” to the activities of political parties while overlooking other forms of contestation in discourse and social movements (Ahmad Fauzi, 2009). The Malaysian Islamic movements are crucial civil actors that produce political and religious discourses that influence the Malaysian political elites through discursive and non-discursive practices. By doing that, they can contest their ideal way of Islam, which changes and shapes the electoral discourse and strategies (Ahmad Fauzi & Razali, 2020).

However, despite the significant influence of Islamic movements on Malaysian civil society and political discourse, there still needs to be a greater understanding of how their competing discourses, constructed identities, and diverse competition strategies shape their struggle for dominance. As Ahmad Fauzi (2009) argues, to understand “the dynamics of Islamism and Islamists”, it is necessary “to delve into the intricate workings of and dealings with grassroots movements which together form some kind of Islamist civil society” (p. 8). This study, therefore, examines the Malaysian Islamic movements, namely ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA, to comprehend how these movements articulate distinct visions of Islam, employ both rhetorical and non-rhetorical tactics to challenge the competitors and seek to redefine political Islam in Malaysia. This investigation would help uncover how these movements influence public perception and policy, contributing to the broader understanding of political Islam’s role in shaping Malaysia's socio-political landscape.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How do ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA define the *self*, *i.e.*, the protagonist, the *others*, *i.e.*, the antagonists and agonistic opponents, and the audiences that the movements seek to influence?
2. How do ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA use discursive frames, namely diagnosis, prognosis, and motivational frames, to construct their discourse and challenge other movements?
3. How do ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA compete to gain dominance in the political Islamic sphere, using discursive and non-discursive practices as competition strategies? To what extent do these efforts affect their struggle for hegemonic influence?

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To explore how ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM define their own identities, delineate their antagonists, and engage with various audiences within Malaysia's political Islam landscape.
2. To analyse how ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM utilise discursive frames—specifically diagnosis, prognosis, and motivational frames—to construct and

communicate social realities that reflect and reinforce their identity and ideological objectives.

3. To investigate the competition strategies employed by ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM with in their pursuit for hegemony within Malaysia's political Islamic sphere.

1.5 Significance of Study

This study aims to advance theoretical and contextual understandings of Islamic movements in Malaysia. First, theoretically, it seeks to advance the understanding of power dynamics, hegemonic struggles, and discursive contestation among the Malaysian Islamic movements by integrating discourse theory and frame theory. Contextually, on the other hand, it aims to provide insights into the specific dynamics and ideologies of Islamic activism in Malaysia by analysing the contested narratives and strategies employed by the Islamic movements in Malaysia.

Second, while there is a substantial body of research in social movement studies, a significant research gap still needs to be filled in understanding the dynamics of competing, opposing or counter-movements, which have received limited attention empirically and theoretically (Soule & King, 2008). Theorisation attempts have been made within resource mobilisation theory; however, these efforts have not been sustained and are, therefore, inadequate. In addition, resource mobilisation theory and frame theory have been criticised for failing to address power dynamics adequately (Nash, 2010; P. E. Oliver & Johnston, 2005; Özen, 2013). In response, discourse theory offers new perspectives by providing analytical tools to examine power relations between competing social movements. Therefore, by employing discourse theory and frame theory, this study aims to make theoretical contributions by providing insights into how competing movements construct and contest meaning within their respective narratives and utilise competition strategies.

Third, there is a considerable amount of research in the literature on social movement studies, but these studies have predominantly been conducted in the European and American contexts. For a better understanding of social movements' competition dynamics, the literature needs more in-depth studies exploring different cultural, social and historical contexts, especially in non-Western contexts. Islamic movements and Islamic-oriented civil society actors have been widely discussed in Malaysian social science literature, but the treatment of the issue as competing movements is under-researched and under-theorised. This study is significant by contributing to discourse theory and frame theory in the context of competing social movements, particularly Islamic movements.

Forth, the literature on Islamic movements does not adequately capture their complex nature, the nuances in their political ideals or their strategies of mobilisation. Instead, they are often analysed as monolithic entities with uniform ideologies, such as revivalist or traditionalist typologies. However, as Liow (2009) points out, Islamic movements are not monolithic but have deep ideological divisions, major debates, and different types of activism. From this perspective, Malaysia is a very convenient example as it has various types of Islamic thought in political parties, bureaucracies, and civil society actors, as well as a vast literature on Islamism to shed light on the complexity of the Islamic movement. Thus, this study aims to show the diversity of perspectives, strategies, and goals within these movements and to challenge simplistic representations of Islamic activism.

Ultimately, fifth, the Islamic movements that are the focus of this study have had a significant influence in shaping Malaysia's socio-political and religious environment. Therefore, there is a growing need for an in-depth study of Islamic movements' competing dynamics and ideologies. By examining the competitive strategies between

ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA, this study shifts the focus from state-movement relations to inter-movement dynamics, offering a theoretical understanding of the power struggles and interactions that shape Malaysia's social and political landscape.

1.6 The Scope of the Study

This study explores the dynamics of competition between Islamic movements in Malaysia, focusing specifically on the intersection of political and religious ideologies. It examines how these Islamic movements construct identities for themselves, their adversaries, and the audience, engage in meaning-making to structure their discourse and mobilise support. This study, also, elucidates the strategies employed by these movements to garner influence and broader acceptance in Malaysia's socio-political landscape.

In Malaysia, there are several kinds of Islamic-oriented political parties and movements. This study limits its scope with the Islamic movements operating in the Malaysian civil society, rather than political parties. Political parties are not included in this study because their objectives, organisational structures, and modes of operation differ significantly from those of civil society movements. Given Malaysia's broad spectrum of Islamic movements, this study focuses on ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA due to their prominent roles and ideological significance within the Malay-Muslim community. Collectively boasting over 80,000 members, these three movements represent key players in the current social and political landscape in Malaysia, making them central to understanding the broader political and ideological contestations in the country.⁴

⁴ Although all three Islamic movements studied in this study report significant membership numbers, it is difficult to assess how many of these members are actively involved in organisational activities. The data collected for this study did not provide a clear distinction between formal membership and active participation. However, it is important to acknowledge that membership figures alone do not necessarily reflect the movements' mobilisation capacity or day-to-day engagement levels. Still, these movements can reach a much wider audience through their communication strategies, particularly by leveraging social media, public campaigns, and community-based initiatives.

In this study, ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA is selected to represent distinct political ideologies within Malaysia's Islamic landscape. Although they have the same ideological foundation of MB which is *dakwah*, they developed their own political and ideological orientations. Accordingly, in this study, ABIM is categorised as a traditionalist and multiculturalist movement, while ISMA as a traditionalist-nationalist movement, and IKRAM as a multiculturalist and modernist/reformist movement.

Furthermore, Islamic social movements have significantly shaped Malaysia's civil and political spheres, particularly since the 1970s. However, this study limits its scope to the period between 2014 and 2024, focusing on competition dynamics over the last decade. While ABIM has been active in the Islamic movement field for a longer period, ISMA and IKRAM, which were formally established in 2008 and 2009 respectively, only began to emerge as distinct movements during this time. Prior to 2008, IKRAM and ISMA operated under the umbrella of JIM, meaning there was no direct competition between ISMA and IKRAM to analyse before these dates. Consequently, the specified time frame is limited to the years between 2014 and 2024, with the textual and audio-visual documents exclusively covering this period.

This time frame is also significant because it marks a period in which these movements, particularly ISMA, have gained greater prominence since 2014 due to the controversies stirred by ISMA's president, Abdullah Zaik. His statements and actions during this period drew widespread attention, amplifying ISMA's visibility and influence within Malaysia's socio-political landscape. Moreover, the 2014–2024 period coincided with significant shifts in Malaysia's political landscape. Notably, the 2018 general election saw UMNO lose power for the first time, a historic development that reshaped the political dynamics. In addition, Anwar Ibrahim's, former president of ABIM, premiership in 2022 created a political environment in which a variety of discourses,

including those championed by Islamic movements, could compete more openly. Anwar's leadership is particularly important for ABIM, considering his historical ties with the movement. These political changes provided new opportunities and challenges for movements like ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM, further influencing their strategies and interactions within Malaysia's civil and political spheres. Thus, by focusing on the past decade, this study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the strategies and competition between these Islamic movements within the context of Malaysia.

1.7 Definition of the Terms

In this section, I elaborate on the key concepts and their preferred definitions in this study. These key terms are social movements and competing movements, Islamic movements, political Islam and Islamism, the concept of *dakwah*, civil society, and civil society organisations (CSOs) and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs).

1.7.1 Social Movements and Competing Movements

Social movements as a conceptual category have been defined by several scholars stressing different aspects of the concept. Mario Diani's definition, however, is one of the most frequently referenced and has been adopted in this study: a social movement is "a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity." (Diani, 1992, p.13). This study prefers this definition because it defines social movements from a very broad perspective, allowing for the inclusion of diverse forms of collective action.

The term "counter-movement", on the other hand, was defined by Zald & Useem (2017) as "the mobilization of sentiments initiated to some degree in opposition to a movement" (p. 249). By definition, counter-movements explicitly seek to undermine both the mobilisation and the goals of its target movement (Lind & Stepan-Norris, 2011).

Scholars have also introduced related concepts that highlight subtle differences from counter-movements. For example, opposing (Fillieule & Broqua, 2020) or opposition movements (Kent, 1990; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; Whittier, 2007) are used. The concept of opposing movements, in particular, underlines groups or organisations that fundamentally disagree with each other's goals, ideologies, or methods.

However, both counter-movements and opposing movements provide limited frameworks for understanding the dynamic interplay of shaping, reshaping, and changing efforts between movements. These definitions do not sufficiently explain the complexity of relationships between movements, especially those that occupy the same sociopolitical or ideological space while pursuing similar objectives.

For this reason, neither concept is successfully able to explain the relationship between ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA. Therefore, in this study, I adopted the concept of *competing movements*. Competing movements refer to movements which share the same sociopolitical or ideological space and pursue similar or overlapping objectives but differ in their methods, ideologies, or approaches. Although the term competing movements is not commonly used in academic literature, it draws upon established theories of social movement studies (*see e.g.*, della Porta & Rucht, 1995; Klandermans, 1990).

1.7.2 Islamic Movements

This term became salient, particularly in the 1980s. The prominent scholars making the initial theoretical and empirical contributions are Olivier Roy (1994, 2004), Nazih Ayubi (1991), John Esposito (1999, 2001, 1996), Asef Bayat (2005a, 2005b, 2013, 2017), Fawaz Gerges (1999, 2013), Mohammed Hafez and Quintan Wiktorowicz Hafez & Wiktorowicz (2004). It is evident that the early studies on Islamic revivalism and the rise of Islamic movements, particularly those conducted within Western academia, were primarily aimed at understanding this powerful phenomenon's emergence and discourses,

as well as the divergent strategies and driving motivation for mobilisation. Concurrently, scholars engaged in debates concerning the most appropriate terminology to describe Muslim resurgence movements.

Among the various terms that have been widely discussed are Islamic fundamentalism (Choueiri, 1990; Jansen, 1997), radical/militant Islam (Pipes, 2002; Sivan, 1985; Wright, 2001), Islamists (Roy, 1994, 2004), revivalist or reformist movements (Esposito, 1999), and political Islam (Ayubi, 1991; Bayat, 2013; Gerges, 1999; March, 2015; Roy, 1994). However, a consensus has not been reached regarding the precise meaning of each concept or their proper usage. Furthermore, some scholars have employed these terms interchangeably, such as fundamentalism and militant Islam (*i.e.*, Wright, 2001) and Islamism and militant Islam (*i.e.*, Pipes, 2002), which has only served to exacerbate the confusion within the literature. Taking into account the reluctance of Muslim scholars to embrace the concept of fundamentalism, along with the value-laden nature of terms such as militant/radical Islamism, there has been a shift in the literature over the years. This shift has seen a move away from the use of Islamic fundamentalism and militant Islam in favour of the concepts of Islamism and Political Islam, which are perceived to provide a more detailed and accurate representation of the phenomena in question.

In this study, I use the term “Islamic movements.” As Asef Bayat (2022) has noted, Islamic movements refer to various social, political, and religious movements or organisations whose identities or agendas are largely shaped by Islamic norms and values. The term “Islamic movements” encompasses the complexity and diversity of these Islamic-oriented social movements without imposing normative judgments or assumptions about their goals or strategies, as the term “Islamist” does. This choice of terminology allows for a more neutral and inclusive analysis of the movements under study.

1.7.3 Political Islam and Islamism

These two concepts have similar meanings, and they are mostly used interchangeably in the literature. Asef Bayat (2013) offers a comprehensive examination of the concept of political Islam, conceptualising it as a contemporary political project encompassing social movements and their ideologies. These movements and ideologies are directed toward the establishment of an “Islamic order” (p. 4). Bayat’s definition underscores the inherently political nature of this term. Being a parallel ideological construct, Islamism, on the other hand, has a very similar meaning with subtle differences. As described by Ahmad Fauzi (2018a), it is “a political ideology that urges Muslims to erect a *Shari’a*-governed Islamic state for them to be able to comprehensively practice Islam as a way of life.” (p. 371). This definition suggests that Islamism is more closely related to the establishment of an Islamic state ruled by *Shari’a* law for a comprehensive practice of Islam. In this study, the term political Islam is adopted because a neutral and broad signifier that refers to the integration of Islam into public and political life without necessarily implying extremism or militancy.

1.7.4 The Concept of *Dakwah*

The concept of “*dakwah*” simply refers to the idea that Islam is a comprehensive way of life comprising social, political, economic and religious realms (Aljuneid, 2017, p. 92). According to this ideology, all the necessary rules are provided in the *Shari’a*, which is established upon the *Qur’an* and *Sunnah* (the sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad). In this view, Islamic norms, values, and ideals provides solutions for the problems of the *ummah* (Islamic community).

Dakwah has played a central role in shaping the agendas and strategies of Islamic movements, particularly those influenced by the MB. However, approaches to *dakwah* have varied significantly in terms of religious interpretations, political standpoints,

engagement with public authorities, social bases, and types of activities (Meuleman, 2011). In this study, *dakwah* is considered the ideological foundation upon which ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM built their discourses. Over time, each movement has developed its own political and ideological orientation by interpreting *dakwah* differently, reflecting their unique priorities, strategies, and modes of engagement with Malaysia's broader societal and political contexts.

1.7.5 Civil Society

Although the term has different definitions with different referrals, in this study, I refer to Diani's (2013) definition of this term which "equates 'civil society' to 'public sphere.'" As he further explains, as a discursive arena civil society is "where competing views on moral and ethical issues as well as on the running of public affairs may be brought up and submitted to public scrutiny." (p. 1). As argued by della Porta (2014), the literature on social movement studies tends to distinguish social movements from civil society by highlighting social movements' role of protest and disruptive actions in political participation. In contrast, the concept of civil society emphasises civility, cooperation, and the importance of mutual trust and shared values within civil society actors (della Porta, 2014). The reason of choosing Diani's (2013) definition because it emphasises the role of civil society as a space for contestation and dialogue, which aligns with the theoretical framework of this study, which examines competing Islamic movements as discursive and strategic actors in the public sphere.

1.7.6 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Nongovernmental Organisations (NGOs)

This concept refers to organisations that operate in the civil society sphere independently from the state. These organisations cover a wide range of entities, including social movements, labour unions, grassroots associations, professional groups, advocacy groups, and social enterprises (Edwards, 2012). The primary interest of an

organisation can also significantly depend on its goals. While some CSOs primarily focus on social and political interests, some are interested in environmental issues. Edwards' (2012) definition is broad enough to capture the diverse range of organisations within the civil society sphere. Therefore, it provides a context for understanding these organisations roles and functions.

For the nongovernmental organisations, the definition of this term is contested. This term commonly refers to organisations that are non-profit, non-violent and not pursuing state power unlike some CSOs. In this study, I adopted Martens's (2002) definition. Accordingly, "NGOs are formal (professionalised) independent societal organizations whose primary aim is to promote common goals at the national or the international level." (p. 282). Martens' (2002) definition is useful to distinguish NGOs from CSOs, such as social movements, which are often loosely organised and driven by grassroots mobilisation.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

It is widely recognised that national politics plays an influential role in shaping the trajectories and discourses of social movements in Malaysia. Therefore, the relationship between political parties and Islamic movements is undoubtedly a significant area of inquiry that warrants further research. However, this dimension is not directly analysed in this study, and I acknowledge this as a limitation. This omission was not due to a lack of relevance but rather the constraints encountered during the data collection phase. Despite several attempts, I was unable to secure interviews with political actors who were directly involved or affiliated with the Islamic movements under study. In addition, the few experts who were willing to share insights into these political relationships insisted that their comments remain off the record, which limited the usability of the information. As a field observation, these challenges might be influenced by my identity as a foreign

researcher, which may have contributed to concerns about political sensitivity among potential informants. Consequently, I refrained from including an in-depth analysis of politics–social movement relations in order to maintain the academic integrity and ethical standards of the research. While this constitutes a gap in the present study, I consider it an important area for future research to complement the discursive and strategic analysis offered here.

Qualitative research is one of the most preferred techniques within empirical social movement studies, offering a multifaceted understanding. Nevertheless, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, qualitative methods inherently lack generalisability due to their reliance on smaller sample sizes. In this study, the number of informants is insufficient to generalise findings. However, given the comparative case study design, the sample size proves adequate to capture the underlying dynamics of the competition between the selected movements.

Second, this study exclusively includes informants who accepted the invitation to participate in interviews, which may influence the representativeness of the data. While selection bias is inherent to the purposive sampling technique, this technique is used for in-depth study rather than measuring trends. To mitigate the impact of selection bias, this study incorporates textual and audio-visual documents and employs triangulation techniques.

Third, as a foreign researcher, I am not fluent in Bahasa Melayu adequately enough to interview native Bahasa Melayu speakers. However, most of the informants were fluent in English, therefore, there was no significant language problem between me and the informants. In only a couple of interviews, the informants requested a translator to express themselves in Bahasa Melayu, I provided a native-speaker translator who was ready

during the interview to overcome the language issue. Thus, this limitation is unlikely to compromise the accuracy of the findings.

Fourth, while the language barrier was not a challenge when conducting the interviews, it created a barrier to establishing close relations with the members of Islamic movements. Examining this topic through ethnographic methodology would have allowed for a much deeper analysis. Nevertheless, constraints related to my lack of proficiency in Bahasa Melayu, as well as my limited network to connect with ordinary members of these Islamic movements, made this approach unfeasible. To address these limitations, I reached out to former members of these movements who had previously left, thereby enriching the data collected despite the challenges encountered.

Finally, I encountered barriers in engaging potential informants. The challenges of establishing the necessary networks with the administration teams of ISMA and IKRAM significantly extended the outreach process. I was informed multiple times that my study topic was somewhat sensitive, leading to a reluctance among potential participants to engage with the study, even after I assured them of their anonymity and the protection of their data. Therefore, following several unsuccessful attempts to get acceptance for my interview invitations, I conducted interviews with informants in mid-level administration positions. I also acknowledge that my gender may have subtly shaped the dynamics of some interviews. As a Muslim female researcher in a substantially male dominated area, my gender may have subtly shaped the dynamics of the interviews — particularly in how some respondents chose to frame or limit their responses. These factors inevitably limited my ability to engage certain actors directly, which I accept as a constraint of this study.

1.9 Chapterisation

The thesis consists of eight chapters, including this introductory chapter. The first chapter aims to outline the study. To this end, the chapter explains the background of the

study, along with the research problem, research questions, research objectives, the definition of the terms, the significance, scope of the study and limitations.

Subsequently, the second chapter reviews the literature by examining broader literature on Islamic movements, particularly in the MENA region. The chapter then provides a review of studies on Islam's historical role in Malaysia and its relationship with the Malaysian state and society. Lastly, the chapter scrutinised the scholarly work on Malaysian Islamic movements, with a special focus on studies of ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM. The third chapter explains the theoretical framework of this study. Next, the two theories, frame theory and discourse theory, and their core concepts are explained and discussed in this chapter. In the fourth chapter, the research methodology is comprehensively detailed, covering the research design, data collection, data analysis processes. This chapter outlines the methodology approach adopted to address the research questions. This chapter also addresses the validity and reliability, and ethical considerations to ensure the rigor and integrity of the study.

The fifth chapter delves into the identity construction of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA. By employing the identity fields concepts from the frame theory and utilising antagonism and agonism concepts from the discourse theory as the analytical framework, the identity construction is examined in three stages: "defining the *self*: Protagonist," defining the *other*, and the audience. Following the identity construction practices of the Islamic movements, the sixth chapter focuses on the discursive practices to understand how they give meaning to the world around them and utilise these meanings to challenge each other.

The seventh chapter investigates the competition strategies between ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA in the Malaysian social and political landscape. It sheds light on how these movements seek to gain legitimacy, assert their influence, and achieve ideological goals through hegemonic projects. Finally, the eighth and last is the concluding chapter, in

which the findings are discussed in light of the theoretical framework, along with general and more specific conclusions on the competition between the phenomena of Islamic movements.

Universiti Malaya

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Since 1970s, competing Islamic movements in Malaysia have become the site of considerable debate regarding their impact on Malaysia's socio-political landscape. This literature review analyses existing research under three themes. The first part examines the literature on Islamic movements worldwide, which is overwhelmingly constituted of the Islamic movements in the MENA countries reflecting the historical and political prominence of these movements. This focus, however, often overlooks the significance of Islamic movements in other regions, such as Southeast Asia.

The second section critically reviews the scholarly work on "Islam's role in Malaysia's State and society." In Malaysia, much of the research has examined the role of Islam through the lens of the state, with an emphasis on political Islam and Islamism. This body of work highlights how the state instrumentalises Islam to shape political and social structures yet leaves significant room for further exploration. The last theme, "Islamic movements and ideological contestations in Malaysia" addresses the limited research on competing Islamic movements in the country. While existing studies often focus on individual movements or provide descriptive analyses, the ideological competition among these movements remains underexplored.

2.2 Global Literature on Islamic Movements

As a distinct yet influential component within the broader context of social movements, Islamic movements offer unique perspectives on the relationships and interactions that drive political dynamics, such as mobilisation of masses, framing religious and cultural narratives for collective action, and challenging dominant narratives and power structures. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the global literature on Islamic movements and political Islam. This exploration reveals the types of Islamic movements,

the impact of socio-political contexts, and ultimately the need for a diverse approach that includes cultural and contextual dynamics when studying Islamic movements.

Islamic activism is, by and large, an isolated field of research, usually studied in terms of the ideology, structure, goals of the actors, or history of the individual movements (Wiktorowicz, 2000). As a concept, it is relatively new in social science literature yet tend to be viewed as a political project by disregarding the differences in religious perceptions, practices, and institutions between Muslim societies (Bayat, 2005). Nevertheless, as Wiktorowicz (2004) points out, Islamic activism, which is also called Islamic movements, are by no means *sui generis*. While Islamic movements encompass Islamic political system ideals, the elements of identity, and collective action, they also “respond to grievances, use institutional and organisational resources to rally support, and produce mobilisation frameworks rooted in symbols, discourses, and practices that are often designed to evoke a sense of injustice to promote activism” (Wiktorowicz, 2004, p. 3), as do other agents of collective action.

Islamic movements have been studied through various analytical lenses, reflecting the diverse ideological, historical, and sociopolitical contexts in which they operate. To better understand these movements, scholars have developed certain typologies to categorise them based on their distinctive characteristics (see, Büyükkara, 2015; Choueiri, 1990; Dekmejian, 1985; Dhaouadi, 2014). While there is no consensus on how specific movements should be classified, these typologies serve as valuable frameworks for analysing Islamic movements’ goals, strategies, and dynamics. For example, Choueiri (1990) examines Islamic movements in three sections: reformist, revivalist, and radical. Nevertheless, scholars have no consensus on the definition of these concepts.

With reformism, Choueiri (1990) refers to the Islamic movements that oppose traditional Islamic interpretations. For reformists, the reason behind the backward

situation of Muslims around the world, contrary to conservatists and revivalists, is the Islamic thought, traditions, and applications. Therefore, for the development of Muslim countries, political systems, education and technological progress should be in line with the developed countries, i.e. Western countries (Choueiri, 1990).

Radicalism, also called neo-fundamentalism in some studies (*e.g.*, Roy, 1999) gives particular importance to the traditional, orthodox interpretation of Islam (Büyükkara, 2015). Radicalism, similar to other Islamic movements, emerged in the context of reviving Islam and Islamic thought in the 19th and 20th centuries. Radicals argue that the regeneration of Islam is only possible by returning to its true origins. They reject any sort of “innovation” regarding religious matters or applications. Besides, they are critical towards other Islamic movements with different ideas, but also immensely oppose the West and West-related ideologies, such as secularism, modernism, or nationalism (Roy, 1999).

Revivalism is defined as “turning back to the original version.” (Büyükkara, 2015). This meaning of revivalism is different from the reformist “reshaping the religious thought” (Büyükkara, 2015, p. 133). In the literature, the phenomenon has been also referred to as fundamentalism—which is not commonly used by Muslim scholars but used particularly in Western literature—political Islam, Islamism, Islamic resurgence, awakening or Islamic renaissance (Ali, 2012, p. 66; Choueiri, 1990, p. 1). The revivalist movements recognise that “sacred and profane” or “spiritual and mundane” are inseparable in Islam (Dhaouadi, 2014). Based on this approach, the movement argues that Islam encapsulates one’s personal and community life. Revivalism is also a strong reaction to the backward situation of the Islamic countries. For the current situation, it is Muslims and Western countries responsible rather than Islam itself. In this sense, unlike reformists, revivalists do not attempt to criticise Islamic thought (Ali, 2012).

There are also other typology attempts to categorise Islamic movements. While Yavuz (2003) uses “society-oriented versus state-oriented and legitimate versus illegitimate” categories, the International Crisis Group (2005) uses the typologies of political Islamic movements, missionary Islamic movements, and jihadi Islamic movements (*cited in* Karagiannis, 2018). These typologies, while useful for analytical categorisation, often fail to capture the complex realities of Islamic movements, which frequently exhibit characteristics from multiple categories simultaneously.

The vast majority of the theoretical endeavours to unfold the dynamics of Islamic revivalism and political Islam focus on the MENA countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey (see, Delibas, 2009; Dhaouadi, 2014; Eligür, 2010; Masoud, 2013; Munson, 2001). However, locally oriented Islamic movements exhibit distinct characteristics. Islamic movements in Malaysia, such as ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM, can be conceptually situated within the framework of revivalist movements (Liow, 2022), as they share core characteristics commonly associated with revivalism. They align with revivalist approach by seeking to revitalise Islamic values and practices in response to perceived moral and social decline. However, their revivalist orientation does not fully capture the localised dimensions of their mobilisation strategies (Saleem, 2021). Unlike many MENA-based *dakwah* movements that operate within broader transnational or ideological frameworks, ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM are deeply embedded in Malaysia’s sociopolitical and cultural context. As Karagiannis (2018) observes, Islamic movements often adapt their mobilisation strategies to address specific geographical and societal challenges: “Islam was utilized as a mobilization structure by religious leaders to promote political aims in a certain geographical area” (p. 6). This localised focus is evident in the ways these movements navigate Malaysia’s unique socio-religious landscape, where Islam holds hegemonic status but coexists with a multicultural and multireligious society. Thus, Islamic movements are deeply intertwined with their respective countries’ historical,

social, cultural, and political contexts, blending these elements with Islamic ideologies. Amin Abdullah (2017), in this regard, contends that contextual approaches are essential, considering each country's unique history, culture, sociology, and politics.

For instance, stark differences exist between the socio-political and religious dynamics in Southeast Asia and the MENA. Since the emergence of MB in Egypt and similar movements in other Muslim countries, there has been a significant research corpus explaining the reasons behind this phenomenon (Masoud, 2013; Munson, 2001; Wickham, 2002, 2013; Wiktorowicz, 2000). Defining them as Islamic revivalism, or Islamic resurgence, these movements are often linked to political-economic crises in post-colonial states, where issues such as economic instability, social injustice, and disillusionment with secular elites drive movements toward Islamic alternatives (Dekmejian, 1980; 1985). Another viewpoint, termed the "success approach," considers the wealth from oil-rich states in the 1970s as a catalyst for Islamic resurgence, fostering a sense of empowerment within Islamic communities (Pipes, 1980). In contrast, the "crisis of modernity" perspective suggests that the dislocation caused by modernisation in the Muslim world led to a sense of alienation, prompting individuals to seek identity and stability within Islamic frameworks (Ali, 2015; Ayubi, 1991; Hunter, 1988).

Contemporary perspectives, including Karagiannis (2018), on the other hand, highlights the impact of globalisation on Islamic movements. The "new political Islam" reflects a blend of global and local concerns, creating a "post-Islamist" phase (Bayat, 2013) characterised by adaptive responses to both local grievances and global forces. While movements like the MB draw on universal themes, their local mobilisation responds directly to regional issues, contrasting with transnational actors like al-Qaeda, which targets Western powers as a "far enemy" (Westphal, 2017).

Hadiz & Robison (2012), in this vein, argue that the motivators of Islamic revivalism are closely connected to political economy to combat the states' authoritarian and neoliberal policies and their undesired consequences in the MENA experiences (cf., Ayooob 2008); nevertheless, Islamic movements experiences in the Indonesian context was somewhat different due to the co-optation strategy of the Indonesian state, particularly during the New Order regime under Suharto. Similar to Hadiz and Robison's claims for Indonesia, political Islam has successfully established its hegemony in Malaysian politics since the 1980s (Camroux, 1996). This strategy is radically different from the strict secular approaches of and the state oppression on the Islamic movements the post-colonial Muslim countries (e.g., Kandil, 2011; Munson, 2001b).

This environment in such contexts like Malaysia and Indonesia, provides Islamic movements political opportunities that they can grow and diversify. The rapid growth of Islamic movements and their increasing influence in mainstream politics and society have contributed to the competition between these movements. For example, as Hadiz (2018) argues, Islamism has become a populist instrument for the political elites and for their electoral interests in Indonesia. In this explanation, divergent from the crisis or success approach, Islamism is not the end goal but rather a form of politics in the political struggle and mobilisation (Luqman Nul Hakim, 2023).

Consequently, the existing body of literature on Islamic movements, particularly those within the MENA region, has established a strong foundation for understanding these movements' political, social, and ideological dynamics. While the early studies often oversimplified the diversity within these movements, more recent studies have expanded the categorisation of Islamic movements and distinguished between reformist, revivalist, and radical currents, as Choueiri (1990) outlines. Although these categorisations are useful to understand and explain the Islamic movements in MENA region, they often

remain short of explaining the ideological and operational differences among Islamic movements in Southeast Asia, specifically the Malaysian context. This is particularly due to Islam's hegemony in Malaysia, unlike MENA countries where Islamic movements struggle with authoritarian-secular leaders. In the climate of Malaysia, in which Islamic movements have relative autonomy to establish their Islamic discourse, they construct their own Islamic values, symbols, and cultural practices or interpret them.

Regarding the competing Islamic movements, not only the Islamic movements literature but also the social movement studies literature in general is relatively scarce and neglected (Fadaee, 2014). The preliminary studies and the first theoretical contribution on countermovements which were made by Turner & Killian (1957), Meyer & Staggenborg (1996), Mottl (1980) and Zald & Useem (1983). These studies were aimed to theorise the dynamics of the movement-countermovements interplay by discussing how and when a countermovement emerge, how and to what extent a countermovement affect the initial movement, what sort of strategies and tactics are employed, how they influence one another's strategic choices, what happens when a movement or a countermovement made an achievement or in the case of a failure to realise their goals, and when the competition culminates. Empirical studies, on the other hand, mostly focuses on the case of anti-abortion versus pro-life (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2008), anti-feminist (Banaszak & Ondercin, 2010, 2016; Whittier, 2007), anti-LGBT movements (Ayoub & Chetaille, 2020; Ho, 2020), and religious movements (Kent, 1990; Peckham, 1998). Besides, Lind & Stepan-Norris (2011) made an important contribution to the relationality of social movements and countermovements with their case study on tenants' movements in Los Angeles, the USA.

Regarding Islamic movements, there is a growing number of studies focusing on opposing Islamic movements in different country contexts. Nur Atika Hairi (2021)

examines the ideologies of Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama and Jamaat-e-Islami, whereas Zolkafali et al. (2021) examines IKRAM and Nahdlatul Ulama's approach towards "*Rahmatan Lil Alamin*." Unlike Aswar et al. (2020)'s work, these studies are mostly descriptive but not analytical examinations. Aswar et al. (2020) applied the countermovement concept in the examination of Hizbut Tahrir and Nahdlatul Ulama in the context of Indonesia. Their study is significant in demonstrating how countermovements delegitimise their counterparts and influence state policy—exemplified by Nahdlatul Ulama's efforts, which ultimately contributed to the Indonesian government's decision to ban Hizbut Tahrir. Nevertheless, while the literature is growing in terms of countermovements, it has yet to fully explore how Islamic movements—each claiming legitimacy—compete through both discursive and non-discursive means, a gap this study aims to fill.

2.3 Islam's Role in Shaping Malaysia's State and Society

Islam in Malaysia has evolved in a religious environment that diverges significantly from that of MENA countries, where Islam is the dominant faith (von der Mehden, 1986, p. 177). Unlike many other Muslim-majority countries, the process of Islamisation in Malaysia has been characterised by a constructive accommodation of both Islam and modernism, even though this process has not been a smooth and linear trajectory (Liow, 2009, p. 4). This section examines the main scholarly perspectives on the role of Islam in shaping Malay identity, nationalism and political movements in both colonial and post-colonial Malaysia, on which the Malaysian Islamic movements were founded, and synthesises different viewpoints to provide a clearer understanding of these phenomena.

Historically, in the pre-independence era, the two Islamic movements, "*Kaum Muda*" (new faction, the progressives) and "*Kaum Tua*" (old faction, the conservatives), shaped the Islamic political discourse in Malaysia. While the first group is known as the disciples

of Islamic modernism (Esposito & Voll, 2001, p. 205; Quandt et al., 1996), the second group, *Kaum Tua*, was a staunch critic of *Kaum Muda* by defending Islamic conservatism (Aljunied, 2019, p. 142). In the post-independence era, establishing their ideological foundation on which *Kaum Tua*, PAS, ABIM and JIM have been strongly influenced by the global Islamic resurgence and perceived the global status quo as inherently corrupt and antithetical to Islam, necessitating transformative change (Farish Noor, 2014). Moreover, the emergence of a new generation of Muslim students and their increased mobility became a crucial factor in transforming the social and political landscape in Malaysia. The Islamisation process has become increasingly strong with these students and their intense emphasis on Islamist ideologies (Müller, 2014, p. 16). The Islamic discourse, which incorporates notions originating from conservative Islamic ideologies prevalent in the Arab Muslim world (von der Mehden, 1986, p. 193), has also contributed to an Islamic resurgence or revivalism in Malaysia.

Islam played a crucial role in constructing Malay identity during the colonial period. Before the Malay Archipelago was colonised, the local inhabitants broadly used the term “Malay” to describe Muslims and non-Muslims who assimilated into Malay culture (Shamsul, 1994). However, *Bangsa Melayu* (lit., Malay race) as a distinct ethnic identity consolidated during British colonial rule, a period characterised by significant Chinese and Indian immigration and a “divide and rule” strategy that intensified racial segregation. In response, Malay nationalism gained momentum, with *Bangsa Melayu* becoming a symbol for the natives. Ariffin Omar (1993), in this regard, discusses the debates over the concept, particularly in the early 20th century. In this period, the psyche of the Malay nationalists can be summarised as “the Malay lands for the Malays only.” The definition of *Bangsa Melayu* and the criteria for identifying who constituted a Malay were subjects of considerable debate. The status of Muslim Arabs and Indians residing among the Malays was scrutinised, while Chinese and Indians were unequivocally excluded from

being considered part of this group (Ariffin Omar, 1993). Nevertheless, *Bangsa Melayu* is not only a cultural or historical category but a sociological and political construct. The concept was instrumentalised as a symbol of indigenous unity in early nationalist movements and later strategically utilised by UMNO to legitimise political power and mobilise Malay-Muslim voters. This political project of defining and protecting *Bangsa Melayu*, therefore, laid the groundwork to use it as a tool by state and political actors in subsequent decades (for a detailed discussion, see Mauzy, 2013).

In shaping Malay nationalism, Islam was utilised as a marker to distinguish Malays from the non-Muslim Chinese and Indian populations in Malaysia. It also provided a moral and religious foundation for the anti-colonial struggle against the British (Farish Noor, 2003). During colonial times, anti-colonial movements often centred around ethnicity or religion—the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) was predominately ethnic Chinese, for instance—and religious identity became an important denominator of the Malay identity and nationalism. As Malaysia transitioned to the post-colonial era, the resurgence of Islamic movements became a significant development.

Here, it is essential to note the role of Islam in consolidating Malay identity. Liow (2009) observes that, as a predominantly Muslim population, Malays distinguished themselves from the non-Muslim Chinese and Indians, with Islam serving as both a religious and political boundary. This sentiment is echoed by von der Mehden (1986), who notes that Malay nationalism was not only a reaction to colonialism but also a reaffirmation of Islamic identity. However, what von der Mehden's older work does not capture is the complexity of how Malay ethnic identity evolved in response to colonial racial policies—an area that more recent scholars, such as Liow, have explored in detail.

While scholars stress the congruence of Islam and Malay identity, there have been efforts to transcend ethnic and national divisions and unite Muslims worldwide under a

single Islamic ideology. PAS, under the leadership of Yusuf Rawa, for example, viewed politics with ethnocentric concerns as “contamination” (Ibrahim, 2019). In these groups, Islam was borderless and beyond ethnicity, while ethnonationalism was a by-product of Western intellectual dominance that prevented the Muslim *Ummah* from uniting against common enemies (Ibrahim, 2019). Similarly, *dakwah* movements in Malaysia, such as ABIM and IKRAM, have promoted the global *ummah* vision and taken a critical stance towards ethnonationalism (Osman Bakar, 1981; Liow, 2022). ABIM and IKRAM, as moderate and progressive movements, address multiculturalism issues within the Islamic framework and hold cross-cultural programs that bring diverse ethnic and religious Malaysians together.

Islam has also profoundly shaped the Malaysian state's governance and political legitimacy. Following the Islamist party PAS's entrance into Malaysian politics as a solid alternative for the ruling government party and the rising popularity of the Islamic groups and movements at the grassroots level, UMNO incorporated Islamic elements in response to PAS's rise and grassroots Islamic movements, especially during the 1980s under Tun Mahathir's administration (Liow, 2009). With Tun Mahathir's administration in the 1980s, Malaysian authorities have proactively engaged with Islamic revivalism, seeking to incorporate Islamic principles into governance structures and societal institutions. However, the state and Islamic movements have also had many fluctuations and setbacks in their relationship, such as the detaining of Anwar Ibrahim and the *Reformasi*⁵

⁵ Reformasi movement is one of the turning points in Malaysian civil society history. The importance of the movement is that it was one the first mass demonstrations since the independence of Malaysia. The movement mobilised hundreds of people with various

movement in 1998. Following the Reformasi era, Islamic ideals became even more central in state administration, particularly under Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's *Islam Hadhari* (Civilisational Islam), which aimed to modernise governance while emphasising ethical and developmental aspects of Islam (Ahmad Fauzi, 2018b). This was further reinforced by his successor Najib Razak, when introduced *Islam Wasatiyyah* as a state policy. Both *Islam Hadhari* and *Wasatiyyah* illustrate how successive Malaysian administrations have continued to embed Islamic principles into statecraft as strategic frameworks for legitimising political authority and appealing to the Malay-Muslim electorate.

The relationship between the government/state and Islamic movements in the Islamisation process is one of the major concerns in the literature. Scholars put significant effort into analysing and conceptualising their relationship. In this regard, Nagata (1984), Saliha Hassan (2003) and Camroux (1996)'s works should be mentioned. Nagata (1984) underlines the significance of Islamic movements as a challenge to the power and authority of the government, *i.e.*, the ruling Malay party UMNO, because historically, UMNO had fashioned itself as the protector of Malays. Saliha Hassan (2003) furthers this argument that since the Islamic movements were closer to the Malay community than the political and religious elites, the movements' taking root among the Malay-Muslim community facilitated.

social and political organisations which had conflicting ideologies or perspectives. For some scholars, Reformasi triggered a new political awakening by unsteady the ethnic politics, it provided a more democratic framework. However, Nair (2007) is sceptical about the positive results attributed to Reformasi. As she contends, let alone the Reformasi movement provided a more democratic framework, "The demise of Malaysia's Reformasi movement reveals not only the entrenchment of the discursive/structural aspects of state power, but also its articulation with civil society and movement politics.". Farish Noor (1999), also sceptical about the success of reformasi movement. While he acknowledges that the Reformasi movement was a counter-hegemonic effort, he argues that its impact remained undermined due to Islamic movements' ethnocentric and Islamist agenda. Khoo Ying Hooi (2014), on the other hand, draws attention to changing protest culture in Malaysia. Reformasi movement was or was not produce any result, as she argues, it "pushed the boundaries" and bring the protest actions in the Malaysian political landscape which paved the way the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (BERSIH) protests. Besides, the Reformasi movement did not produce any outcome in regards to more democratic and inclusive political system for Malaysia, however, from the social movement theory perspective it certainly created a political opportunity which created positive repercussions for Islamic movements. For example, reformasi movement help JIM, as Lemiere (2009) puts it, "to re-launch itself as a national movement with national-appeal" (p.61).

Camroux (1996) conceptualises the strategies of the state to regulate the relationships with Islamic movements, which are in line with Saliha Hassan's (2003) descriptions. As he noted, the Malaysian state applied three-fold tactics, which are accommodation, co-optation, and confrontation. First, the government credited the Islamic movements, holding them as reliable sources of indicators of "the feeling, aspiration and concerns of its Malay-Muslim majority electorate" (Camroux 1996, p. 98). Due to this reason, the government showed tolerance by providing them with public space and a political role in Malaysian civil society. Secondly, the government established or sponsored its Islamic non-governmental organisations, such as the Malaysian *Dakwah* Foundation (*Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia*, YADIM). Thus, the state itself actively took part in the Islamisation of Malaysia. Thirdly, as in the case of 1987's *Operasi Lalang*⁶, the state oppressed the Islamic movements directly by applying the Internal Security Act (ISA), where hundreds of activists were detained, and *Darul Arqam*, which was one of the Islamic movements, was banned.

Ahmad Fauzi and Hamdan Razali (2015), on the other hand, focus on the contested visions of Islam of both political groups and Islamic movements, particularly during Najib Razak's premiership years between 2009 and 2013. As they draw attention to the debates and competition between different versions of Islam, ranging from Mahathir's, PAS's, Middle Eastern-influenced *Ulamas*', reformists', nationalists', or moderates' Islam vision. Therefore, the main concern was which version of Islam would prevail in the political and social arena. In the Najib era between 2009 and 2013, however, Najib Razak, who could not reveal his Islamic vision, paved the way for the proliferation of

⁶ On 27 October 1987, the Malaysian Special Branch and the Royal Malaysian Police carried out an operation to arrest over 100 people including NGO activists, opposition politicians, students, media reporters, artists, three newspapers licence was revoked. While the official reason for the operation is to ease the racial tension, it was speculated that the main reason was then-Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's way of handling his political opponents ("What Happened with Ops Lalang 33 Years Ago?", *The Rakyat Post*, 27 Oct, 2020. Available at <http://www.therakyatpost.com>).

diverse groups and individuals who spoke on behalf of Islam with different and even opposing perspectives (p. 325).

Towards the 2020s, the state's effort to design and regulate Malaysia's Islamisation by actively involving the process has been clearer. In this context, Mohamad (2010) identifies "religious bureaucracy" as a crucial factor that warrants attention alongside Islamic social movement organisations and political parties, primarily UMNO and PAS. As Mohamad (2010) contends, religion has become increasingly bureaucratised as the Malaysian state has transformed into a vehicle for Islamisation.

Drawing on Weber's concept of charismatic authority, Mohamad (2010) applies it to religious authorities, traditionally known as *ulama*. She argues that the *ulama* raised their power, legitimacy, and efficacy under the rule of state administration. The problem with the *ulama*, nevertheless, is their non-negotiable authority in bureaucracy, which has invaded "the authentic, heterogeneous, and pluralist Islamic thought" (Mohamad, 2010). As a result, Mohamad's (2010) analysis highlights the increasing role of religious bureaucracy in the Islamisation of Malaysia and the accompanying hegemonic struggle involving the government, religious elites, and Islamic social movement organisations. The bureaucratisation of religion, particularly with respect to the *ulama*'s authority, raises concerns about the preservation of authentic, diverse, and pluralist Islamic thought, potentially impacting the broader socio-political landscape of Malaysia.

More contemporary literature, on the other hand, increasingly focuses on the rising competition over religious identities in Malaysian politics and increasing far-right tendencies. Towards the 2020s, the bureaucratisation of Islam in Malaysia intensified, with religious authorities and Islamic movements like ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA shaping political discourses, reinforcing the complexity and heterogeneity of political Islam in Malaysia (Ahmad Fauzi, 2020; Hew & Chan, 2024; Saleem, 2021).

One of the recent studies, Oliver (2020) investigates the phenomenon of Islamic revivalism and politics in the Malaysian context. The Malaysian state, particularly during the Tun Mahathir era in the 1980s and 90s, used Islamisation as a co-opt strategy to compete with PAS, gain control of the Malay constituents and discourage the opposition. He argues that this effort of the state's desire for hegemony, raising the importance of Islam in social life, increase the visibility of Islam in public life, creating its own religious bureaucracy in order to promulgate what is Islamic and what is not, the state attempted to build its hegemony to control the society both ideologically and physically (p. 73). In the process of Islamisation, some of the civil society agents, mainly the Islamic movements but particularly right-wing Islamic movements, were a great facilitator. However, Oliver (2020) does not go further and elaborate on the role of civil society actors in the hegemonic efforts of the state.

Saleem's (2021) study, on the other hand, focuses on the pejorative use of the "liberal" identity in the political competition in Malaysia. She argues that in order to remain in power the Malay elite reaffirmed the dominant ethno-religious narratives and rearticulated the meaning of "liberal" as anti-Islam. By extension, the "liberal" Malays was associated with non-Malay ethnic minorities with secular values, because the elites argued that non-Muslim ethnic minorities and their "liberal" Malay-Muslim partners threaten *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay Supremacy), Malay special rights, and Islamic values (Saleem, 2021). In this reconstruction of liberal identity, the elites demonise and delegitimise their political rivals so that they can retain control of state power.

Another study regarding the competing political identities using Islamic discourse is Hew's (2020) study. He argues that PAS is not the only Islamist party in Malaysia. Its views and political Islam vision have been contested in many ways and by many actors in urban Malaysia. By focusing on the general election campaign in, Selangor *Bangi* in

2018 (GE14), he shows that with the support of civil society actors and some *ulama*, the two parties (PAS and AMANAH) contested their different visions of political Islam, the historical competition between PAS and UMNO has evolved to PAS versus AMANAH. The crucial point in his article is that the interactions between the political parties (PAS and AMANAH) show that there are two loose coalition: compassionate Islam of AMANAH (with staunch support of IKRAM and ABIM) versus racial and religious backlash from ISMA and PAS (Hew, 2020). By emphasising the strong support and dedication of Islamic movements (ABIM and IKRAM) to AMANAH during the *Bangi* election campaign, Hew (2020) posits that ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA played a crucial role in shaping discourses and practices of political Islam in Malaysia during GE14. Furthermore, their influence is expected to persist, emphasising the ongoing complexities and challenges surrounding the evolution of political Islam in the country.

Recently, there has been a proliferation of research on religious nationalism and far-right ideologies in Malaysia. Hew & Chan (2024), Gkoutzioulis (2024), Tayeb & Weiss (2024), Hamid & Razali (2023) and Helmy Sabtu et al. (2021) are among the recent research in this field. While Hew & Chan (2024), Gkoutzioulis (2024) and Hamid & Razali (2023) examine the ideological foundations of far-right ideologies and their integration with the Islamic discourse in Malaysia. and Tayeb & Weiss (2024) and Helmy Sabtu et al. (2021) focuses on their reflection on the Malaysian politics, using the case of PAS.

This review reveals that despite significant scholarship on the relationship between the state and Islamic movements in Malaysia. Much of the existing literature emphasises structural and institutional strategies; however, limited attention is given to the strategic and discursive competitions. Studies such as Hew (2020) provide valuable insights into event-focused collaboration and contestation, such as ABIM and IKRAM's support for

AMANAH during electoral campaigns but fail to address the long-term dynamics shaping inter-movement rivalry. Furthermore, while recent works (e.g., Saleem, 2021; Hew & Chan, 2024) analyse the rise of far-right ideologies and ethno-religious narratives, they insufficiently explore how pluralist movements like ABIM and IKRAM counter these narratives or promote multiculturalism through Islamic frameworks. ISMA's promotion of a Malay-Muslim supremacist ideology is acknowledged, but its interactions and ideological competition with more inclusive movements remain inadequately examined. Additionally, there is a gap in the application of frame and discourse analysis, which could uncover how these movements construct and contest identities, articulate distinct visions of Islam, and mobilise support.

2.4 Islamic Movements in Malaysia

The current landscape of Islamist movements has evolved in tandem with the global Islamic resurgence. Even though Islamic movements were spreading their version of Islamic teachings and lifestyle, as Jomo and Ahmed (1988) noted, the 1979 Islamic Revolution significantly heightened Islamic involvement in political life. Irwan Saidin (2019) argues, however, that this awakening initially revealed itself through ethnic Malays as well as political parties and organisations, such as the Islamist party, PAS, and Islamic movements *Darul Arqam*, ABIM and *Jamaat Tabliq-i Islami*. These movements have played a significant role in shaping the current political landscape in Malaysia and paved the way for the entrance of new movements such as ISMA and IKRAM and political parties such as AMANAH (Irwan Saidin, 2019). Thus, Islam's increasing prominence is significantly affected by the presence of both established political Islamist party PAS and Islamic movements in Malaysia.

Indeed, these new Islamic approaches have contributed to a more complex and multifaceted landscape of Islamic political thought and practice. Yet, they have also

generated contestation and competition among various interpretations of Islam. As Ahmad Fauzi (2018a) argues, the evolving development and contestations regarding the interplay of Islam and politics in Malaysia's public space for 60 years (1957-2017) since its independence as a nation-state. Particularly since the 1980s, Islam has transformed into a highly contested political domain. On the one hand, the number of Islamic movements in Malaysia has grown rapidly in recent years. At the same time, their power and influence in mainstream politics and society have become more visible. Therefore, the increasing prominence of competing Islamic movements in Malaysia has become a crucial area of academic inquiry in recent years. Next section discusses the literature on Islamic movements and their relationships with the Malaysian state and other Islamic movements.

The Malaysian social sciences literature has started to focus on the Islamic revivalist movements in the 1980s (Zainah Anwar, 1987; Jomo & Cheek, 1988; Muzaffar, 1986; Nagata, 1984). The primary inquiries of these scholars during this period revolved around understanding the nature of Islamic revivalism, the motivations behind these movements, and the factors that enabled them to garner substantial support from society. In this respect, the early studies on Malaysian Islamic movements shared similarities with macro-level approaches in terms of their scope and the explanations they offered for the emergence of these movements.

Scholars such as Jomo & Cheek (1988) and Muzaffar (1986) argue that Islamism in Malaysia has been shaped by certain macro factors, similar to the studies focusing on other Muslim countries. Among these factors, colonialism and the Iranian Revolution are considered particularly crucial. Farish Noor (2014) draws attention to the post-colonial global order and its unjust and unequal characteristics, as well as the Iranian Revolution, which emboldened the Islamic parties and movements to change and challenge the global

status quo that was deemed as evil and corrupt. Considering secularism as a serious threat posed by the imperialists, revivalists contend that *Islam is ad-Din*, a way of life that embodies both religious and political realms.

Liow (2009), on the other hand, is very sceptical about the growth motivations of Islamism in Southeast Asia comparing the MENA. He argues that in MENA countries, Islamic movements' growth was closely related to their autocratic states and their failure as secular Pan-Arab nationalists. In Malaysia, however, the Islamisation process was neither a reaction to the state nor a response to the bankruptcy of the modernisation process. Instead, the process was directed and structured by the state since the 1980s. Besides, Liow also disagrees with the view that Islamisation in Malaysia is connected with economic deprivation and unequal wealth distribution. Contrary to pointing out the Mahathir administration in the 1980s, he claims that the politicization of Islam went hand in hand with economic growth. Further, Mahathir himself employed Islamic vocabulary and idioms to justify his industrialisation and development policies (Liow, 2009)

The claims of Liow (2009) overlooks the Malaysian Islamist movements' counter-mobilisation efforts in a repressive political context triggered by an authoritarian setting. He fails to consider the regimes' strong control over civil society and political party actors through laws such as the ISA. Under the ISA, dozens of academics, students, religious and youth leaders were detained and prosecuted (Weiss, 2004, p. 263). In fact, as Bob (2020) indicates, measures of the government to curtail dissidents' efforts left the only choice to express their grievances gathering around Islamic movements. Therefore, joining an advocacy group or an Islamic movement was a way of engaging in opposition politics. This was the case, particularly for the university students (p. 69). Before Anwar's deputy role in the UMNO government in 1982, ABIM harshly criticised the government in regard to wide economic inequalities, poverty of rural Malays, and corruption. By

focusing on the 1980s and onwards, Liow (2009) oversees the state's efforts to control and repress the Islamic movements. From the 1980s, the government chose to collaborate with certain Islamic movements, such as ABIM. As Weiss (2004) pointed out, this was a power preservation strategy. The government had sensed the shift in the Malay-Muslim ground; hence, they developed a collaboration strategy and took steps to counterbalance the *dakwah* mobilisation (p. 272). This strategy of the government, therefore, was, in essence, a power struggle as a result of efforts to preserve and maintain the UMNO's hegemony over the Malay constituents (Ahmad Fauzi & Razali, 2015).

Muzaffar (1986) and Zainah Anwar (1987), on the other hand, focus more on the social aspects of revivalism. Muzaffar (1986) contends that the main motivation behind the Islamic resurgence was to oppose the modernisation ideology of the West and alter it with the Islamic one. Accordingly, changing preferences, activities, and behaviours of Malays, such as changing clothing styles or adopting stricter dietary rules, challenge the modernisation process. As Muzaffar (1986) noted, not only the ordinary lives of Malays but also businesses and the political system were affected by the transformation of the resurgence, and he underlines that Islamic movements demand more, such as an Islamic education system, Islamic political order or Islamic legal framework which reveals the importance of the cultural and intellectual aspects of Islamic resurgence (Muzaffar, 1986).

Zainah Anwar (1987) conducted one of the first empirical studies focusing on *dakwah* movements. She investigated how *dakwah* messages were spread among university students. She highlights the importance of the New Economic Policy (NEP) on the mobilisation for education and occupation reasons and ABIM's widespread networking activities that help the *dakwah* movements to increase their contacts so that how it becomes one of the most influential Islamic movements in Malaysia.

Alternatively, looking for the reason behind Islamic resurgence, Jomo and Ahmed Cheek (1988) argue that there were both internal and external factors strengthening Islamic resurgence and the consolidation of its political influence; however, domestic politics was one of the major drivers of Islamic revivalism⁷. Besides, they acknowledge that ethnic considerations have been seen as the major force underlying the Islamic resurgence in Malaysia while recognising the impact of class contradictions also plays a significant role, supporting Kessler's (1980) claim. Still, more importantly, they stress the relative autonomy of ideology culture to understand the factors that shape the development of these movements and to analyse how they interact and influence each other in Malaysia.

Sharaduddin Maaruf (2005) is overly critical of the assertions of the Islamic revivalists by arguing that Islamists are disparaging the existing social order and status quo, yet they are not very certain of the things that they approve or disapprove of. Even more, they mostly fail to diagnose or understand the existing conditions of society objectively. Instead, they formulate their own reality for the mobilisation towards the change they offer. Therefore, as he argues, the way of religious thinking of Islamists is a utopian type that includes these elements "a) Islam as *Ad-Din* or the Religion, b) the threat of secularism, c) the image of the West in crisis, d) the limitation of man, e) the hierarchy of the knowledge, f) the perfectibility of the past, f) the pursuit of the new millennium, and g) the denial of the reality of social dimension." (p. 3).

⁷ Moreover, Jomo and Ahmed (1988) detect three phases for the development of Islamic resurgence. The first, the early 1970s when Malay-Muslim students were sent abroad for education purposes, second, the late 1970s when ABIM and PAS's tacit partnership as an opposition bloc against UMNO, and the third, the 1980s, the cooperation between Islamic movements and the government. It should be noted here that Ahmad Fauzi (2008) adds two more phases to Jomo and Ahmed's periodisation; which are the fourth phase 1998-2003 the Reformasi Phase which the mass demonstrations organised by Islamic movements and their calls for civil liberties and the abolishment of Internal Security Act (Weiss, 2006). Lastly, the fifth is the 2003-2008 readjustment phase which was a new era for Islamic movements and state relationships.

Maaruf's claims, however, overlook the dynamic structure of political Islam in Malaysia and its dependence on the structural-economic circumstances. As an example from the PAS case, Farish Noor (2014) points out that PAS has never had a uniform and invariable ideological stand but various histories that intersect with each other. Besides, Islamic revivalism and Islamic movements in Malaysia are quintessentially counterhegemonic movements. From the beginning, they were a staunch critic of the government and the ruling elites. As Kessler's (1978) important study showed, the Islamists, particularly PAS, which has significant grassroots support, sought to eliminate economic inequalities and create a more equitable society. In the same vein, PAS framed its Islamic state vision as an ethical economy and moral society.

The initial studies for the Islamic movements in Malaysia, as can be clearly seen, made a great effort to explain the emergence of the Islamic movements and their motivations for mobilisation. However, their explanations overly emphasise the macro factors, such as colonialism or the Iranian revolution, whereas a little emphasis on micro factors, such as the role of local religious leaders and individual experiences in shaping the ideologies and strategies of Islamic movements, remains underexplored. Furthermore, the existing literature predominantly adopts the centre-periphery perspective in investigating the relationship between Islamic movements and the Malaysian state. In this regard, the literature overlooks the complex relationship between the state and the Islamic movements and does not provide an in-depth understanding in terms of the power dynamics within and between these movements.

2.4.1 The Literature on ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA

ABIM, one of the most important Islamic movements and the biggest Muslim youth organisation in Malaysia, was founded in 1971 as a by-product of Islamic revivalism in Malaysia (Zulkifly Abdul Malek, 2011). Due to its importance in Malaysian politics,

scholars have investigated it from various perspectives, including management, Islamic studies, sociology and politics. The first research focusing exclusively on ABIM is the doctoral dissertation of Manutty (1989), who examined the organisation's origin and its impact on the Malay community. Besides, Zainah Anwar (1987) and Nagata (1984) paid attention to ABIM's adoption of Islamic teachings and emergence as a *dakwah* movement.

A growing body of literature discusses ABIM's ideas, activities, NGO activism, and impact on society and politics. Saliha Hassan (2003), for example, provides a critical perspective on ABIM and its activities throughout its history up to the end of the 1990s. More recently, while Liow (2009) discusses ABIM in the context of rising conservatism among Malays and within the Malaysian state body. Zulkifly Abdul Malek (2011) investigated the influence of the MB on ABIM in terms of ideological and activism methods. As he pointed out, one of the fundamental issues that ABIM reacted to was the social injustice and inequality problems of Malays because of the government implementations. Ideologically, however, the organisation was very much affected by the MB's *dakwah* movement. Therefore, their activities initially concentrated on youth activism and education. In the 1980s and 1990s, ABIM, under Anwar Ibrahim's charismatic leadership, became a very influential religious pressure with several branches and thousands of members across Malaysia.

As one of the studies on ABIM, Irwan Saidin (2019) conducted a comparative study on ABIM, PAS, AMANAH and ISMA, focusing on the attitudes of these actors as a response to the Arab Uprisings and investigated the "Malaysian Spring" polemics. According to Irwan Saidin, all the selected Islamic movements were in favour of free and democratic elections for political change rather than a regime change by rallies, protests or civil disobedience. From the findings of Irwan Saidin (2019), it can be concluded that

Islamic movements in Malaysia are distant and cautious about actions that might lead to violence or cause serious administrative turmoil, as in the case of Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia.

In the cases of ISMA and IKRAM, both have the same ideological and organisational background, and they were founded as a result of the division within JIM.⁸ While the right-wing members formed ISMA in 1997, more progressive members left JIM to form IKRAM in 2009. Even though both organisations were influenced by the MB's ideology (*see i.e.*, Maszlee Malik et al., 2018; Zulkifly Abdul Malek, 2011), their political standings and treatments of problems are most of the time opposed. ISMA's concerns mostly focus on the erosion of the *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) principle and the status of Islam in Malaysia (Osman & Saleem, 2016). On the contrary, IKRAM is regarded as a moderate and progressive Islamic organisation that deals with multiculturalism issues within the Islamic framework and holds up cross-cultural programmes which bring diverse ethnic and religious Malaysians together (Zaman, 2019).

Unlike ABIM, the literature on ISMA and IKRAM is relatively scarce; limited studies focus exclusively on these movements. Most of the research is descriptive work explaining the ideals or activities that IKRAM or ISMA focuses on. Lemiere (2009) is among the first scholars to examine the formation of Jema'ah Islam Malaysia, the former organisation of IKRAM and ISMA. She investigated how a "non-partisan" civil society actor transformed into a "third party" between political parties and Malaysian society by stimulating political change and influencing political leaders. What is also crucial in

⁸ The literature on the origin and shared history of ISMA and IKRAM is complex. While ISMA informants contested the notion of a shared origin, as discussed in Chapter 5, IKRAM informants and several experts acknowledged this connection. For this study, I treat this shared origin as informative rather than a point of contention.

Lemiere's (2009) work is that she expresses the conflicts and contestations between Islamic social movements that support different political parties for election and also cooperation with each other, particularly with ABIM, after Anwar's ouster and during the *Reformasi* movement.

Maszlee Malik and his colleagues are among the scholars who are examining JIM (and IKRAM) from different perspectives, such as education, governance and human rights issues. Maszlee Malik et al. (2016) examine JIM's philosophy on education between 1990 and 2000, following the traces of their understanding of the *dakwah*. According to them, JIM simulated the MB's ideals and aimed to transform first the individuals, then the families and finally the whole society through education to maintain their *dakwah* mission. In another research, Maszlee Malik (2017b) discusses the good governance efforts of JIM as a civil society actor. As he argues, faith is an important motivator for social movement mobilisation. Thus, he investigated how Islamic movements, such as JIM, mobilise the masses for *good governance* by incorporating faith into governance and politics.

From the governance perspective, Maszlee Malik (2017) also discusses human rights violations and the role of Islamic movements, focusing on the JIM case. As he argues, JIM was engaged in good governance and human rights issues, particularly in the case of the famous Internal Security Act. JIM actively participated and led the mobilisation of the abolishment of the ISA as a part of good governance ideals and responsibilities. Finally, Maszlee Malik et al. (2018) examine IKRAM as an NGO operating in the civil society arena. The authors highlight the critical role NGOs can play as agents of change and discuss how IKRAM integrates religious ideals into their social, economic, and political agendas to promote the well-being of citizens. The scholars argue that by doing so, Islamic movements, such as IKRAM, are able to demonstrate the ongoing relevance

of religion and faith in today's modern-global world and their potential to make significant contributions to society. It can be suggested that Maszlee Malik and colleagues have attempted to develop a theoretical framework that incorporates the intersection of religion and development, and the practical examples of JIM and IKRAM serve as a manifestation of this paradigm.

Zaman (2019) discusses Malaysian CSOs' efforts to counter the growing ethnic and religious conservatism in Malaysia. Zaman (2019) highlights IKRAM's activities as a faith-based organisation. Presenting themselves as a "progressive voice of Islam", as Zaman noted, IKRAM involves dialogue with other ethnic communities and offers alternative social policies to improve the social fabric in Malaysia. However, these efforts of IKRAM met with backlash from ISMA and other Malay nationalist groups, and they encountered allegations as being "liberal", even though IKRAM does not align itself in the liberal-secular ideological spheres. Zaman's article is essential in illustrating the complex power relations at play between social movements and their competitors, as well as the conflicts that arise from different ideological and religious interpretations.

ISMA, on the other hand, has garnered increasing attention from researchers and academics in recent years. Despite its active engagement in community services as a *dakwah* movement, the predominant focus of scholarly investigations has been on ISMA's discourse and ideological stance. Osman & Saleem (2016), for example, focus on the impact of ISMA's discourse on politics in Malaysia. They point out that Malay rights have been strongly expressed in ISMA's rhetoric, which has made ISMA gain national attention and increased its visibility in recent years. Emphasising the importance of the *Ketuanan Melayu* principle and the perceived diminishing status of Islam in society, ISMA developed a severe counterattack against Najib Razak's attempts at

moderate public discourse, also known as Islam *Wasatiyyah*⁹ (lit. moderate Islam) policy and the *IMalaysia* initiative. As the national elections approached, Osman and Saleem (2016) argued that Najib and UMNO underwent a strategic shift and adopted pro-Malay rights and anti-liberalism rhetoric that ISMA pioneered. This analysis elucidates the significant influence of ISMA's ideological positions on the broader political landscape in Malaysia.

As pointed out before, ISMA has a robust nationalistic ideology compared with other Islamic movements. Ahmad Fauzi & Razali (2016) discuss ISMA's ideological justification for its stance as an Islamic movement. Accordingly, ISMA adopted MB's founder Hassan al-Banna's thoughts on nationalism, more specifically "integral/benign nationalism". Hence, as Ahmad Fauzi & Razali (2016) argue, Arab nationalism, advocated by Hasan al-Banna, became the foundation for ISMA's adoption of Malay nationalism, which was implemented within a Malaysian-Islamic context.

In a recent book chapter, Ahmad Fauzi & Razali (2023) examine the intricate relationship between extremist discourse and potential violent outcomes by focusing on the case study of ISMA. Although ISMA does not participate in direct acts of violence, Ahmad Fauzi & Razali (2023) argue that its claim of non-violence cannot be trusted due to the significant influence of Middle Eastern-oriented religious leaders. They suggest that ISMA's uncompromising rhetoric fuels extremist tendencies, which could potentially provoke other ethno-religious groups into violent actions. By highlighting the grey area

⁹ The concept of *Wasatiyyah* was first introduced into ABIM's ideological framework by its former president, Siddiq Fadzil, who emphasized a balanced and contextual understanding of Islam (Badlihiham Mohd Noor, 2007). This principle has since been consistently upheld by successive ABIM presidents—including Mohammad Nor Manutty, and Muhammad Faisal Aziz—as a core element in promoting a moderate approach to *dakwah* activities and fostering constructive engagement with non-Muslim communities (Badlihiham Mohd Noor, 2007; Muhammad Faisal Abdul Aziz, 2022b). In contrast, it was not until 2016 that *Islam Wasatiyyah* was formally introduced as a state policy by then Prime Minister Najib Razak, aimed at institutionalizing moderation and countering extremism within the broader framework of national governance (Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, 2020). The Najib government's adoption of the Wasatiyyah concept as a state policy can be seen as a clear indicator of ABIM's discursive influence on state-level policymaking.

between non-violent extremist discourse and violent outcomes, the authors maintain that extremist discourses from seemingly non-violent organisations may indirectly contribute to escalating tensions and the emergence of violence. Consequently, Ahmad Fauzi and Razali (2023) strive to illuminate the complex relationship between extremist discourse and potential violence, providing insights into the possible consequences of ISMA's radicalisation for ethno-religious dynamics in Malaysia.

There are also comparative studies focusing on ISMA and IKRAM. Mohd Hedzir and Arif Yahya (2018), for example, compared how the "*rahmah*" (compassion) concept is understood in IKRAM and ISMA's ideological framework. The authors argue that despite the fact that the *rahmah* concept is crucially important in Islam, both the *dakwah* movement have different understandings and approaches to it. IKRAM's *rahmah* approach includes both Muslims and non-Muslims. Being compassionate towards non-Muslims for IKRAM is an opportunity for establishing good relations with non-Muslims to convey and spread Islam's teachings and messages. For ISMA, on the other hand, *rahmah* is a concept that should not be misused by using the concept in the "liberal hermeneutic approach", which refers to being compassionate towards non-Muslims. Unlike IKRAM, ISMA adopted exclusionary attitudes towards non-Muslims and defends Islam and the Muslim community in Malaysia.

In a similar vein, Arif Yahya and Mohd Hedzir (2018) compare IKRAM and ISMA's approach towards non-Muslims in the light of their comprehension of hadiths. As the authors discuss, although they reference similar hadiths, due to their different understandings of *dakwah*, ISMA's political focus in Malaysia results in their disagreement with non-Malays' political position, leading them to adopt a more rigid stance towards them. In contrast, IKRAM seeks to build closer relationships with non-Malays, seeing these engagements as opportunities to convey the *dakwah* message and

Islamic teachings to non-Muslims. As Arif Yahya and Mohd Hedzir's comparative works have shown, even though each movement has the same religious sources to guide their actions, due to their ontological differences, their understanding and, thus, interpretation of these sources are diametrically opposed.

In conclusion, the focus of academic research on ISMA has primarily been on its discourse and ideological stance, which has influenced the political landscape in Malaysia. Scholars have also examined the intricate relationship between ISMA's extremist discourse and potential violent outcomes, highlighting the potential consequences of radicalisation for ethno-religious dynamics in Malaysia. Additionally, comparative studies between ISMA and IKRAM have shed light on the differences in their approaches towards non-Muslims and their understanding of key Islamic concepts despite both movements having similar religious sources. These studies emphasise the importance of examining the complexities of Islamic movements and their ideological positions, as they can significantly impact social and political dynamics in Malaysia.

2.5 Literature Gap

Overall, the literature on global Islamic movements overly emphasises macro-level factors such as the role of the state, transnational influences, and broader socio-economic processes, such as modernisation and globalisation. Furthermore, the literature often focuses on the significance of political dynamics in shaping the trajectory of these movements. However, Islamic movements have inherent complexities. While similar motivations have impacted all Islamic movements, they have different internal dynamics, motivations and strategies in the current situation, and they are influenced by local or international factors differently. Therefore, analysis of Islamic movements should integrate macro and micro-level factors, such as the values, symbols, and meaning-making processes, to comprehensively understand these groups. As the constructivist

perspective suggests, social movements are not a by-product of major forces or a reaction to dominant structures of power. Rather, they construct new meanings or identities or assign new meanings to existing values and concepts.

Having discussed the meaning production role of the social movements, it is vital to address the ideology component of social movements, which is often underemphasised and widely neglected in the literature. Social movements produce meaning by constructing their own ideologies for participants and contenders by accentuating certain things and hiding others (Benford & Snow, 1988), and they actively utilise ideologies for collective action. Drawing on Gramscian concept of “common sense,” social movements’ construction of an alternative common sense as a counterhegemonic effort. This new common sense produced by the social movements can challenge the dominant discourse and hegemonic structures within politics and society by influencing the political and other civil society actors. To better understand the role of ideology in social movements, particularly within the context of Islamic movements, it is vital to understand the process of ideological articulations and their impact on other actors to analyse how these ideologies can potentially transform existing societal norms and power relations.

The examination of power dynamics, contests, and competition between social movements remains an inadequately explored area in both global and Malaysian literature. Social movements seek to garner increased support from the audience while simultaneously delegitimising or destabilising their adversaries, ultimately aiming to enhance their power and legitimacy. The literature has yet to adequately theorise the struggle between social movements and counter-movements. The methods these movements use to delegitimise each other have not been adequately analysed. No studies in this area have yet been conducted in Malaysia. This study, in this regard, is an attempt to understand the characteristics of power struggles, which is crucial for comprehending

competition, contestation, or cooperation between social movements, especially in the contexts of various movements that compete for influence and legitimacy. Malaysian Islamic movements are very suitable for this attempt. Furthermore, analysing these power dynamics between social movements can provide a better understanding of the impact of these struggles on the construction and contestation of hegemony, particularly in relation to the formation of alternative discourses of “common sense”. By focusing on the power dynamics between ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM, this study seeks to discover the hegemonic contestation of these Islamic movements in the Malaysian context.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework for understanding competition dynamics between Islamic movements in Malaysia. It focuses on frame theory of David Snow and Robert Benford (Benford, 1987, 1993, 2013b; Benford, 1997; Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow, 2004; Snow & Benford, 1988, 1992) and discourse theory, particularly the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau, 1977, 1988, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2005; Mouffe, 1993, 2013a; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Social movements create their own identities to differentiate themselves from their competitors, invoke frames, and contest their ideas in civil and political society to gain more support and power and increase their legitimacy. Frame theory and discourse theory provide the necessary framework to examine the contestation between the ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM cases selected for this study and how their discourses shape and reshape Malaysia's political and social landscape.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. First, it provides an overview of the theories used to explore the competition between social movements and explains the rationale for selecting frame theory and discourse theory in this research. Then, frame theory and discourse theory are examined in detail by discussing the origin of the theories, the key concepts, and their relevance to Islamic movements. Following these sections, the application of these two theories in this research is outlined. The final section presents the concluding remarks.

3.2 Social Movement Theories on Competition

Various theories and concepts that explain the competition between social movements. Among the most prominent are resource mobilisation theory (RMT), political opportunity structure theory (POS), and new social movements theory (NSM), which play a central

role in guiding social movement studies to explain how movements operate. In addition to these theories, more interpretive frameworks, such as frame theory — an integral part of RMT— and discourse theory —although not explicitly linked to social movement studies— provide an appropriate theoretical lens for this study. In this section, I briefly discuss each theory and explain why frame theory and discourse theory were chosen to investigate the competition between ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA in this research.

First, as a theory considering social movements as rational entities, RMT claims that social movements compete like business organisations for limited resources (Koopmans, 1993; Zald & McCarthy, 1980). These resources may be the money, time, energy and skills of participants (McCarthy & Zald, 2001; Zald & McCarthy, 1980), symbolic goods such as prestige, or for gaining legitimacy and credibility from the authorities (Benford & Zurcher, 1990), support from the public, elites and other external groups (Zald & Useem, 2017). There are theoretical debates about competition between social movements – or social movement industries and social movement organisations as the terms of RMT. However, how competition affects social movements and industries has not been sufficiently explored (Soule & King, 2008). In the context of Malaysia, RMT provides a framework to understand the strategic mobilisation of resources by ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA to enhance their influence in both the civic and political spheres, as each movement seeks to maximise its resources, whether in the form of public support, financial contributions or institutional alliances. However, RMT's focus on resource competition overlooks the ideological and identity dimensions crucial to understanding the dynamics of Islamic movements in Malaysia.

In addition to RMT, the POS theory provides another layer of explanation. For Diani & Eyerman (1992), this term refers to the openness or closedness of the political system, the presence or absence of alliances, divisions or alliances within the elite, the state's

tolerance of protests and the state's ability to make policy. According to this theory, as Meyer & Staggenborg (1996) argue, social movements shape policies by bringing issues to the forefront of political debate, lobbying policymakers and mobilising public opinion. They claim that the political opportunity structure changes in response to the actions of both the movement and the counter-movement, as there are also counter-movements. This interaction involves constant adaptation to each other's strategies and actions. This dynamic interaction thus characterises the overall course of the political struggle (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). While this approach underscores the interactions and mutual influence of movements and counter-movements, there is an overemphasis on the role of the opportunity structure by ignoring the impact of non-structural variables (see, Saunders, 2004).

Frame theory initially emerged as a response to the limitations of earlier theories like RMT and POS. Still, it shifted the attention to the interpretive processes and meaning-making activities within social movements. Nevertheless, the frame theory views social movements more than the carriers of existing ideologies. Frames are the interpretive schemata and serve as cognitive shortcuts that help individuals understand complex issues and participate in social life (D. A. Snow & Benford, 1988).

The frame concept has been a widely used approach in social sciences since the 1970s and in social movement studies in the 1980s (Lindekilde, 2014). It was partly a result of the criticisms towards RMT because RMT overemphasises the importance of rational choice and selective incentives but does not give sufficient significance to feelings, beliefs, ideologies, and shared identities (Lindekilde, 2014; Nash, 2010). The frame concept was already being used by previous scholars, such as Erving Goffman's "Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organisation of Experience" in 1974, one of the most famous examples. However, David Snow and his colleague Robert Benford created the most

influential works in which they strived to develop RMT's rational choice stance by integrating a social constructivist approach, which scholars call a cultural or linguistic turn for RMT (Lindekilde, 2014).

For frame theory and RMT, the meaning, scope, and application of discourse are somewhat limited by the concept of "frames" or cognitive schemata. In other words, discourses are viewed primarily as instrumental tools designed to reinforce specific objectives. Consequently, discourse analysis within these frameworks often evaluates how effectively frames achieve their intended outcomes (McAdam et al., 1996; D. A. Snow & Benford, 1988).

The NSM theory, on the other hand, pioneered vastly by European theorists such as Touraine (1981), Melucci (1989), and Castells (1996), focused on NSMs that emerged in the 1960s and onward by highlighting their novelty against the "old" labour movements (Buechler, 2013). Different from the old social movements, NSMs put their attention towards society and everyday life, such as issues of gender, race, ethnicity, environmentalism and the like, rather than targeting the state and state power (Buechler, 2013; Tuğal, 2009). In this regard, according to Melucci (1996), NSMs have increasingly shifted their focus from confrontations with authorities to questioning dominant cultural norms and generating new ideas. NSMs theory opens up a new path to understanding the Islamic movements' everyday practices and identity construction efforts; nevertheless, the NSMs' focus on identity while downplaying the role of political involvement falls short in explaining the Islamic movements. As Tuğal (2009) stated, "some contemporary movements still target the state in roundabout ways even when they do not challenge it publicly" (p. 425). In the case of Islamic movements, political objectives remain a central dynamic, often intertwining with identity-based concerns, which highlights the limitations of NSM theory in fully capturing the political dimension of these movements.

The discourse theory of Laclau & Mouffe (1985), on the other hand, developed a much broader conception of discourse. This theory includes all practices and meanings in a discourse, shaping a particular community of social actors (Howarth, 2000). However, the meanings in a discourse are not fixed but constantly negotiated (Torring, 1999). Therefore, discourse analysis is about how discourse is constructed historically and politically and how it functions (Howarth, 2000).

In practical terms, in the cases of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA, each movement seeks to establish itself as the legitimate voice of the Muslim community, which involves both cooperation and conflict. They collaborate on certain issues where their interests align, such as defending the rights of Muslims or promoting Islamic education, while fiercely contesting others, like the interpretation of Islamic law or the appropriate relationship between Islam and the state.

Thus, while discourse theory examines the broader socio-cultural and political context in which the discourse shapes social realities, identities, and power relations, frame theory focuses more on social movements and their strategic efforts on meaning-making processes to mobilise supporters and garner legitimacy. In the Malaysian context, while discourse theory provides insights into the broader socio-political context, the social conditions and contradictions, frame theory elucidates how ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA interpret and articulate their ideologies, goals, and grievances within the Malaysian context.

3.3 Frame Theory

“Frame” is one of the concepts widely used in communication studies and sociology. In this study, I use the frame theory in the context of sociology, and particularly social movement studies, as an analytical concept that focuses on meanings, beliefs, and ideologies that motivate and legitimate social movement campaigns. Therefore, I follow

the definition of Snow and Benford, in which social movements “frame, or assign meaning to and interpret, relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilise potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to mobilise antagonists.” (1988, p. 198).

Drawing on the ideas of Goffman, Snow, and Benford, they utilise the frame concept to analyse how social movements negotiate meanings with their actors and convince them of their commitment (D. A. Snow & Benford, 1992). As contextualised by Snow and Benford, frames are interpretive schemata in social movements that define certain conditions as unjust and offer alternatives that might be achieved through collective action (1992, p. 137). In this approach, social movements carry or transmit beliefs and ideas and produce meaning for participants and contenders; even more so, they might shape or reconstruct the existing meanings (D. A. Snow & Benford, 1988).

Collective action frames consist of various strategies, thus several frames, that social movements utilise for their means. Among them, core framing tasks are one of the characteristic features of collective action frames. As D. A. Snow & Benford (1988) discuss, core framing tasks are constructed by social movements to define the problematic conditions, offer solutions and encourage others to act. These tasks are (i) diagnosis frame, (ii) prognosis frame and (iii) motivational frame. The first task, the diagnosis frame, refers to problem identification and attributions regarding what or who to blame. In this task, social movements need to figure out the problem that requires remedy and the sources of causes and effects. The second task, the prognosis frame, refers to solutions to those problems and identifying strategies, tactics, and targets; in other words, it is about how to achieve the solutions. Lastly, the third task is motivational frame which refers to the call for action. After all, mobilisation cannot occur spontaneously even when a movement has identified its problems and solutions, so a movement must use

motivational frames to generate public support through socially constructed vocabulary (Snow and Benford, 2000).

Framing processes are highly contested, sometimes by other movements, bystanders, or media. Challenging a movement's frame is defined as "counter-framing", which refers to "rebut, undermine or neutralise a person's or a group's myths, versions of reality, or interpretation framework" by Robert Benford (1987). With counter-frames, social movements aim to limit or reverse the claims of opponent movements, and this process has been called a "frame contest". Another counter-frame form is the "frame dispute", a disagreement or a conflict over an issue or situation within or between different movements. The counter-frame strategies, frame contest and frame disputes are crucial in understanding how social movements react to internal and external challenges and how they transform over time (Benford, 1987; Benford & Snow, 2000).

Collective action frames are significant because they enable social movements to align various events and experiences to construct a unified and meaningful "package" in Gamson's (1988) terms (cited in Snow & Benford, 1992, pp. 137–138). However, frames can vary and be dynamic in each movement. Snow and Byrd (2007) note four ways of frame variation; first, the three frame types may not be equally important for each movement. For example, a prognostic frame can be more critical than a diagnostic frame for some social movements. Second, the relevance or salience of framing tasks may vary according to the movements' missions or tasks at hand. Third, there may be differences in development about the frames of a social movement. Some frames may be more focused and coherent; they are articulated better than others. Fourth, each component's resonance or relevance may vary according to their audience (2007, pp. 129–130). Regarding social movements contesting in the same category, these possibilities should be considered determining factors of a social movement's success. The ideological

expansion of a movement or the effectiveness of mobilisation efforts can be profoundly affected by these possibilities (Snow & Byrd, 2007).

3.3.1 Frames and Ideology

The role of ideology in the frame theory is one of the literature's most controversial yet critical issues. Della Porta and Diani (2020) argue that the construction of reality, identification of social problems and designating the responsible, to a great extent, depend on the perception of the social movement, but what affects a movement's perception? Ideology is central to social movements, functioning as a resource for them. However, Oliver and Johnston (2000) criticise ideology as being treated as a frame in the literature, and they question whether ideology is a frame or not.

Schwedler (2000) claims that ideology is a type of frame because ideology describes "some event or aspect of social life or system of government as problematic and in need of repair or change, and attributes blame or responsibility" (Snow 2000, p. 4, cited in Schwedler, 2000, p. 23). On the other hand, Oliver and Johnston (2000) argue that they are not synonymous concepts but are related. For them, frame points to process, but ideology indicates content. Frames are a dynamic instrument that helps understand "what is going on" and a cognitive process producing or revising the set of meanings (D. A. Snow & Benford, 1988). In other words, while frames are generated to ask for a change in the world of ideologies, they concurrently reconstruct or transform the meanings and ideologies. Conversely, ideology is a "fairly broad, coherent, and relatively durable set of beliefs that affects one's orientation not only to politics but everyday life" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 613).

David Snow (2004) expresses criticism for the treatment of the ideology concept in social movement studies, stating that the ideology and frame connection is complex and unstructured. He points out that, firstly, it is wrongly presumed that ideologies are mostly

coherent and stable. Contrarily, they are very much influenced by interpretations. The second error is that the studies often ignore the diversity among the social movement participants' ideology. Participants may not share the same ideological stand even within the same movement. Third, discrepancies can be seen between collective action frames and ideology. Lastly, movement ideologies provide a base for frames. However, not every frame is derived from the movement ideology. Sometimes, frames "go beyond ideological limits" (p. 399).

Islam functions as an ideology for Islamic movements by establishing a "coherent set of values and goals and providing a rationale for defending or challenging various social arrangements and conditions" (Balkan Şahin & Bodur Ün, 2021). However, like other ideologies, Islamism also transforms from newly interpreted realities. The transformation within the ideological structure resonates more rapidly through collective action frames, which is why scholars need to track down the collective action frames. Westphal (2017) shows the framing processes of the ISIS. The movement uses grievances, e.g., power loss, socio-political discrimination, and economic disadvantages, as a diagnostic frame. After interpreting the new reality and defining the protagonist, which is the West, in this case, ISIS's ideology argues that the solution is only possible with the Islamic State and a violent struggle against the West and its components. Hence, Westphal's (2017) research on ISIS shows the importance of further studies on the vigorous interaction between ideology and frame.

Islamism, as an ideology, provides a heritage for social movements' claims to enable a greater resonance in society. However, Islamic movements challenge their ideological limits as well. As Hoyle (2016) revealed in his empirical research, in some cases, such as the MB in Egypt or AKP in Turkey, Islamic movements can utilise post-Islamist frames to consolidate or maintain power. As a result, ideology can illuminate the relationship

between ideational and interpretative factors. As Snow (2004) indicates, scholars consider frames and counter-frames to better understand the transformation of social movements.

3.3.2 Frame Analysis on Islamic Movements

Frame theory is increasingly used to analyse how Islamic movements construct their narratives, mobilise support and position themselves in a broader socio-political context. This section examines how frame theory has been applied to radical movements such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS as well as revivalist movements such as the MB and Jamaat Tablighi Islami. By examining these categories, I highlight the different ways in which these groups articulate their goals, negotiate their identities and respond to internal and external challenges.

Much of the existing research on Islamic movements has focused on radical organisations or transnational revivalist movements that inspire various groups in different countries. Thus, this section divides Islamic movements into these two categories to examine the different framing strategies employed by each category and their implications for understanding the dynamics of these movements.

3.3.2.1 Radical Movements

The empirical research on radical Islamic movements examines unique features. For example, Rogan (2011) and Westphal (2017) investigated the identity construction of radical Islamic movements and how they frame the self and the other in their narratives and discourse. Moghaddam (2005), Louis (2009) and Rowland and Theye (2008) examined the ontological security anxieties of terrorist Islamic movements in response to the rising influence of secularisation and globalisation which discredit the traditional local values in the non-Western world. As Rowland and Theye (2008) claim, these movements create a mystic narrative underpinning a return to the glorious past. Thus, as the literature suggests, by inventing a golden age in Anthony Smith's (1995) sense of the term, the

Islamic movements establish a discourse based on the apparent self-other dichotomy, reclaim their pride that the Western colonial masters took away, restore their self-esteem, and affirm their old and new self-identity (Rowland & Theye, 2008).

The literature on the core framing tasks of the radical Islamic movements has demonstrated that the Islamic movements vary significantly. While accusations against the West and Muslim ruling elite are among the common diagnosis frames of Islamic movements, such as Al Qaeda (Holbrook, 2014; Kavrakis, 2023), ISIS (Robinson, 2017), and Hezbollah, the main diagnosis frame is the injustice of the political elites (Karagiannis, 2009). For Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), it is the illegitimacy of the ruling regime (Page et al., 2011). Similarly, for some of the radical Islamic movements, the prognosis frame is jihad or armed violence and the creation of an Islamic state (Kavrakis, 2023). For others, it is the implementation of the *Shari'a*, overthrowing the local regime, and establishing a caliphate (Page et al., 2011). The motivational frames of the radical Islamic movements, on the other hand, are the promotion of violent action as a religious duty (D. A. Snow & Byrd, 2007), criticising the Muslims not supporting their ideology, disavowal of infidels (*al-wala' wa-l-bara'*). For revivalist Islamic movements, motivational frames hardly ever call for violence but, most of the time, promote the *dakwah* (the proselytisation of Islam) activities and invitation of Muslims to participate in reforming society at large (Wickham, 2002, p. 147).

3.3.2.2 Reformist Movements

For *dakwah* movements, the diagnosis frames show similarities to the radical Islamic movements, yet they are more complex. Their diagnosis frames range from the enemies of Islam and Muslims to the problems of Muslim individuals. In the case of the MB, for example, one of the most influential Islamic movements in the world, the movement has diagnosed the problems as the defeat against the Crusaders (Christians), the communists,

the Zionists, and the idolaters that are the main enemies of Islam and the Muslims. However, Muslims are also seen individually in moral crisis. As Islam is a panacea for all the problems, the MB's solution is to establish an Islamic rule that has an *ummah* vision. The Islamic order and *ummah* vision can be established by military and political strength and moral virtue. Therefore, the Islamic order would help restoration of moral values among Muslims. Thus, the material civilisation would be replaced with a moral civilisation (Wickham, 2002, p. 141).

3.3.3 Criticisms Towards Frame Theory

Since the first paper by Snow and Benford (1988), "Ideology, Frame Resonance and Participant Mobilization," the use of frame theory in studies of social movements has grown extensively. Various new concepts have been derived from the 'frame' notion and utilised in various disciplines. However, this extension has been a blessing and a curse for the frame theory. First, scholars criticise that frame theory concepts are not well-defined; therefore, applying these concepts has been inconsistent across studies (van Dijk, 2023; Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011). Van Dijk (2023) goes even further and argues that these concepts often work as a "fuzzy reference" and thus are superficial and lack depth. He also notes that the frame concept does not offer a new analytical approach since discourse analysis has many well-known concepts, such as "topic, theme, rhetoric, narrative, ideologies, or values" (van Dijk, 2023, p. 172).

In response to van Dijk's critique, Snow and Vliegenthart (2023) published a rejoinder. Accordingly, they argue that van Dijk's claim is based on his selective reading and misinterpretation of the frame concept within the literature on social movements. Besides, they oppose seeing frame and related concepts as useless altogether but instead underline that close alignment to discourse analysis and cognitive psychology could benefit the frame theory (D. A. Snow & Vliegenthart, 2023). As Lindekilde (2014) noted, although

there are “obvious affinities” between discourse analysis and frame analysis, their analytical scope and assumptions about the nature of discursive practices are different.

Apart from the definition and the extent, frame theory is also criticised regarding the absence of power within the theory. As Vliegthart and van Zoonen (2011), the lack of focus on power dynamics is a significant gap within the frame theory literature. Supporting this claim, Özen (2013) discusses not only frame theory but resource mobilisation theory and acknowledges that social movements are able to challenge the status quo as a collective action, but at the same time, they tend to ignore how they can challenge the hegemonic structures and rebuild on their owns. This ignorance makes them incompetent to understand the revolutionary nature of some social movements that seek to influence policies and transform societies (Özen, 2013).

The absence of the role of power and domination in the frame theory, and resource mobilisation theory in general, is a legitimate criticism. This shortcoming can be overcome with another theory focusing on power relations in socio-political systems. Discourse theory pays particular attention to the exercise of power and its impact on social practices and relations. Thus, applying this theory in this study is suitable. In the next session, I explain the discourse theory and the following section discusses why to integrate these two.

3.4 Discourse Theory

Examining the competition between Islamic movements requires a theory that conceptualises power and domination and their relationship between discourse, strategies, and competition of social movements. Discourse theory, which developed by Ernesto Laclau and Mouffe (1985), in their seminal work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, offers a significant framework for this study. According to this theory, social phenomena are constructed through language and meaning-making practices. These social phenomena

that we consider as “reality” are shaped by discourses, in other words, systems of meaning that define and position subjects, objects, and social relations (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). This section outlines the rationale for selecting discourse theory as the second theoretical framework applied in this study. First, I provide an overview of discourse theory and its key assumptions. Then, I elaborate on the theory’s core concepts relevant to this research, namely the concepts of hegemony, articulation and signifiers, identity and identification, and the logic of equivalence and difference.

Focusing on the contestation and conflict in socio-political relations, discourse theory offers insights into the competition between social movements. The theory underlines dissensus, disagreement, agonism and antagonism, in other words, “the ineliminability of contestation from politics” (Little & Lloyd, 2009, p. 3). For their reasoning, conflict and disagreement keep democratic contestation alive (Mouffe, 1996). Discourse theory stresses the primacy of politics and power in its formation. Therefore, their philosophical standpoint opposes essentialism, which argues that “a society, the human subject, or the objects that we encounter in social life, have fixed essences that exhaust what these entities are” (Howarth, 2010, p. 311).

Discourse theory falls under the broader category of post-structuralist discourse theory, which includes influential thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Butler, Laclau, and Mouffe. This study follows Laclau and Mouffe’s strand, which is also called the Essex school (Townshend, 2003). In this study, their approach is referred to “discourse theory” to distinguish it from other discourse theories of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, Fairclough and van Dijk’s critical discourse theory, and Bourdieu’s sociology of language. Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, which is strongly influenced by Lacanian subject theory and other post-structuralist theorists such as

Derrida, Saussure, and Foucault (Howarth, 2000), is seen as a combination of post-structuralism and post-Marxism (Torfing, 1999, p. 3).

Although they consider themselves within the Marxist theory, Laclau and Mouffe criticise Marxism regarding its class reductionism and economic determinism, and they developed an alternative approach by focusing on the theory of discourse. Discourse theory represents a major break with classical Marxist understanding, although it is considered to be one of the post-Marxist approaches. For example, in contrast to Marxism, discourse theory rejects the determination of social structures and even the prediction of the future of these structures. From this perspective, class essentialism and historical phases are completely abandoned. Instead, the theory sees structures as contingent and open to change (Torfing, 1999).

Laclau and Mouffe were strongly guided by Gramsci's ideas; nevertheless, their approach to the economic classes differs significantly from the orthodox Marxist approaches and also from Gramsci. While for Gramsci, the "collective will" that leads to a socialist revolution must have a class character, for Laclau, the conflicts between classes and the dominant rule are due to political and ideological reasons rather than production relations (Torfing, 1999). Therefore, "the identity of the people plays a much more important role than the identity as class." (Laclau, 1977, p. 114). In this respect, social movements or organisations do not necessarily have a class base or any other essential principle, but they can organise through shared political or ideological ideals.

This departure from Marxist tradition also affected the definition of civil society in discourse theory. As Martin (2009) argues, the notion of dislocation has central importance in understanding how civil society works. Civil society is conceptualised as a site in which multiple and dispersed dislocations take place. As semi-autonomous entities, the civil society actors are "freed" from structural relations while still bound to

them to some extent. However, due to the dislocations they face, social groups form various identities based not only on class-related identities but also on race, gender, nationality, or religion (Martin, 2009). In this dispersed society with dislocated subjects, competing discourses mobilise social actors through their identities, which constitutes the site of hegemony (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

Thus, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe offer a radical departure from traditional Marxist understandings of the social. Where classical Marxism emphasised a material, deterministic, and causal approach – often focusing on class conflict as the driving force of history – Laclau and Mouffe turned to post-structuralism. In their view, the social and political realms are not preordained realities. Instead, they are constructions shaped by discursive structures. These structures establish relationships between different elements – objects, ideas, and social practices – and by articulatory practices, identities are formed, and hegemonic projects are created (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

The fundamental claim of the discourse theory is that cognitions, language, and acts “only become meaningful within certain pre-established discourses, which have different structuration that change over time.” (Torfing, 1999). Therefore, a discourse consists of signifying chains that are constantly reconstructed and re-negotiated (Kølvraa, 2018). For Laclau and Mouffe, discourse is not just spoken language but a broader web of meaning-making practices that includes institutions, cultural norms, and even emotions (Laclau, 1988). Therefore, Laclau and Mouffe reject the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices (1985, p. 107).

Howarth and Stavrakakis (2000) explain the main assumptions of discourse theory. For discourse theory, all objects and actions are meaningful and a part of social reality. Accordingly, the first assumption is that “discourse theory investigates the way in which social practices articulate and contest the discourses that constitute social reality.” (p. 3).

Secondly, discourses are political because, through a system of meaningful practices that form identities of subjects and objects, political frontiers are formed. These frontiers divide insiders from outsiders, constructed through processes of antagonism. Third and finally, discourses are contingent and historical constructions which can be subjected to dislocation and re-articulation, leading to the constant potential for change and transformation within social orders.

Discourse theory provides a useful framework for examining the competition between Islamic movements in Malaysia due to its focus on identity construction, discursive articulation and hegemonic struggles. The theory allows for the analysis of how each movement constructs its identity, attracts followers, and positions itself against others. Besides, it helps understand the efforts of the ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA to dominate societal discourse and establish their interpretations of Islam as the dominant narrative. Additionally, it examines both discursive and non-discursive practices, providing insights into how movements engage in various activities to influence the audience and each other. Discourse theory's focus on the contingency and fluidity of social structures is very suitable in Malaysia's dynamic political landscape, aiding in understanding how movements adapt to changing contexts.

3.4.1 The Concepts and the Logics of Discourse Theory

Discourse theory has various concepts to explain the complex processes through which meaning is constructed and power is organised within societies. Through discourse, social actors, which is Islamic movements in this study, negotiate the meanings, and exercise power not through coercion but through the establishment of dominant narratives, norms, and values. To examine these processes, discourse theory has several key concepts, but in this study, I utilised the concepts of identity and identification to understand the identity constructions of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA; articulation and signifiers to examine their

meaning-making practices, and the logics of equivalence and difference and hegemony for the analysis of competition strategies. Next section explains these concepts in detail.

3.4.1.1 The Concept of Hegemony

The hegemony is one of the core concepts in this theory. From the international relations perspective, the hegemony concept frequently indicates the order among the states, order within the world economy, and international social relationships connecting different countries through institutions, mechanisms and even universal norms (Cox, 1983). From the political sociology perspective, however, hegemony is a political and moral-intellectual leadership aiming to build a collective will with a national-popular character, as defined by Gramsci (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, pp. 65–67). While the concept has its foundations in the Leninist tradition, in a way of defining a political leadership of the working class within a broad class alliance (Torfing, 1999), Gramsci's comprehension of the concept transcends the working class and its interests in the society as a whole.

Gramsci's conceptualisation of hegemony marked a significant shift within Marxist theory, challenging the deterministic view that the economic base unilaterally shapes the political structures, institutions, ideology, and culture. Instead, Gramsci emphasised the reciprocal relationship between the base and superstructure, highlighting the role of cultural and ideological leadership (hegemony) in securing consent and maintaining dominance within society. However, focusing on the ruling class's control and dominance over the superstructure rather than the base, Gramsci argued that it is the highest level of political struggle (1971). However, although heavily influenced by Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) criticise him for compromising his ideas to an essentialist and linear theory of history.

The concept of hegemony in Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) seminal work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* marked a significant departure from traditional Marxist thought by

pushing Gramsci's hegemony notion to its limits (Day, 2004). They contended that the Marxist emphasis on class contradiction and the essentialist approach to the relationship between the economic base and the superstructure is overdetermined. As Laclau (1977) argued, "the identity as *the people* plays a much more important role than the identity as *class*" (p. 114). Therefore, social identities and political alliances are not pre-determined by economic structures. Instead, they are the result of discursive practices that articulate and rearticulate social meanings.

In discourse theory, the social order is considered open and incomplete (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 111), and social demands are various which are promoted in political struggles (Howarth, 2000; Laclau, 2001; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Sayyid & Zac, 2003; A. M. Smith, 2012; Torfing, 1999). This means that political relations are seen as integral to the formation and transformation of social order (Laclau, 2000; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). However, the creation of a new social order is not determined only by existing structural conditions but is always contingent on the hegemonic struggles of competing political forces. Therefore, any social order is always open to challenge by counter-hegemonic forces. These contingent circumstances, in which political contestations emerge, make it possible to reshape and challenge the existing power relations (Luqman Nul Hakim, 2023).

Drawing upon Laclau's (2000) work "Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics," Richard Day (2004) argues that there are four dimensions of hegemony. First, as Laclau stated, "unevenness of power is constitutive of hegemonic relation" (Laclau, 2000, p. 54). This means that power is widely and evenly distributed in society, unlike in authoritarian regimes, where societies are divided into authorities and subordinates. Therefore, for an uneven power distribution, societies should have a plurality of particularistic groups and demands (p. 55). Second,

Laclau argues that “there is hegemony only if the dichotomy of universality/particularity is superseded” (p. 56). For Laclau, political struggles can never be completely universal or too particularistic. Therefore, in a hegemonic formation, particular interests “assume a function of universal representation” (p. 56), which supersedes the boundaries of universality and particularity. For universality, chains of equivalence have a critical position. Through identities competing and cooperating to represent others, the system of relations, and thus chains of equivalences establish.

The third dimension is the empty signifiers. As he argued, hegemony “requires the production of tendentially empty signifiers” to which chains of equivalence are connected. While empty signifiers resonate within the discourses and participate in the meaning-making processes, they tend to lose their true meaning since the high level of demands is placed on them. The notion of “Islamic” can be a good example of how it functions as an empty signifier. In the context of religious discourse, “Islamic” has a clear and specific meaning. However, when applied to different domains such as Islamic education, Islamic parties, Islamic state, and Islamic law, the term becomes increasingly broad and encompassing. This wide application allows diverse groups to rally around the concept of “Islamic” even if they have differing views on what it implies explicitly. For instance, an Islamic political party and an Islamic educational institution might both use the term to garner support, but their interpretations and applications of “Islamic” principles could differ significantly.

The last dimension refers to “the terrain in which hegemony expands is that of a generalisation of the relations of representation as a condition of the constitution of social order” (Laclau, 2000, p. 207). This dimension argues that to achieve universality, the terrain would be open enough to consist of diverse groups, relations, and discourses. These dimensions reveal how the concept of hegemony is interconnected with discourse

in terms of superseding universality and particularity, chains of equivalence and empty signifiers. The following sections elaborate on these concepts further.

The application of the hegemony concept in examining Islamic movements has been rising rapidly, particularly since the 2011 Arab uprisings (Chalcraft & Marchi, 2021). The concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony have been used to understand the rising power of political Islam and Islamic movements in Middle Eastern countries by the works of Hazem Kandil (2011), Mirshak (2023), John Chalcraft (2021), Marchi (2021), and Asef Bayat (2013, 2017) are among others. For example, Asef Bayat (2007, 2013, 2017) applies the hegemony concept along with the rest of the Gramscian framework to comprehend the efforts to the Islamic movements. He argues that Islamic movements, particularly those ascribing the MB, “seem to adopt a somewhat Gramscian strategy of establishing moral and political hegemony in civil society, expecting that the state will turn Islamic in the long run following the Islamization of society.” (Bayat, 2013, p. 5). These scholars illustrate the dynamics of hegemony from below, where Islamic movements mobilise not only religious ideologies but also socio-political strategies to expand their influence.

However, the use of Gramsci’s framework in studying non-Western contexts has sparked critical debate. Sara Salem (2021) on the other hand, questions the Gramscian framework, a Western concept theorised for classed society, into application of a non-Western context, such as Egypt. She argues that, when travelling a theory to other countries, scholars must be mindful of how the theory intersects with other concepts. In the case of Egypt, she found that the hegemonic struggle of the ruling power intersected with colonialism and its forms of racialisation and capitalism. In other countries, there might be other concepts that have identifiable impacts on the hegemonic and also counterhegemonic struggles. Drawing on these perspectives, I utilise the hegemony

concept to examine how social movements create social-political strategies to expand their influence and legitimacy. However, as Salem (2021) pointed out, the local context is also vital in this examination. Having this mindset, therefore, this study seeks to further explore the intersection between the hegemonic strategies of Islamic movements and their engagement with the local context.

3.4.1.2 The Concepts of Articulation and Signifiers

In discourse theory, articulation has a central position in constituting social identities. Being a form of discursive practice, the notion of articulation attains meaning in the construction of a discourse by combining and connecting certain words, objects, ideas, and concepts (Jacobs, 2018). Laclau and Mouffe define the concept of articulation as ‘any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice’ (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 105). Through this process, various elements are linked together in a way that changing identities, creating new meanings and connections. Over time, as these combinations are repeated, the patterns they form start to create a stable structure. This stable structure, composed of interconnected and redefined elements, is what we eventually recognise as the social world (Marchart, 2014, pp. 276–280). The “structured totality” produced by this articulatory practice forms the discourse. In this regard, articulation works similarly to frames in frame theory, where repetitive patterns and combinations of elements shape a stable structure of meaning.

Within discourse theory, both discursive and non-discursive articulations are essential in shaping meanings and identities. Laclau and Mouffe call “moments” the differential positions that are articulated within a discourse, which are integrated into a discourse, while “elements” refers to the differences that are not discursively articulated or to the contested meanings in a discourse. The relationship between moments and elements

involves a linear transition from elements to moments, even though a complete transition is impossible (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 113). This process gives social identities or any social formations a partial and contingent fixity. Nevertheless, since both Laclau and Mouffe affirm that there is a total contingency, this fixation can only be possible through nodal points. Nodal points work as a reference point in which elements are structured as moments in a meaningful system. Through the connecting moments, nodal points create a network of meanings or a chain of signification (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000, pp. 7–8).

In the context of *dakwah* movements, for example, the “Islam is a comprehensive way of life” moment can be considered as a nodal point. While serving as a core reference point around various aspects of life, such as economy, education, knowledge, law, or even social order and gender roles, it helps to organise and stabilise other elements within the discourse. These elements might include concepts like justice, morality, family, education, and governance, all interpreted through an Islamic lens. This nodal point also provides a coherent framework for the *dakwah* movements that can unify diverse demands and identities under this framework.

The empty signifier is another crucial concept in discourse theory. The term refers to signifiers that have no signifiers in simple terms (Torfing, 1999). In more complex terms, an empty signifier lacks any meaning particular to themselves; therefore, it is open and ambiguous enough to be filled with various meanings by different social agents. In a discourse, empty signifiers connect entire chains of signifiers and become the centre of the signifier chain (Kølvraa, 2018) and the hegemonic struggle. In this respect, discursive networks of the chains of signifiers with an empty signifier at the centre resemble spider webs rather than fishing webs (Jacobs, 2018). For example, concepts like “justice,” “democracy,” or “freedom” can be articulated in ways that mobilise diverse

constituencies around a common cause, even if their specific interests and interpretations differ. From the Malaysian context, as Farish Noor (1999) argues, *reformasi* is an example of an empty signifier because the concept of *reformasi* has lost its exhaustive content, so it has become a convenient tool for political and ideological conflicts.

Floating signifiers, on the other hand, are signifiers whose meanings are overflowed by contested with different articulations. Therefore, these signifiers have not received a definite meaning (Kølvraa, 2018). For example, Luqman Nul Hakim (2023) argues that Islamism, as a political discourse, is increasingly becoming a floating signifier for Islamic movements or parties because different groups can easily appropriate Islamism for their different agendas and interests.

3.4.1.3 Identity and Identification

Discursive structures are social and political constructions that establish a system of relations between objects and practices. These constructions create a system of relations, such as equivalential and differential, shaping how these elements interact within a discourse. The system of relations provides subject positions for social agents, allowing them to identify and locate themselves within a discursive structure (Howarth, 2000).

On the other hand, social identities also produce their negation. As Derrida puts it, every identity requires a difference, and every difference requires an identity (Howarth, 2000). The negation of identity and the difference cause social antagonisms. Torfing (1999) argues that hegemonic forces tend to form excluded identities which hinder the full realisation of chosen meanings.

Social antagonism has a central position in discourse theory. For Laclau, social antagonism is the fundamental ontological basis of all hegemony (Jacobs, 2018). Contrary to the self-identity, social actors construct an *other*, or “enemies”, to define who

is causing the problems or creating obstacles to the change they seek. In this respect, social movements frequently label antagonists as infidels, fascists, or racists to distinguish between “us” and “them”. In the frame theory, the protagonist-antagonist constructions are pivotal in the boundary-defining endeavours of social movements. However, the antagonism has a pivotal position in discourse theory, which is conceptualised as a multi-layered concept that offers a more theoretically articulated perspective than what is typically found in frame theory.

Aside from being one of the most important components of discourse theory, Chantal Mouffe further theorised the concept in the context of radical democracy. For her, antagonism and agonism are the two spectrums of democratic politics. In her conceptualisation, democratic politics should aim for a transformation from antagonism to agonism (Mouffe, 1999, p. 755) (*see*, Table 3.1. for nodal points of antagonism and agonism). Antagonism refers to a radical difference from the *others* who are considered enemies to be destroyed. Agonism, on the other hand, articulates the relationship between *self* and *other* as a “[...] we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognise the legitimacy of their opponents” (Mouffe, 2005, p. 20). As she (2013a) further elaborated on the ethical and political principles,

What exists between adversaries is, so to speak, a conflictual consensus – they agree about the ethico-political principles which organise their political association but disagree about the interpretation of these principles. (p. 109).

Thus, an agonistic conflict does not ignore the differences regarding position and interest between other actors; nevertheless, they are still in conflict situation while sharing “[...] a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place” (Mouffe, 2005, p. 20).

Table 3.1 Nodal Points of Antagonism and Agonism

Antagonism	Agonism
Radical difference	Conflictual togetherness
Homogenisation of the <i>self</i>	Pluralisation of the <i>self</i>
Enemy Destruction	Peaceful and non-violent interaction

Source: Carpentier (2018)

According to Mouffe, *self* and *other* relations do not necessarily imply *self* and enemy-*other* relations (Mouffe, 2013b). In fact, as Carpentier (2018) argues, these concepts are not either-or categories; therefore, they can (and often) coexist. As he further criticises, to improve understanding of *othering*, the fluidity, contingency and multidimensionality of the concepts should be taken into account. Following him, thus, in this study, antagonism and agonism are considered two polars of a spectrum in which the identity of the *other* can shift along this spectrum towards either an antagonistic or agonistic end, depending on the context and discursive practices.

3.4.1.4 Logics of Equivalence and Difference

The logic of equivalence and the logic of difference are among the key concepts in discourse theory that is used in this study to examine the hegemonic projects of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA. In discourse theory, logic of equivalence and difference is utilised to explain how social identities and political alliances are forged (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 127). Accordingly, the logic of equivalence refers to reducing differences between groups by emphasising similarities, while the logic of difference emphasises differences, fragmenting identities and creating new boundaries within society, to break down these chains of equivalence (*see*, Table 3.2. below for a comparison). As Glynos & Howarth (2007) argue, “the logic of equivalence entails the construction and privileging of antagonistic relations, which means that the dimension of difference on each side of the frontier is weakened, whether differences are understood as a function of demands or identities” (p. 144).

Table 3.2 Logics of Equivalence and Difference

Logic of Equivalence	Logic of Difference
Aims to establish equivalent identities to organise around a common identity	Aim to dissolve existing equivalent identities
Weaken internal differences	Highlight and emphasise internal differences
Construct a common enemy to oppose	Identify unique characteristics of the self

Source: Laclau & Mouffe (1985, p. 1) and Howarth & Stavrakakis (2000).

According to discourse theory, Laclau and Mouffe describe the logic of equivalence as the “simplification of the political space” (1985, p. 130) because this logic helps build broad-based coalitions to oppose another camp by highlighting commonalities and shared enemies, challenging existing power structures and establishing new hegemonies. The logic of difference, on the other hand, refers to the expansion and increasing complexity of the political space by inhabiting distinctive identities and demands or elements, as Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argue.

[...] the logic of difference tends to expand [...] the number of positions that can enter into a relation of combination and hence of continuity with one another, while the logic of equivalence expands the [...] elements that can be substituted for one another – thereby reducing the number of positions which can possibly be combined. (p. 130)

Though seemingly contradictory, the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they interact in a complex manner (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000). Social actors can organise and establish a common identity against a common adversary while preserving their unique characteristics and particular struggles.

3.5 Integrating Frame and Discourse Theories in Analysing Malaysian Islamic Movements

This section discusses the reasoning behind the combination of frame theory and discourse theory in the context of competing Islamic movements in Malaysia. Namely, there are two reasons for an integrated approach: first, the lack of a standardised

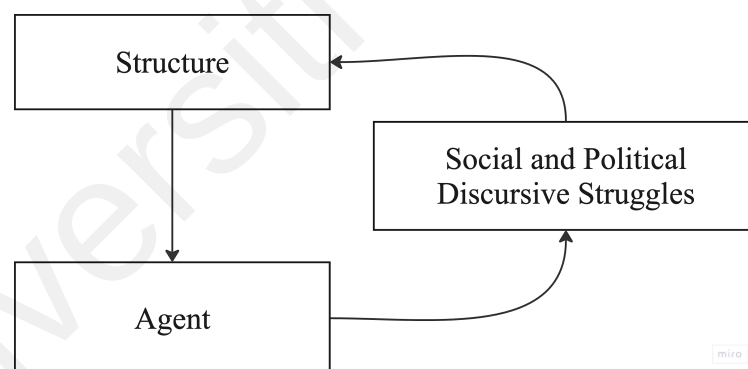
methodological framework in discourse theory, and second, the theoretical agent-structure problem in both theories. Firstly, discourse theory does not offer a systematic approach to analysing a discourse on which scholars have a consensus (Nabers, 2015; Nonhoff, 2019). This lack of knowledge causes difficulties for researchers in applying and operationalising the theoretical concepts and framework. Moreover, in discourse analysis, discourse is not restricted to textual documents and their linguistic features; actions in the form of social practices, rituals, and even symbols are the subject of discourse theory. For discourse analysts, how non-textual, non-linguistic data should be analysed leads to a great challenge.

The works of Saharov (2021) and Sulehry and Wallace (2021) are among the recent research that applied both frame and discourse theory in their research. In both studies, frame theory provided a practical and systematic method for conducting textual analysis. Through core framing tasks, identity fields, or frame alignment strategies, frame theory offers a framework that researchers apply to the data systematically. Frame analysis is one of the most widely applied analytical techniques in social movement research, explaining social movements' efforts to use ideas and ideologies to mobilise their constituents while demobilising counter-movements (Lindekilde, 2014). However, the concept of power has found little place in the discussions and explanations in frame analysis, while the role of ideology in the frame-constructing process has not been well-theorised yet (P. Oliver & Johnston, 2000; Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011). Discourse theory's emphasis on power relations and ideological contestations, in this respect, creates a deeper level of analysis.

Secondly, these theories are complementary in terms of their agent-structure approach. From the ontological assumptions' perspective, both theories draw upon a constructivist standpoint by arguing that social realities are constructed via language, symbols, and

frames/discourse (Gamson, 1992; D. A. Snow, 2004; D. A. Snow & Byrd, 2007). Nevertheless, each theory has a different perspective in terms of agent-structure relations. For frame theory, following a similar theoretical assumption to RMT, social actors are rational; therefore, they act to maximise their interests (Nash, 2010). In this respect, frame theory remains closer to the essentialist approaches to subjectivity.

Discourse theory's perspective on the question of structure and agency is, on the other hand, relatively different. Laclau and Mouffe see agents as fundamentally capable of engaging in social and political discursive struggles that can challenge and redefine social structures, but, following Althusser's concept of interpellation, they argue that social structures, to a certain degree, play a determining role, as human beings are constituted as subjects within these discursive formations (Howarth, 2000; Khan, 2022; Laclau, 1990; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) (*see*, Figure 3.1).



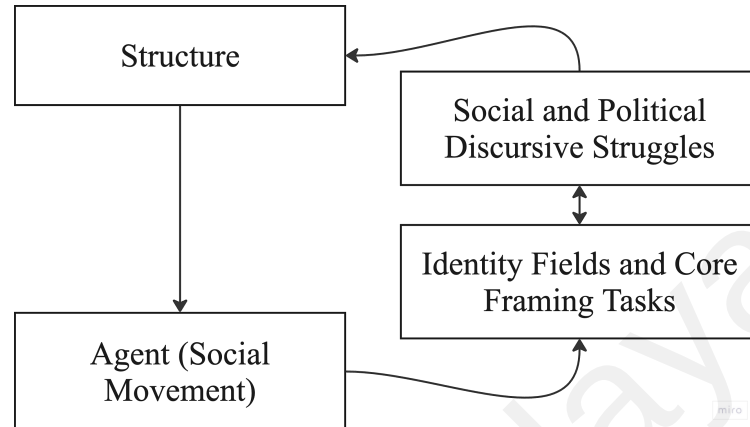
Source: Author's compilation based on the works of Howarth (2000) and Laclau & Mouffe (1985)

Figure 3.1 Structure-Agency Relation in Discourse Theory

As illustrated in Figure 3.1, the role of agents in the meaning-making processes and discursive and hegemonic formations is limited by the structures in which they are constituted, though they retain the capacity to challenge and potentially reshape these structures through discursive struggles.

While frame theory offers a framework that highlights how social movements strategically employ frames to mobilise their constituents and resources, increase their

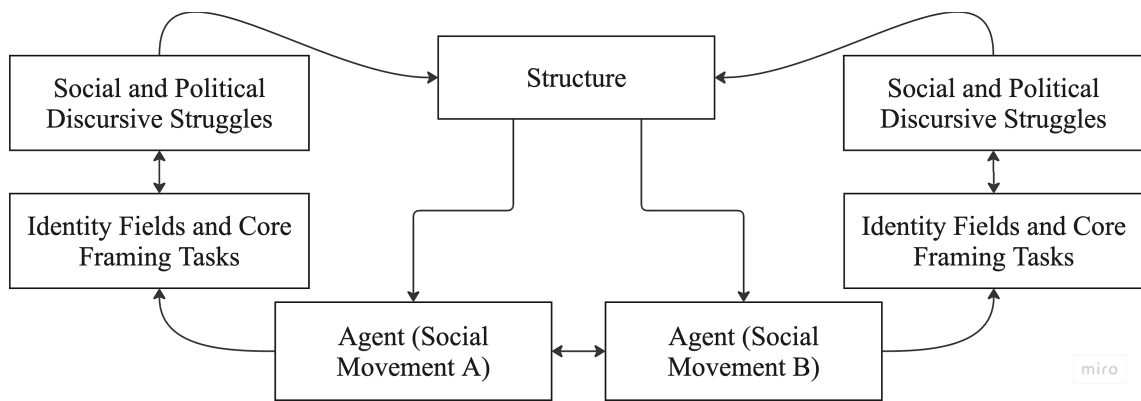
legitimacy and influence, and achieve goals, discourse theory acknowledges the constitutive role of structures and provides insights into how these structures are constantly contested and re-negotiated (*see*, Figure 3.2).



Source: Author's compilation based on the works of Benford and Snow (2000) and Snow and Benford (1988)

Figure 3.2 The Interplay between Structure, Social Movements, and Framing

As demonstrated in Figure 3.2, to frame theory, social movements are rational and strategic and actively shape their environments through identity fields and core framing tasks. While for discourse theory, social movements operate within the structure; they also have the agency to engage in discursive struggles that can transform the hegemonic order. By combining these two theories, this study acknowledges the agency of ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM in constructing new narratives or reshaping existing ones to further their goals. Nevertheless, by drawing upon the discourse theory's assumption, this research also accepts the denominator role of the structure, which means that structure shapes the frames and strategies of Islamic movements in Malaysia. To take this assumption further, I argue that they are also influenced by the interactions and competition between the movements (*see*, Figure 3.3).



Source: Author's compilation based on frame theory and discourse theory's assumptions

Figure 3.3 Social Movements Interaction with Structure and Each Other

As shown in Figure 3.3, social movements — whether ABIM, ISMA or IKRAM — do not only react to the state or the hegemonic discourse on Islam. They also engage in discursive battles and compete to define the “correct” interpretation of Islamic values and practices in the Malaysian context. These movements often frame their positions in such a way that they subtly delegitimise their competitors, whether through theological arguments or criticism of their political alignment. Their efforts to out-frame one another suggest that discursive power is also contested horizontally between the movements and not just vertically against the state.

Studying multiple cases in this study brings new challenges to applying two theories. It, therefore, requires a unified framework to understand how social movements articulate their frames in that particular way, how their frame affect each other, how they collaborate or compete over their frames on a micro, day-to-day level. This approach should, at the same time, provide a macro-level framework to examine changes in meanings and discourses in the long periods as well. In this regard, integrating frame and discourse theories can provide a comprehensive understanding of social movements as agents actively constructing and reconstructing meanings, articulating discourses, and establishing hegemonic formations in an unfixed, open, and fluid social structure.

Thus, I combined frame theory and discourse theory in this study, particularly Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's version, to examine the competition between the Islamic movements in Malaysia. In this respect, the data analysis consists of three stages. The first stage focuses on the identity construction and identification processes of ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA. The concept of identity fields, which examines the social movements' construction of identities in three categories—protagonist, antagonist, and audience—from frame theory, serves as a suitable analytical framework. However, the data showed that the antagonist concept alone is not adequate to comprehend the competition between the case studies. Therefore, the discourse theory concepts of agonism, the logic of equivalence, and the logic of difference are employed for a deeper understanding. By integrating these concepts, the analysis effectively captured the dynamics of identity construction of these Islamic movements.

The second stage examines the discursive practices of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA to analyse how they construct a reality that aligns with their identity and ideological goals. The data is investigated in terms of the core framing tasks, namely diagnosis, prognosis, and motivational frames, as frame theory suggests. By doing that, the discourse of the Islamic movements is separated into small pieces, which also helps to elicit to what extent their views on political Islam differ. Additionally, the concepts of empty and floating signifiers and nodal points are utilised to better comprehend the role of ideology and the dynamics of competition between these movements.

The third stage investigates the hegemonic articulatory practices of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA to understand how they utilise discursive and non-discursive strategies in their hegemonic formations and competition. The concepts of frame disputes, resonance, and alignment from frame theory, and hegemony from discourse theory are used for the analysis.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has comprehensively examined the theoretical frameworks utilised to understand the dynamics of competition among Islamic movements in Malaysia, specifically ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA. By integrating frame theory and discourse theory, particularly the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, this combined framework aims to capture the competition between these movements through constructing their identities, interpreting social realities, and engaging in hegemonic struggles.

The first theory focused on was the frame theory, which emphasises the strategic use of meaning-making processes to mobilise supporters and garner legitimacy. Within frame theory, the concepts, such as core framing tasks, which are diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames, frame resonance, and the frame alignment processes, are essential to examine Islamic movements. The chapter also examined discourse theory, which is built on the concept of discourse and all practices and meanings that shape a particular community. Discourse theory's focus on the historical and political construction of discourses, as well as the role of power relations in shaping social realities, provides a deeper analytical lens. The concepts of hegemony, articulation, and signification were particularly useful in understanding how Islamic movements establish themselves as legitimate voices within the Muslim community.

By integrating these two theories, the chapter addressed the limitations of each approach. Frame theory's practical and systematic method for analysing textual data was complemented by discourse theory's emphasis on power dynamics and ideological contestations. This combined approach allowed for a more comprehensive analysis of the identity construction and hegemonic practices of ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA. This integrated theoretical framework highlights the complex interplay between identity

construction, discursive practices, and hegemonic struggles by focusing on how ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA shape and reshape the political and social landscape in Malaysia.

Universiti Malaya

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the research methodology employed in the study. It begins with the research design, which provides the overall framework for the study. Next, the data collection methods are explained, followed by an overview of how the data was analysed to generate meaningful findings. Issues of validity and reliability are also addressed to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the research. Finally, ethical considerations are discussed to highlight the study's commitment to responsible and ethical research practices.

4.1 Research Design

This study employs an exploratory qualitative research approach grounded in the social constructivist research philosophy. I focused on using frame and discourse theories to study the competition between selected Islamic movements in Malaysia. Both theories are influenced by the social constructivist paradigm, which views human reality as socially constructed reality (Collin, 1997, p. 69). In other words, actors, interests, norms, and systems as social constructions that can change over time and place. Grounding on this philosophy and the discussion on structure-agency relationship in the chapter of Theoretical Framework (pp. 83-87), I argue that social movements are not simply a product of significant challenges or reactions to dominant structures of power, but they actively produce new meanings, identities, and forms of collective action. They are means of expression of beliefs and values in search of collective action and goals. Therefore, in this study, they are considered political actors who can resist, transform, and challenge the state, contest other groups, and establish alliances. As Melucci (1988) underlines, individual actors have the ability to act together spontaneously in response to discontentment, deprivation, and injustice (p. 340). Through this process, movements interact, influence, and define themselves as collective actors, shaping the field of

collective action and emerging as alternative power structures operating within the political and civil society fields.

Applying frame theory and discourse theory to competing social movements required qualitative methodology because qualitative methods explore the meaning and understanding of multiple and subjective realities in the social world, which participants experience differently (Bryman, 2012). Therefore, I mainly intend to explore these subjective and various realities through qualitative methods.

There are two reasons for selecting qualitative methodology in this study. Firstly, these relationships are constructed and deconstructed through the dynamic interaction of social actors, groups, and institutions. Secondly, power is a complex, multifaceted concept that cannot be reduced to a single dimension. In examining social movements' competition, power can manifest in different forms, such as overt political dominance and more subtle influences on discourse, ideology, and identity formation. Therefore, quantitative methodology, which examines phenomena through fixed variables, is unsuitable for analysing the dynamic interplay between social movements. Instead, qualitative research methodology, in line with social constructivism, offers suitable tools to examine discourses, meanings, and frames constructed by social actors. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) underline, qualitative methodology aims to explain "how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 15), which is precisely what the social movements do with their frames.

The research design begins by defining and differentiating the "case study" and "multiple case study" approaches.

4.1.1 Case Study Methodology

A case study method has been selected for this study. To be able to define a case study, explaining the “case” is essential. According to Gillham (2000), a “case” has these features: (1) a unit of human activity embedded in the real world; (2) which can only be understood in context; (3) which exists in the here and now; (4) that merges in with its contexts so that precise boundaries are difficult to draw” (p.1). Gillham (2000) then defines a case study as a method that investigates the abovementioned features to answer specific research questions and seeks evidence for all types. For Yin (1994), cases are the units of analysis in searching the *how* and *why* questions that “investigate a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context.” (p.13).

The primary purpose of the case study approach is to generate an in-depth understanding of a specific topic. Therefore, as Yin (1994) pointed out, it requires exploring the complexity and uniqueness of a particular phenomenon in a “real-life” context. The qualitative version of the case study is, as Merriam (1988) argues, “particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic and rely heavily on inductive reasoning in handling multiple data sources” (p.16) to create a deep understanding of the studied phenomenon.

The characteristics of the present research —the competition between the selected Islamic movements in Malaysia— require applying the case study approach. It is necessary to understand how different Islamic movements construct their *self* and *other’s* identities, define their audiences and invoke their diagnosis, prognosis, and motivational frames against Malaysia’s social and political problems, and strategically compete with one another. The case study approach enables a detailed and context-specific examination of the operations of these movements, the evolution of their ideologies over time, and their interactions with each other. By examining specific Islamic movements as cases of

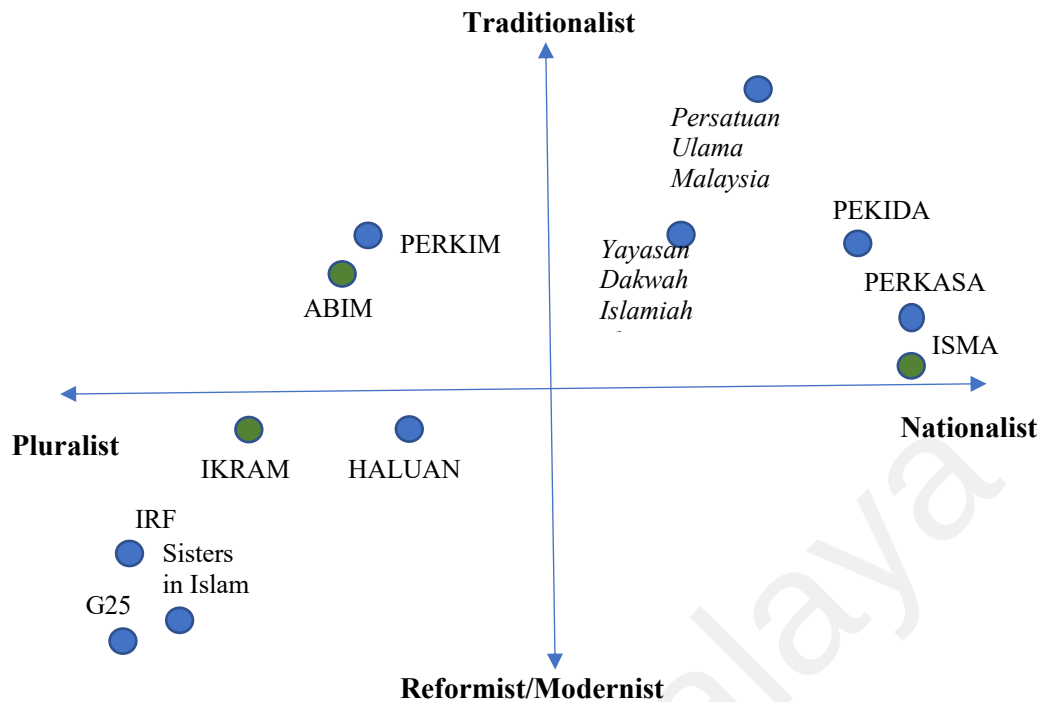
this study, I could thoroughly explore the internal dynamics of each movement, including how they develop their ideologies, invoke framing strategies, and react to external political and social influences. This approach also facilitates comparative analysis, as it enables the identification of patterns, divergences, and areas of competition between movements. Focusing on specific Islamic movements as case studies, therefore, helps better understand the dynamics of the competition between the Islamic movements through identity construction, framing and other competition strategies.

The case study method can focus on an individual or multiple cases for analysis (Yin, 1994, p. 12). The multiple cases are very suitable for cross-case and comparative analysis. For the cross-case and comparative analysis, the research design should include two contrasting cases and need similar analytical methods (Bryman, 2012). The main logic of the comparative-multiple case study is that when different cases are compared, it provides a better understanding of the examined social phenomena.

This study naturally employs a multiple case study approach to compare the selected cases since the main investigation is the contest between Islamic movements. Investigating the Islamic movements in a comparative and multi-case research design provides an opportunity to understand the influence of movements and how they are influenced by each other. However, it is also crucial to set the case boundaries well. As Ragin and Becker (1992) point out, the cases should be “similar enough and separate enough to permit treating them as comparable instances of the same general phenomenon” (p. 1). Next, I explain the case selection process and the criteria applied.

4.1.2 Cases Selection

This study examines the competition between the Malaysian Islamic movements; therefore, the cases are selected within the Malaysian civil society actors. As Bryman (2012) notes, cases do not necessarily have to be extreme or odd but, instead, “either they epitomize a broader category of cases, or they will provide a suitable context for certain research questions to be answered” (p. 70). Following Bryman, I categorised the Islamic movements in Malaysia according to their political approaches, such as traditionalist, modernist, nationalist or pluralist, based on the sources in the literature on Islamic movements in Malaysia. Figure 4.1 illustrates the ideological positions of various Malaysian Islamic movements along four dimensions: Traditionalist, Modernist/Reformist, Pluralist and Nationalist. These movements are positioned according to their political orientations, with the vertical axis representing the spectrum between Traditionalist and Reformist/Modernist perspectives, while the horizontal axis reflects their stance between Pluralist and Nationalist perspectives. This matrix provides a visual framework for understanding how the various Islamic movements relate to one another regarding their political ideologies, highlighting the diversity of thought and the differing interpretations of Islamic principles within the Malaysian context.



Source: Author's compilation based on a synthesis of various sources from the literature¹⁰

Figure 4.1 Malaysian Islamic Movements' Ideological Positions Matrix

Several Islamic movements and Islamic civil society organisations are registered in Malaysia. For this study, I selected three Islamic movements that represent distinct political ideologies within Malaysia's Islamic landscape: ABIM as a traditionalist and pluralist movement, ISMA as a traditionalist-nationalist movement, and IKRAM as a pluralist and modernist/reformist movement.

There are three reasons for selecting these cases. First, all three Islamic movements share the same ideological root in the MB (Hew & Chan, 2024). As a result, these movements have similar views and approaches, particularly in promoting the idea that "Islam is a way of life" and advocating for the implementation of Islamic law (Liow,

¹⁰ I am grateful to Mr. Shahrul Aman bin Mohd Saari, Secretary General of IKRAM, and Dr Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin for their valuable contributions to this matrix. Mr. Shahrul Aman shared his personal mapping of Malaysian Islamic movements and NGOs, which he generously permitted me to utilise. Dr Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin provided insightful feedback that further refined the matrix.

2009). However, their interpretations of Islam and *Shari'a* differ significantly (Liow, 2021). For instance, while ABIM is relatively moderate and supports a plural society, ISMA is the most radical in its ethno-nationalist views. Therefore, although they are all *dakwah* movements promoting the ideology of “Islam is a way of life”, they have different political approaches that define and shape their discourses.

Second, ABIM, established in 1971, and JIM¹¹, established in 1990, are among the Malaysia’s oldest Islamic movements. Since then, they have built up extensive grassroots support, and a network engaged in *dakwah* activities, allowing them to maintain a significant presence in Malaysian society. Third, all three Islamic movements have considerable political influence in Malaysia, not only through their ideological and societal impact but also via their strong connections with major political parties, which they utilise to employ their agendas. As a result, these three Islamic movements were considered suitable for a multiple case study.

4.2 Data Collection Methods

The primary source of this study is the semi-structured interviews and textual and audio-visual documents, such as media statements, social media posts, books, magazines, and articles produced by these Islamic movements that ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA, two different data collection methods were applied in this study. Additionally, secondary sources, such as newspaper articles and news reports also utilised in this study to provide contextual background and enhance the discussion of key events that the informants indicated. The following sections elaborate the data collection processes of these two primary sources, and secondary sources.

¹¹ JIM served as the foundation from which both ISMA and IKRAM later emerged, shaping their development within the Islamic movement.

4.2.1 Primary Sources-1: Semi-structured Interviews

In qualitative research, interviews are among the most widely employed methods (Bryman, 2012). Interview methods can be in different forms, such as structured, *i.e.*, standardised interviews; semi-structured, structured interviews, and unstructured, *i.e.*, open-ended interviews (Creswell, 2007). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data source due to their ability to provide in-depth information on the research topic. This method is particularly useful for obtaining detailed insights from a smaller pool of participants (Boyce & Neale, 2006) while providing rich and detailed answers and flexibility. This flexibility makes this method more appropriate to explore emerging themes that might not have been anticipated and to understand the actual thoughts and feelings of the informants (Bryman, 2012, pp. 470–471).

The semi-structured interview method was especially appropriate for this study, enabling a deeper exploration of key topics, such as discourse, ideology, social identity construction, and competition within Islamic movements. Hence, in this study, 36 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The data collection process spanned from August 2022 to April 2024, with interview durations ranging from 60 to 90 minutes, although the longest interview lasted approximately 3 hours. The interviews are categorised into two groups, namely Islamic movements informants and experts, and applied different participant recruitment strategies which is elaborated in the next section.

4.2.1.1 Group 1: Islamic Movements Informants

In this group, 20 interviews were conducted. For IKRAM and ISMA, I carried out six interviews for each of the movements, and eight interviews for ABIM. Table 4.1 presents the list of informants from three Islamic movements in Malaysia that are the cases of this study: ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM. These informants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods, ensuring a diverse representation of leadership positions and

key roles within the movements. The table outlines each informant's names, positions, and interview dates, providing a clear record of the individuals who contributed to this study. For this group of informants, the primary selection criterion was that the informants should hold administrative positions, specifically those in authoritative roles, such as the president and vice presidents and members of the administration team of the movement.

Table 4.1 List of Informants: Islamic Movements

No.	Name of Informant	Role of Informant	Date of Interview	Interview Mode
ABIM				
1	ABIM-1	ABIM Administration	January 11, 2023	Face-to-face
2	ABIM-2	ABIM Administration	February 2, 2023	Face-to-face
3	ABIM-3	ABIM Administration	February 2, 2023	Face-to-face
4	ABIM-4	ABIM Administration	March 11, 2023	Online
5	ABIM-5	ABIM Administration	March 14, 2023	Face-to-face
6	ABIM-6	ABIM Administration	May 17, 2023	Face-to-face
7	ABIM-6	ABIM Administration	July 27, 2023	Face-to-face
8	ABIM-7	ABIM Administration	July 27, 2023	Face-to-face
ISMA				
9	ISMA-1	Council of Shura	January 26, 2023	Face-to-face
10	ISMA-2	National Women Committee of ISMA	March 4, 2023	Face-to-face
11	ISMA-3	Former Administration Member of ISMA, Advisor	March 16, 2023	Face-to-face
12	ISMA-4	ISMA Administration	March 28, 2023	Face-to-face

13	ISMA-5	ISMA Administration	August 10, 2023	Face-to-face
14	ISMA-6	Former Administration Member of ISMA, Advisor	February 6, 2024	Face-to-face
IKRAM				
15	IKRAM-1	IKRAM Administration	January 11, 2023	Online
16	IKRAM-2	IKRAM Administration	January 13, 2023	Online
17	IKRAM-3	IKRAM Youth Wing	December 1, 2022	Face-to-face
18	IKRAM-4	Former Administration Member of IKRAM, Advisor	January 6, 2023	Face-to-face
19	IKRAM-5	IKRAM Youth Wing	August 27, 2023	Online
20	IKRAM-6	IKRAM Youth Wing	September 17, 2023	Face-to-face

For ABIM, the informants include high-ranking officials reflecting a range of perspectives within the movement. For ISMA and IKRAM, however, despite my repeated attempts, I could not get positive responses to my interview requests from several members of their administration teams. For this reason, I employed a broader sampling strategy for these movements. The ISMA informants consist of past and present presidents, but I could not achieve to get positive responses from other members of the ISMA administration. Consequently, I managed to contact National Women Committee representative, and members of Shura Council and ISMA advisors. The number of IKRAM informants from the administrative team is limited to three. After several attempts, finally I managed to contact IKRAM Muda (the youth wing of IKRAM) members who have various administrative positions in IKRAM.

Four of the interviews were conducted online, while the remaining 16 were conducted face-to-face. The variety of roles and the range of dates indicate that the data gathered

reflects not only the hierarchical structure of these movements but also their internal dynamics and evolving discourses. In order to protect the informants' privacy, their names are withheld in this study.

4.2.1.2 Group 2: Expert Informants

While the first group informants from the Islamic movements provided the main source of data, the expert interviews were also significant as they contributed a different layer of knowledge. As Bogner and Menz (2009), expert interviews are frequently employed as an exploratory tool,

In both quantitatively and qualitatively oriented research projects, expert interviews can serve to establish an initial orientation in a field that is either substantively new or poorly defined, as a way of helping the researcher to develop a clearer idea of the problem or as a preliminary move in the identification of a final interview guide. In this sense, exploratory interviews help to structure the area under investigation and to generate hypotheses. The experts interviewed may themselves belong to the target group of the study as part of the field of action, but in many cases, experts are also deliberately used as a complementary source of information about the target group that is the actual subject. In the latter case, the expert's role is that of someone who possesses "contextual knowledge. (p. 46)

In line with the justification provided by Bogner and Menz (2009), expert interviews were considered as highly appropriate for this study. These interviews can provide deeper insights into the movements and the larger cultural, ideological, and political contexts in which they function. Critically, their insights also illuminate some issues concealed or distorted by the social movement informants. This complementary perspective helped to structure the field under investigation and enriched the analysis by offering an external perspective on the internal dynamics of the Islamic movements.

Table 4.2 presents the list of expert informants representing the second group interviewed for this study. These expert interviews include scholarly academics specialising in Islamic movements and Islam in Malaysia, along with representatives from various NGOs, such as Sisters in Islam, Islamic Renaissance Front (IRF), and the Asia

and Middle East Centre (AMEC). These NGOs maintain connections with Islamic movements. Additionally, this group includes a politician, a former Islamic movement president, and a columnist. The selection criteria for these informants were based on their research and publications on political Islam and Islamic movements in Malaysia, their roles as representatives of social movements or NGOs, and their previous leadership positions within the selected Islamic movements. The names of the informants who are the former members of the Islamic movements are withheld from this study, and they are referred to as Expert-6, Expert-7, Expert-8. In the expert informants category, I interviewed 16 informants in total. Notably, seven interviews were conducted online, while the remaining nine were face-to-face.

Table 4.2 List of Informants: Expert Interviews

No.	Name of Informant	Role of Informant	Interview Date	Interview Mode
Scholars				
1	Dr. Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin	Expert	October 2, 2022	Online
2	Expert-1	Expert / NGO	August 30, 2022	Online
3	Prof. Dr. Farid Alatas	Expert	February 17, 2024	Face-to-face
4	Expert-2	Expert	August 4, 2022	Face-to-face
5	Assoc. Prof. Dr. Khairudin Aljuneid	Expert	January 3, 2023	Online
6	Nathanial Tan	Columnist	April 24, 2024	Face-to-face
NGO Representatives				
7	Expert-3	Former ABIM president	August 9, 2023	Face-to-face
8	Prof. Dr. Ahmad Farouk Musa	NGO (IRF)	December 22, 2022	Face-to-face
9	Expert-4	NGO (IMAN)	August 5, 2022	Online
10	Expert-5	Sisters in Islam	April 7, 2023	Face-to-face

11	Rozana Isa	Sisters in Islam	April 7, 2023	Face-to-face
12	Dr. Muslim Imran	NGO (AMEC)	December 28, 2023 / February 2, 2024	Face-to-face
Politicians				
13	Khalid Samad	Politician	December 26, 2022	Face-to-face
Former Members of Islamic Movements in Malaysia				
14	Expert-6	Ex-ISMA Member	August 10, 2023	Online
15	Expert-7	Ex-ISMA Member	August 12, 2023	Online
16	Expert-8	Ex-HALUAN and Ex-ISMA Member	August 13, 2023	Online

The selection criteria for the expert category were diverse. The academics were selected for their expertise and experiences in political Islam and Islamic movements fields in Malaysia. For NGOs, those with either positive or negative interactions with ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA were chosen. The columnist, who is a non-Malay and non-Muslim Malaysian, was included for a unique viewpoint from outside the Malay-Muslim community. Although not intended as a comprehensive representation of non-Malay, non-Muslim perspectives, his interactions with Islamic movements offered valuable insights into how these movements are perceived by members of Malaysia's broader multicultural society. The former members of Islamic movements, who remain anonymous, have had more than one year of experience in at least one of the movements: ABIM, ISMA, or IKRAM. Lastly, the only politician I managed to interview, Khalid Samad, is a well-known Islamist and former member of parliament in Malaysia.

4.2.2 Primary Sources-2: Textual and Audio-visual Documents

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, I utilised the textual and audio-visual documents produced by ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA. By the term "documents," I refer to Wolff's (2004) definition, "Documents are standardized artefacts in so far as they

typically occur in particular formats: as notes, case reports, contracts, drafts, death certificates, remarks, diaries, statistics, annual reports, certificates, judgements, letters or expert opinions” (p. 284). In addition to this definition, “document” consists of textual and visual materials, such as photos, videos and posters (Flick, 2014; Patton, 2015). Following this definition, I included the documents of media statements of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA presidents published in the official website of these movements, or national news outlets, such as Malaysiakini.com, The Star online, and ISMAweb.com; the social media posts published through their official accounts; the articles, columns and commentaries of authoritative figures, such as presidents, vice presidents, chairpersons and former presidents of these movements in the media; as well as archival material such as books, newspapers, and magazines. Prior (2003) argues that documents are essential because their status and meaning depend on how they are integrated into fields of action. They are, therefore, dynamic entities that shape and are shaped by the context in which they operate. As she (2003) stated,

If we are to get to grips with the nature of documents then we have to move away from a consideration of them as stable, static and predefined artifacts. Instead, we must consider them in terms of fields, frames and networks of action. In fact, the status of things as “documents” depends precisely on the ways which such objects are integrated into fields of action, and documents can only be defined in terms of such fields (p. 2).

In the same vein, the documents of the Islamic movements are highly significant since they have been frequently used to communicate with political actors, such as political parties and government, and their members (Lemiere, 2010). Given their pivotal role in shaping the movements' strategies and interactions with key political actors and their importance for understanding the core ideology, framing strategies, and discursive approaches, these documents were also utilised as primary sources. 45 documents analysed in this study.

Table 4.3 Distribution of Documents

Islamic Movements	Media Statement in Official Website	Social media	Article, Columns, and Commentaries	Media Statement in News Outlets	Other	Total
ABIM	4	4	1	5	1 ¹²	15
ISMA	5	2	-	8	1 ¹³	16
IKRAM	9	1	-	2	-	12
Other (HIKAM¹⁴)	2	-	-	-		2
					Total	45

The documents analysed in this study span the period from 2014 to 2024, focusing on the most recent decade. This timeframe was selected due to significant developments in the discursive and strategic dynamics among Islamic movements in Malaysia. Since 2014, ISMA has adopted an increasingly vocal stance on the presence and role of Chinese and Indian Malaysians, sparking heated debates and reactions from other Islamic movements. This shift in ISMA's rhetoric and positioning necessitated the adaptation and development of new strategies by other movements to effectively compete in both discursive and strategic arenas. In addition, there have been some major political changes in this period, most notably UMNO's electoral defeat and Anwar Ibrahim's appointment as Prime Minister. These events provided new opportunities and constraints for these movements to navigate in their competition strategies.

Given the heterogeneity of these materials and the lack of standardised search tools across different platforms, the document selection process did not follow a systematic search strategy. Instead, a multifaceted approach guided by purposive sampling was taken to ensure inclusivity and depth when exploring ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA's ideological

¹² Bimonthly Magazine of ABIM, *Risalah*. (January–February 2021).

¹³ ISMA's campaign in Change.org for the Demanding Recognition and Affirmation that Malaysia is an Islamic State.

¹⁴ Malaysian Islamic Movement Association (*Himpunan Gerakan Islam Malaysia*, HIKAM, formerly HGIM) is the umbrella organisation that ABIM and IKRAM come together along with WADAH and HALUAN.

and discursive landscape. In the selection process, documents relevant to the research questions were included, while documents with repetitive arguments were omitted. The collected documents are all publicly available and are all primary sources.

ABIM produces a diverse range of materials to support its Islamic and intellectual objectives in various platforms. Along with the official website (ABIM.org.my), ABIM actively engages audiences through social media platforms, including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok, with its largest following on Facebook, amounting to approximately 71,000 followers as of December 2024. Beyond digital platforms, ABIM maintains a publication arm, ABIM Press, which publishes original works and translations of esteemed Islamic scholars, such as Yusuf Al-Qaradawi and Hamka. Additionally, ABIM disseminates its ideas and research through its academic journal, *Malaysian Journal of Islamic Movements and Muslim Societies*, and its bimonthly magazine, *Risalah*.

ISMA maintains a strong presence on social media, including on X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube. It has its largest audience on Facebook, boasting more than 253,000 followers, as of December 2024. Additionally, ISMA operates affiliated media (<https://ismaweb.net>) and official websites (<https://isma.org.my> and <https://muis.org.my>). IKRAM is similarly active on various social media platforms, including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok. Its largest audience is on Facebook, where it has over 238,000 followers as of December 2024. In addition to its social media presence, IKRAM publishes articles and other materials on its official website (*IKRAM.org.my*), further contributing to its outreach and engagement efforts.

The selection process of the documents consisted of three phases, which are a literature review, a focused examination of official sources, and an iterative keyword-based search. In the first phase, I started following the official social media accounts of ABIM, IKRAM

and ISMA from the beginning of this study to monitor their activities, reactions, and responses to current events—the documents selected in this process cover dates between 2020 and 2024. Monitoring their activities, reactions, and responses provided deeper insights into the political ideological orientations and internal factions within these movements. By closely observing how ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM responded to current events and societal issues, I was able to discern not only their public stances but also the underlying ideological currents that shaped their reactions.

In the second phase, guided by insights from the literature review and the interviews, the focus shifted to a targeted search for documents. In this phase, I searched the documents published between 2014 and 2024. I identified recurring themes related to the ideology of political Islam, discourse, and competitive dynamics among ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM, as highlighted by interviewees. Several key themes emerged from this analysis, including Islam, the Malay struggle, Malaysian politics, liberalism, Malay culture, and the Malay language. Additionally, themes such as *wasatiyyah* (the concept of moderation), cosmopolitan Islam, *Bangsa Malaysia* (the concept of a united Malaysian nation), and *Negara Rahmah* (a vision of a compassionate, just state) also became prominent. These themes served as keywords for a focused search across a range of documents, allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of the ideological discourses within ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM. Given the dynamic and evolving nature of these discussions, the search process was iterative, so that the identification of new and relevant materials could be detected as they emerged. This iterative approach ensured that the selected documents were comprehensive and reflective of the ongoing discourse among the movements. The primary objective of this phase was to deepen the understanding of the topics discussed in the interviews and to provide a more contextual and nuanced analysis of the ideological and strategic orientations of ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM.

In the third phase, I investigated specific documents containing particular themes, such as *Madinah* society, *rahmah*, and *wasatiyyah* concepts in which ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA used in their discourse, often with varying interpretations. In this phase, the documents published between 2014-2024 was examined. These documents, then, utilised for a comparative analysis. This approach allowed for an in-depth examination of how each movement constructs its realities, engages and responses with issues through distinct ideological lenses.

The documents I collected were based on publicly available documents, so accessing them was not a challenge. Regarding authenticity, all documents are primary sources and released by the administrators of the movements, such as the president, vice presidents, chairman or former presidents, who are still active in various positions within the movements. The documents analysed were in either English or Malay. Malay documents were translated into English by a native Malay speaker proficient in English to ensure credibility. For representativeness, only the primary sources were selected. Utilising a variety of document sources, such as official websites, social media accounts, columns, and media statements, ensures methodological diversity and thorough coverage of different facets of the discourse of each movement, facilitating a deeper understanding of their strategies and discourse.

4.2.3 Secondary Sources

Secondary sources refer to the pre-existing data (Goodwin, 2012). In this study, these sources include peer-reviewed academic articles, newspaper articles, news reports, legal documents, and organisational data. These sources are utilised to complement the primary sources by enriching them with a contextual background, additional explanations, and further details for understanding the dynamics of Islamic movements in Malaysia. Peer-reviewed articles were instrumental in explaining and elaborating on key concepts critical

to understanding Islamic movements in Malaysia, while newspaper articles offered historical and contextual backgrounds that deepened the understanding of the issues being analysed. Finally, legal documents and organisational data provided essential details for the analysis.

A purposive sampling strategy was used in the data collection process and this process is not linear but iterative. This approach involved repeated reviews for the inclusion of relevant sources as new issues emerged or gaps were identified during the analysis. By doing so, I aimed to address the gaps left by the primary data, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of the research context. This iterative refinement also allowed the integration of diverse materials, enhancing the overall analytical depth and contextual richness of the study.

The selected secondary sources are publicly available. Thus, the credibility and authenticity of the documents were carefully assessed through their origin, the reputation of the publishing entities, and their alignment with other established sources in the field. This helped ensure that the secondary data used was both reliable and relevant to the study.

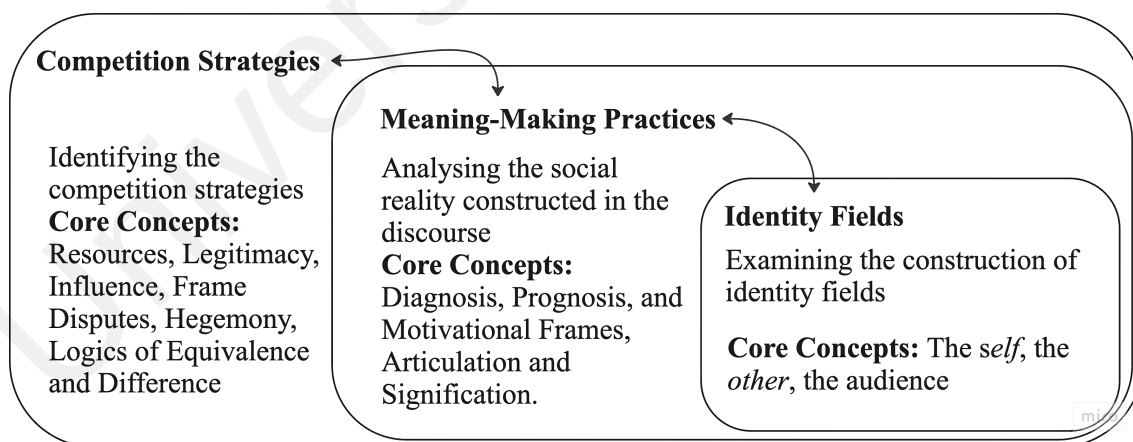
4.3 Data Analysis

For the data analysis, I developed an integrated analysis model which combines frame analysis and discourse analysis. The combination of both theories was necessary to addresses both textual and visual materials, and discursive and non-discursive elements in the data. The integration of frame and discourse analysis allowed for a thematic focus, with each theory contributing unique strengths to the analytical framework.

Frame analysis provided a structured approach to examining the identification and meaning-making processes of each movement, particularly through diagnostic,

prognostic and motivational frames. Discourse theory, with its interpretive and flexible nature, provided a rich set of concepts to capture abstract and complex phenomena such as antagonism, hegemony, nodal points, empty signifiers, chains of equivalence and chains of difference (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002) Together, these concepts served as thematic tools for analysing how discourses functioned within the data.

Figure 4.2 illustrates the Analysis Model of the Study which is created by combining frame theory and discourse theory. The model has three steps. In the first step, I employed the identity fields concept to examine how Islamic movements constructed identities for themselves, others, and their audiences. In this step, discourse theory concepts such as nodal points and empty signifiers were integrated to explore how movements articulated central ideas into their core values and the identification of the *self*. Then, I incorporated the concept of agonism from discourse theory better capture the details and nuances of antagonist identities that the movements constructed. Finally, I compared the identity fields concepts to analyse the different elements in ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA' discourse.



Source: Author's own compilation

Figure 4.2 Analysis Model of the Study Based on the Combination of Frame and Discourse Theory

Secondly, I applied the concept of core framing tasks—diagnosis, prognosis, and motivational frames—to analyse how Islamic movements identified key problems, proposed solutions, and motivated their supporters. The discourse theory concepts

articulation and signification are inherent in the core framing tasks. These frames were employed to understand how ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA construct social reality, and combine words, objects, ideas, and concepts to articulate a discourse.

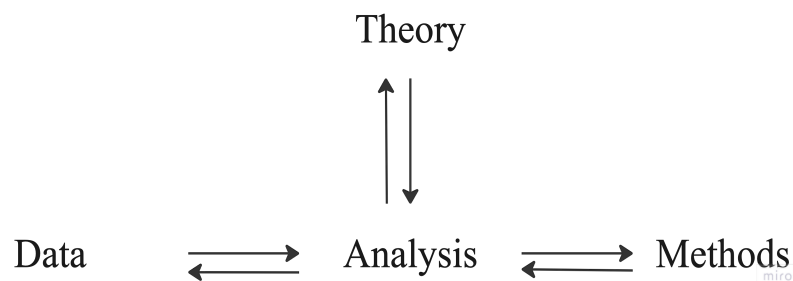
Finally, in the third step, I examined the competition strategies used by the movements. At this stage, the focus was on non-discursive competition strategies in which frame analysis was not suitable. Therefore, the analysis conducted by focusing on key themes that emerged from the data, such as resources, legitimacy, influence, which were pivotal in understanding how these movements utilised in their hegemony competitions. Then, these themes were examined through discourse analysis. Concepts such as hegemony, chains of equivalence, and chains of difference were applied to understand the competition between hegemonic projects of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA. This thematic and theoretical integration enabled a comprehensive examination of how ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM's competition strategies for hegemony.

The primary data that was analysed consists of two main types: semi-structured interviews and a variety of textual and audio-visual documents, including media statements, social media posts, articles, books, and magazines. While most sources are transcribed for textual analysis, visual materials, such as posters and images, are preserved and analysed as visual data. In this section, I outline the processes of data analysis.

Before beginning the coding process, I transcribed all the interviews myself, as self-transcribing allows researchers to engage more deeply with the data and fosters a better understanding of the details in the responses. After the transcription, the interview transcripts, and the textual and audio-visual documents, which are the selected public releases of the movements, social media posts, and press releases (periodical issues and articles) were imported into qualitative software for coding. To enable a systematic and

cohesive coding process I conducted the coding process by using coding software, ATLAS.ti.

The coding process of the data is essential to provide the replicability and reliability of the research findings. I developed a codebook, primarily informed by frame theory, to systematically analyse each case within a clear and structured framework. This process aligns with inductive reasoning (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). However, as the analysis progressed, it became evident that certain aspects of the data required a combination of both theoretical frameworks to provide a more comprehensive explanation. For this reason, I had to employ abductive logic. Bridging both deductive and inductive logic, as Flick (2018) points out, abduction had a great benefit for this study because “it opens up more space for the intended interaction between the researchers and their data, between the researchers and their theory fragments so far developed, and between their data and theory.” (p. 88). Therefore, abductive logic underlines the iterative process between analysis and theory (*see*, Figure 4.3). In this respect, unlike the inductive logic which impose theory on data analysis, abductive logic is based on, first, the existing theoretical knowledge, and second, interpretive actions by the researchers (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014).



Source: Ignatow & Mihalcea (2018)

Figure 4.3 Abductive Logic

A key example of this application occurred in the identity fields concept from frame theory. Theoretically, this concept is structured around three components: protagonist, antagonist, and audience. Yet, the data I collected revealed that the “antagonist” category alone could not adequately capture the complex relationships between Islamic movements and other actors within Malaysia’s civil and political landscape. To address this limitation, I integrated the concept of “agonism” from discourse theory, which proved more suitable in understanding these dynamics.

The coding process was not linear, nor could each step be delineated. Instead, it was a recursive and iterative process, where I frequently moved back and forth through the data—this involved reading and coding the data several times to refine the interpretations and ensure a thorough analysis.

4.4 Validity and Reliability

Validity in qualitative methodology refers to the accuracy of the data from the perspective of the researchers, the informants, and the readers (Creswell, 2007). Scholars have offered many different procedures or strategies to control the accuracy of the findings. According to Creswell (2007), at least two validity strategies should be used to accomplish credible qualitative research (p. 209). To enhance the validity and rigour of this study, I employ four strategies: the triangulation strategy, review of the external audits, clarification of the researcher’s bias, and spending prolonged time in the field.

Triangulation refers to cross-checking the data with other data sources or secondary resources. To fulfil this procedure, first, I interviewed several scholars working on the Malaysian Islamic movements, activists of other civil movements, politicians, and influential figures who had very close connections or organic ties with the case study movements. Secondly, I used textual and audio-visual documents such as ABIM, ISMA,

and IKRAM's publications and archival materials to examine the evidence gathered from the interviews.

The researcher's biases need to be clarified to provide a better understanding to the reader, as Creswell (2007) indicated. As an outsider Muslim researcher conducting a study on Islamic movements in Malaysia, my aim was to bring a neutral yet critical perspective to the research. During the study, I experienced some advantages of being an outsider researcher. For example, the impact of social stereotypes and prejudices that can shape perspectives in Malaysian society on the analysis process was very limited. In addition, I have no affiliation with any of these movements or the informants I interviewed, which minimises the risk of conflict of interest.

However, as a researcher who identifies herself as being closer to a pluralist understanding of Islam, I recognise the inherent difficulties of maintaining objectivity in researching social movements that advocate pluralist on the one hand and nationalist versions of Islam on the other. Therefore, although I strive for a balanced perspective, I recognise that my own values may at times be closer to the pluralist orientations of movements such as ABIM and IKRAM. In turn, I admit that I have adopted a more critical stance towards exclusionist or nationalist ideologies such as those put forward by ISMA, particularly when they appear to challenge the principles of multiculturalism and inclusiveness.

Therefore, I believe that the consistent analytical framework I have used in my analysis of the discourses of all three movements has been effective in reducing potential biases. This framework allows me to criticise all movements on equal terms, ensuring that my interpretations remain as objective as possible, even if their ideologies differ significantly from my personal inclinations.

Additionally, spending prolonged time in a research field was beneficial in developing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon examined. I spent the vast majority of the research process in Malaysia observing and experiencing the Islamisation and Islamic movements phenomenon. Being in the field, I had the opportunity to attend events or programmes where the presidents and members of the Islamic movements gave speeches, and I had informal conversations with both members of the movement and non-members in Malaysia. These experiences and conversations provided a better understanding into the dynamics of Islamic movements in Malaysia.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

In qualitative studies, interviewees are the primary source of information. Some ethical issues that protect the informants' rights can be categorised into three sections: informed consent procedures, deception or covert activities, and confidentiality towards the informants (Creswell, 2007). As the first step of the protection of informants' rights, the Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC) approved the ethics clearance application on 6 May 2022. The letter is provided in Appendix A.

The second step was reaching out to the potential informants. Participation in my research was entirely voluntary. I preferred sending emails and informing them about the research topic to reach them. Initially, I emailed potential informants and asked for their consent to participate in my study. When approaching the potential informants, I used the email address that the UM provided to preserve confidentiality. Also, informants were guaranteed that their information would be preserved confidentially and would only be used for this study project. They were also informed about the topic and the content of the interview in detail via the Participant information sheet attached to the invitation emails. They might decline my request if unwilling to participate in the study. At this

step, I contacted more than 70 potential informants, and only 36 of them positively responded.

Final step was to set an interview date and time with the informants. With those accepted to be informants, the interviews were conducted either online via Skype, Zoom, or Google Meet, whichever is suitable for the informant, or face-to-face, according to the preferences and availability of the informant. The questions, reservations regarding the interview and confidentiality concerns were addressed prior to the interview. The interviews started with their consent and recorded if the informants agreed. In some interviews, informants requested to stop recording or demanded to be off the record. The information they provided in these sections was excluded entirely from the data. The recordings will be kept as my private data and stored on my private, password-protected laptop, and only I have permission to access the recordings. They will be destroyed five years after the thesis is submitted.

CHAPTER 5: MAPPING THE TERRAIN: IDENTIFYING THE *SELF*, THE *OTHER* AND THE AUDIENCE

5.1 Introduction

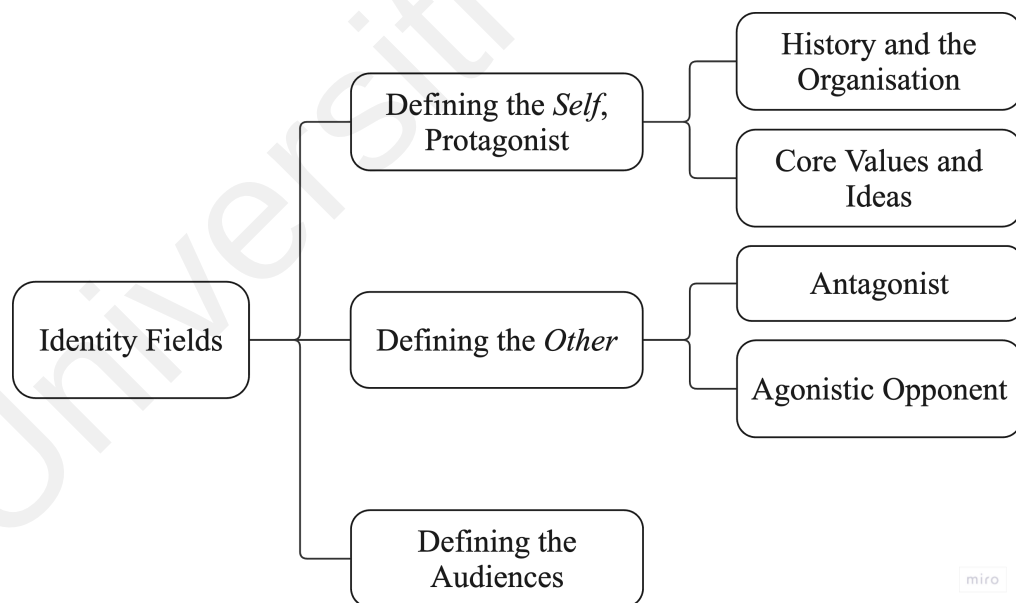
This chapter explores the landscape of Malaysian Islamic movements, namely ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM by examining how they define and construct their identities in relation to each other, their antagonists, as well as their audiences. Identity is a significant part of a social movement because each movement has a distinct collective identity (Della Porta & Diani, 2020). These “identities” build an integrated narrative linking the movement’s values, goals and actions (Gamson, 1992). Thus, these constructed identities are significant components of social movements’ discourse and their competition.

In this chapter, the examination of the identities that ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA articulate is guided by identity fields concept from the frame theory. According to Hunt, Benford and Snow(1994), social movements construct identity fields by defining themselves and their allies (*i.e.*, protagonist), their enemies and antagonists, and their audiences. The identity fields help social movements to mobilise support and respond to criticisms and other attacks from countermovements, and the media (Benford, 2013).

Identities also have a central position in discourse theory. They are constructed through articulatory practices and subject positions (Howarth, 2000). Unlike fixed or pre-given identities, identification is a dynamic social process in which identities are actively constructed and continuously reshaped (Laclau, 1994). Nevertheless, identities are not one-sided but “doubly differentiated” in David Howarth’s terms (2013, p. 250). Accordingly, when individuals or social groups define themselves —referred to as *self* hereafter— they also define “who they are not,” thereby simultaneously identifying the antagonist —referred to as *other* hereafter.

However, as frame theory suggested, social movements do not only define themselves and the antagonist, but they also identify the audiences. Social movements identify themselves and the antagonists in a way that they can be distinguished from *others* and appeal to potential supporters. Additionally, social movements often adapt their strategies or frames to resonate more among the audiences to mobilise support and foster a sense of solidarity. Although identity and identification are crucial phases of discourse theory, the frame theory provides the framework for systematically applying the concepts of protagonist, antagonist, and audiences.

Combining identity fields concepts from frame theory and agonistic opponent concept from discourse theory, this chapter examines the identity constructions of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA in terms of “Defining the *self*: Protagonist,” “Defining the *Other*,” and “Defining the Audiences” (see, Figure 5.1).



Source: Author’s compilation based on the identity fields concept of frame theory

Figure 5.1 The Framework of Identity Fields Analysis

“Defining the *self*: Protagonist” section focuses on how these movements define themselves in relation to each other. The examination of this identity is divided into two sections —“history and organisation” and “core values and ideas”—to provide a

structured and thorough analysis of how each movement constructs its identity. In the “history and organisation” section, I examine each movement’s origins, development, and structural arrangements to understand its foundational identity and strategic positioning. These aspects discuss the trajectory of the movements, their key turning points (such as the split between IKRAM and ISMA and their rebranding), and their evolution in response to sociopolitical contexts. The “core values and ideas” section complements this analysis by exploring the ideological principles that underpin each movement’s goals and vision. Although these core values are not static and adopt the needs of sociopolitical changes, they work as an anchor in their discourse, as nodal points in the sense of discourse theory. Therefore, this section reveals how the movements frame their identities and position themselves within their broader discourse. This approach aligns with Hunt, Snow and Benford’s (1994) conceptualisation of identity fields, which emphasise the importance of examining both organisational elements and collective identity claims to understand how movements position themselves as advocates of their causes.

In the “defining the *other*” section, I reveal how the movements identify and articulate their *others* and how they justify it. In this study, rather than the term “antagonist” as frame theory suggests, “the *other*” notion is preferred since “antagonist” is mainly used for referring to a high level of animosity and hostility towards *others*. The *other* is a far less loaded notion that can reflect the realities in the Malaysian Islamic movements’ terrain. Following “the audiences” definitions of the movements in which the movements construct their discourses, a comparative analysis of identity fields is provided. Lastly, the conclusion section summarises the insights gained from the examination of Malaysian Islamic movements.

5.2 Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM)

Since its formation in 1971, ABIM has been one of the most prominent and influential Islamic movements in Malaysia's civil and political scene. Although founded as a youth organisation, ABIM has had a significant impact on the social and political arena by challenging the hegemonic discourse of the ruling government with a new discourse grounded on global revivalist ideologies (Liow, 2009; Saidin, 2019). This section examines how ABIM constructs the identity of *self*, *others* and the audience.

5.2.1 Defining the *Self*: The Protagonist

ABIM constructs its self-identity as a protagonist in Malaysia's socio-political and religious landscape. This identity is deeply rooted in its historical legacy and the core values it espouses. Categorised as traditionalist-pluralist, ABIM seeks to address the challenges of Malaysian society while staying true to the universal principles of Islam. The following subsections explore two key dimensions of ABIM's self-definition: its history and organisational development, which provide the foundation for its identity, and its core values and ideas. Together, these elements illustrate how ABIM construct the identity of the *self*.

5.2.1.1 History and the Organisation

The earliest and the forefront of the *dakwah* movement in Malaysia is ABIM. Founded in 1971 as a youth movement, ABIM became influential in changing the understanding of Islam in Malaysia by introducing *Syumuliyyah* (lit., the comprehensive understanding of Islam) (Maszlee Malik, 2017). The founders of ABIM were part of a student union, the National Union of Malaysian Muslim Students (*Persatuan Kebangsaan Pelajar Islam Malaysia*, PKPIM), consisting of undergraduate university students (Zulkifly Abdul Malek, 2011).

While ABIM has taken a reserved position in regard to politics, historically, ABIM has always been involved in Malaysian politics. Even in the very early period of its establishment, ABIM was a staunch critic of UMNO due to rising socioeconomic justice problems and the inadequate incorporation of Islamic principles in Malaysia's social and political policies (Saliha Hassan, 2003; Weiss, 2006). With the help of the charismatic leadership of Anwar Ibrahim, who is currently the prime minister of Malaysia since 2022, ABIM gained immense social support (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023). In the contemporary period, ABIM's relative political neutrality may serve a strategic function. By maintaining a non-partisan stance, at least at the discursive level, ABIM remains appealing to a broad segment of Malaysian society. This position allows ABIM to preserve its credibility and reach across diverse ideological and political segments of the society and avoid engagements in partisan struggles.¹⁵

Despite his young age, Anwar Ibrahim served as the deputy minister under the Mahathir government in the 1990s. Besides him, there have been several influential names strongly associated with ABIM have taken various positions in Malaysian politics, such as Fadzil Noor, Mohd Nor Manutty, Siddiq Fadzil, and Abdul Hadi Awang (Jomo & Cheek, 1988). Despite this strong connection with Malaysian politics, ABIM has not turned into a political party but remains a youth movement. Even more, the movement has been imposing a strict de-membership policy on the members who join politics.

¹⁵ Although the ABIM informants strongly emphasised this policy, my personal observations and impressions from the other interviews with experts suggest that drawing a clear line between the movement and Anwar Ibrahim seems impossible. For the general public, ABIM is synonymous with Anwar Ibrahim, a perception he reinforced by participating in ABIM's programs immediately after his premiership, and several times thereafter. As a consequence, Anwar Ibrahim's role as Prime Minister has placed ABIM in the spotlight. As ABIM-3 noted, "Now suddenly a lot of people remember us, saying, 'I was also ABIM in the 1980s.'" Therefore, they have received a higher number of membership applications, as he reported. However, this attention also brings a burden. As ABIM-2 stated, Anwar Ibrahim's position "is a blessing and a curse" because ABIM's future is now seen as dependent on Anwar's performance. Although they support him sometimes openly sometimes silently, ABIM informants acknowledged that Anwar's performance will indelibly affect ABIM's image and thus determine its future.

Throughout its history, ABIM has gone beyond the *dakwah* activities by actively involving civil society activities. Along with launching the *Reformasi* (lit., reformation) movement over Anwar Ibrahim's detention in 1998 to demand civil liberties (Weiss, 2006). ABIM has also been a prominent member of the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (*Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil*, BERSIH) movement, a pro-democracy coalition demanding electoral and governance reforms (Khoo, 2021). In this context, ABIM has served as a bridge between modern democratic values and Islamic approaches within Malaysian civil society (Saliha Hassan, 2003).

According to the official numbers, ABIM has 42,000 members and more than 130 branches in Malaysia and across the world. The movement also manages 320 educational institutions (*see*, the official website of ABIM, www.abim.org.my).¹⁶ The movement engages in diverse activities through different organisation bodies ranging from women's wing international affairs to the Global Peace Mission. Furthermore, ABIM is part of three different but strongly interlinked organisations: the student union, PKPIM; the youth movement, ABIM; and the elderly members' platform, WADAH. As pointed out by ABIM-6, this three-level organisation structure within a single movement was designed by the late Siddiq Fadzil, one of the most influential ideologues of ABIM. For this structure, Siddiq Fadzil referred to the term "*Ekperimentasi Haraka*," the movement experiment. According to ABIM-6, the goal of this structure is to make room for younger generations to educate and train for future leadership roles. As an example of this experiment's implementation, all three organisations gather periodically to discuss the issues in the Majlis Shura Council (ABIM-6, personal communication, July 27, 2023).

¹⁶ Accessed 11 June 2024.

As s/he further pointed out, in this council, each organisation sits side by side without any hierarchy.

In Majlis Shura Council, PKPIM, ABIM and WADAH's presidents, these three presidents, along with the chairman of the *Shura* [consultation], sit there together. The PKPIM president is just a [undergraduate] student, but he sits together with the president of ABIM and the president of WADAH. This is the beauty of our system; it gives this kind of privilege to the PKPIM to sit together with other presidents in the *Shura* Council. This is why, in our organisation, we give chances to the young, so they have the chance to be exposed to what we have before (ABIM-6, personal communication, July 27, 2023).

As a youth movement, ABIM is bound by the Youth Societies and Youth Development Act endorsed in 2007 and set an age limit for the members of the youth organisations.¹⁷ This act requires that the age of youth movement members must be limited to between 15 and 40 (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023). The members who are more than the age of 40 must leave the movement. For this reason, another organisation was founded called WADAH. According to Expert-3, WADAH aims to gather the senior members of ABIM in a common platform to proceed with their activities (Expert-3, personal communication, August 9, 2023). This organisational structure enables ABIM to retain its members' engagement and contributions, even as they age out of the youth bracket, to ensure continuity and sustain influence within the movement. Furthermore, this flexible structure enables an autonomous domain for each organisation—PKPIM, ABIM, and WADAH—while allowing them to contribute to the overarching goals of the movement.

5.2.1.2 Core Values and Ideas

Core values and ideas are significant dimensions of the identification process. As data analysis indicated, three interrelated core values and ideas categories were detected that

¹⁷ See, Act 668, Youth Societies and Youth Development Act. Published July 27, 2007.

are crucial in the definition of ABIM's *self*. These three values and ideas are namely, *dakwah*, *Manhaj Malizi* (lit., the Malaysian way of change) and "*wasatiyyah*". The concept of *wasatiyyah* was introduced by the former prime minister of Malaysia, Najib Razak, to promote the moderation approach in the nation-building process of Malaysia (Othman & Sulaiman, 2016). Adopting *wasatiyyah* concept into its discourse along with *Manhaj Malizi*, ABIM organised other discursive elements around them, utilising them as nodal points in its articulation of meaning. As nodal points, they serve as central signifiers that establish relationships between other elements in ABIM's discourse, such as inclusivity, national unity, and Islamic revivalism. This section examines how ABIM articulates these core values and ideas and positions them as nodal points within its broader discourse.

By defining itself as a *dakwah* movement, ABIM's core values and beliefs revolve around the philosophy of "Islam as a complete way of life" as stated by the former president of Muhammad Faisal Bin Abdul Aziz (2022) in his article. ABIM's primary motivation for mobilisation during its formative years aligned closely with the objectives of other *dakwah* movements, such as the MB and Jamaat-e-Islami. The post-colonial order and the frustrations it caused were among the major underlying reasons, as explained by Expert-3.

After colonialism, the British wanted to stay longer in the country they colonised by putting their own [local] people [who are] Westernised, secularised. What we call "the Brown British", [which means that] you have brown skin, you are Malay, but your mind, you're thinking, your lifestyle, your culture is British. So, they put people like that. After our independence, the people got fed up, and the entire Muslim world got fed up because the locals, their own people, were running the country just like how the British were running it. So where do we go? That is why in the 70s, we call it the revival of Islam, the Islamic Renaissance, happened (Expert-3, personal communication, August 9, 2023).

According to Expert-3, Islamic revivalism was a result of a quest for an expression of the local people's acknowledgement, which had long been avoided. As s/he argued, the

rulers whom the colonial powers left behind were ideologically connected to the colonial's mindsets rather than locals, therefore they were not exactly reflecting the sensitivities of the Muslim people in Malaysia.

This approach is in line with the spirit of the independence period. As noted by Farish Noor (2014), to establish the hegemony of the local people, Islam provided the ideological framework and the discursive tools necessary for the resistance and the establishment of the counter-hegemonic discourse to Malays. Based on this framework, ABIM has constructed its understanding of *dakwah* and political Islam, heavily influenced by global Islamic movements, as well as influential Islamic scholars, such as Naqib Al-Attas, Ismail al-Faruqi, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Bouti (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023; ABIM-8, personal communication, July 27, 2023; Expert-3, personal communication, August 9, 2023). According to ABIM-3, ABIM deliberately prefers to interact with Islamic scholars from around the world rather than following a single Islamic philosophy.

We would, first, like the idea of Islamic movements, like Hasan al-Banna *Ikhwan-ul Muslimin* [MB], but at the same time, we also engage with the local issues in the Malay Archipelago, Malay psyche. So that is why. We are not so-called indoctrinated by this *Ikhwan-ul Muslimin* because we refuse to follow the *Ikhwan* fully. [...] Of course, we learnt from the *Ikhwan*. We have *usrah* [lit., family, but referring to study circles in this context], etc. But their way of *dakwah*, you know, in Malaysia, we are more tolerant. Maybe we are different from Arabs. Also, we learn from other Islamic ideologies from the US like Ismail al-Faruqi. What is special about ABIM [is that] we are independent. We learn from all; we are not indoctrinated by one school of thought, but we have many in terms of idealism and persuasion (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023).¹⁸

¹⁸ In the same vein, being one of the oldest Islamic movements in Malaysia, ABIM has led other movements with its experiences as mentioned by the informants from ABIM. Expert-3, for example, argued that ABIM's adoption of the MB's framework, while not following it completely, has also guided other movements: "They [referring to IKRAM and ISMA] have realised that we are not Egypt. We realised that earlier. They came later after they saw our model. Then, we [ABIM] were [like] the big brother. [...] They follow the way we think and the way we go. So, they are changing." (Expert-3, personal communication, August 9, 2023). Expert-3's this statement was also confirmed by two other IKRAM informants, IKRAM-1 and IKRAM-3.

As an outcome of disassociating themselves from the global *dakwah* movements and interacting with various Islamic thoughts, ABIM has constructed a unique Islamic framework that is suitable for Malaysia, as the ABIM informants argued.¹⁹ This framework, which they call “*Manhaj Malizi*,” combines the global *dakwah* understanding with the realities of Malaysia. As Expert-8 argued,

We have also learned from other organisations abroad [referring to the MB and the Iranian Revolution]. Learning [in the sense that] we are not under their supervision, [or] under their direction. So, the ABIM leadership at that time went and visited all these groups and learned from them. But I think I remember there was a story [that was told where] *Ikhwan-ul Muslimin* asked ABIM to *bi'at* (lit., to follow) the *Ikhwan*. So, I think Anwar or maybe the other leaders decided that we were not following the *Ikhwan* because of the nature of Asia. In Malaysia, we call it *Manhaj Malizi* (Expert-8, personal communication, July 27, 2023).

Manhaj Malizi is strongly associated with the moderation (*i.e.*, *wasatiyyah*), highlighting “the middle ground” rather than extreme interpretations of Islam, as noted by Muhammad Faisal Abdul Aziz (cited in Oleh Diana Azis, 2022). However, the crux of this concept is related to relations with the non-Muslim population in Malaysian society. By arguing that the Middle Eastern way of Islam is not suitable for Malaysia due to the high level of ethnic and religious diversity in the country, *Manhaj Malizi* articulates an Islamic framework that is moderate and compassionate towards non-Muslims in Malaysia. Moreover, *Manhaj Malizi* materialises the discursive framework that ABIM constructed to articulate its demands and positions in the local religious and socio-political landscape (Maszlee Malik, 2017a). ABIM’s social activities and political agenda, such as *Bangsa Malaysia* (the Nation of Malaysia) and Cosmopolitan Islam, are profoundly grounded in this framework. In this respect, *Manhaj Malizi* combines the elements of global Islamic revivalism, local religious understanding, which materialised

¹⁹ This argument can be confirmed by analysing the books published by ABIM Press. ABIM has published the books of Islamic scholars with diverse approaches, such as Hamka, and translated books of Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, Dr. Abdul Karim Zaydan, and Shaykh Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan Al-Bouti. See, <https://ilhambooks.com/publishers-en/abim-press/>.

within the Cosmopolitan Islam agenda, and social realities of Malaysia, especially the country's multiethnic and multireligious characteristic. Thus, the concept plays a critical role in guiding and shaping the movement's identity and becomes a nodal point of ABIM's discourse.²⁰

Manhaj Malizi signifies ABIM's resistance to the imposition of external models of Islamic practice that may not align with the local context. In this regard, it is an attempt to establish a hegemonic position that defines a uniquely Malaysian approach to Islamism. Despite acknowledging their influence, the refusal to fully align with the MB exemplifies a counter-hegemonic stance that challenges monolithic representations of Islamic revivalism, as well as highlights the subjective needs of different nations. ABIM's discourse strategically navigates between universal Islamic principles and particularistic local traditions, engaging in a form of discursive hybridity that allows for a pluralistic and inclusive Islamic identity in line with the requirements imposed by Malaysian society. As ABIM-8 further explains,

To understand the context, in Malaysia, it is completely different from what you have in the Middle East. We learn also from Pakistan, *Jemaah Islami*, Mawdudi and some other well-known figures from others. From Indonesia also, we have many other traditional schools. During the time, they [ABIM leaders] were closed with Hamka. So, we learn from the *ulama* and from the [local] scholars, but at the same time, we also learn from other schools of thought in other regions. But we make it [compatible with] our Malaysian context. We are not just simply copying others (ABIM-8, personal communication, July 27, 2023).

ABIM's efforts to establish its own way of doing *dakwah* can also be considered as an act of identification. As Laclau and Zac (1994) argue, the subject does not just passively

²⁰ The concept of *Manhaj Malizi* is also a result of seeking their own form of self-determination, while as Laclau and Zac (1994) argue, "searching for such determination in something external to itself- a 'something' which will operate as both 'shelter' and source of 'security'" (p. 12). In this regard, ABIM creates a unique Islamic understanding that takes into account the subjective realities of Malaysian society. By doing so, it not only incorporates ideas, frames, and methodologies from the MB and other revivalist movements but also provides ABIM with a framework of legitimacy and structure that acts as a shelter and security, in the sense of Laclau and Zac (1994).

accept the identities given by the structures but actively shapes them. In this case, ABIM does accept the *dakwah* movement identity, but also shapes it to construct its own identity.

Connected to these core values, ABIM established two major agendas, namely *Bangsa Malaysia* and *Cosmopolitan Islam* which are elaborated in the next chapter. These agendas reflect ABIM's identity in terms of their ideological position in terms of the non-Muslim population. Distinguishing themselves from the Malay nationalist discourse, ABIM prefers a more egalitarian approach in line with their moderation principle and underlines the citizenship concept aiming to reduce social and political hierarchies between different ethnic groups. As the vice president ABIM-3 explains,

We [ABIM] always believe in the idea of citizenship. We really understand respecting other minorities and fellow citizens. We have always believed that this is what should be embraced by the Malaysians. There must be interactions with other civilisations. This is the real concept of "*Lita'arafu*". People talk about Surat Hujurat, Verse-13, about *Lita'arafu* [meaning] "knowing each other" as knowing Malay, knowing Chinese. [We say that] we know Chinese, what they like during the Chinese New Year [etc.]. We talk like we really know. But the reality is that [to really know them] you have to go to their house. You have to have a Chinese friend to really understand the Chinese (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023).

This quotation further explains the core beliefs of ABIM's perspective on non-Malays and its relationships with them. By defending the contact and communication with them, ABIM wants to go beyond the ethnic identities to protect a common "Malaysian" identity. In this effort, they also use Islamic sources for justification. As stated in the quotation, they use *Lita'arafu*, referring to getting to know one another.²¹ The importance of *Lita'arafu* concept further discussed in the audience of ABIM section below.

²¹ The concept of *Lita'arafu* originates from Surah Al-Hujurat, verse 13 of the Quran; "O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may 'get to' know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware." Source: <https://quran.com/en/al-hujurat/13#:~:text=O%20humanity!,-Knowing%2C%20All-Aware>. Accessed February 20, 2024.

5.2.2 Defining the Other: Antagonist

Social movements' identification of the antagonist is pivotal for both framing theory and discourse theory. In frame theory, the antagonist typically appears as a specific and clearly defined entity, constructed through diagnosis framing to attribute blame for grievances. In discourse theory, on the other hand, antagonism is a relational spectrum representing varying degrees of opposition. At one extreme, there is the antagonist, who is the "enemy" that needs to be destroyed, but at another extreme, there is an agonistic *other*, who is a legitimate rival. In this section, I investigate ABIM's *other* using discourse theory's antagonism and agony spectrum, which offers a more detailed explanation for the *others* that constructed under the category of antagonists. The data analysis revealed that three groups were detected as antagonistic or agonistic *others* within ABIM's discourse. These groups are extremists, liberal groups, and other Islamic movements, which are situated along a spectrum —ranging from antagonism to agonism.

On the side of the spectrum closer to the antagonist end, ABIM targets the "extremist" discourse as its *other* without explicitly specifying what these entities are. With the term extremism, it was found that they refer to religious extremism and ethnic nationalism. As the current ABIM president Ahmad Fahmi Mohd Samsudin and his colleague Raja Nurul Balqis (2021) discussed in their article "ABIM's role in building bridges towards harmony through values and peaceful co-existence,"

At a time when identity politics and nationalist politics are threatening to erode values of moderation and tolerance, it is more important than ever to highlight and champion the concept of peaceful coexistence. Identity politics, religious extremism, and hyper-nationalism invariably exacerbate traditional and non-traditional security challenges such as xenophobia, hate speech, terrorism, forced migration, and territorial conflict (Ahmad Fahmi Mohd Samsudin and Raja Nurul Balqis, 2021).

Ahmad Fahmi and Raja emphasise the threat posed by identity politics, religious extremism, nationalist agendas, and the values of moderation and tolerance, which

ABIM's core values support. They contend that the reason for targeting these concepts as antagonists is that religious and nationalistic extremism can cause serious problems within and across Malaysia; therefore, it needs to be fought.

Although religious and nationalist extremism is increasingly associated with groups such as PAS and ISMA, ABIM cautiously refrains from explicitly naming or directly targeting these groups. In this respect, some of the recent activities of ABIM are worth noting regarding how they articulate their antagonist. Following the 15th General Election in 2022, there was an upsurge of hashtags *#13mei* and *#13Mei1969*²² and references from the record-winning Malay movie *Mat Kilau*²³ to suggest that a possible recurrence of the 1969 racial riots (Jalli, 2023). These contents were widely shared particularly by the PN supporters on TikTok. The vitality of TikTok in this case was that the platform brings thousands of Malaysian youths together. Not surprisingly, these contents caused outrage among the non-Malay Malaysians. To show their support and solidarity with the non-Malay Malaysians, ABIM, in support of IKRAM, organised a social media campaign, *#kitakawan* (lit., We are friends), to oppose the ethnic and religious extremism showcased during the post-election process on social media. Image 5.1. below illustrates the campaign call of ABIM to Malaysians to share their photos with the hashtags Spread the greetings Reject Hate, We are friends, Love my Malaysia.

²² These hashtags reference the tragic racial riots that occurred in Kuala Lumpur on May 13, 1969, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of people.

²³ This movie, which depicts a historical Malay fighter's struggle against colonial powers, had previously sparked heated discussions among Malaysia's minority communities due to its negative portrayal of certain groups, including Sikhs and Chinese.



Source: X.com/ABIMalaysia (@abimalaysia, November 22, 2022)

Image 5.1 ABIM's *#kitakawan* Campaign Call

ABIM-3 shared the background and motivation behind it. As s/he stated, the campaign was a response to the post-election hate campaign on social media against non-Malays and the negative impact of the film *Mat Kilau* on non-Malay and non-Muslim relationships in Malaysia. Nevertheless, even during the *#kitakawan* social media campaign the antagonist against whom the campaign created is not specified as can be seen in the post shared above. As ABIM-3 confirmed, ABIM had never issued a statement against *Mat Kilau* and its effects on Malay-non-Malay relations; they chose to counter it in an indirect way. In a similar vein, ABIM-4 discussed why this campaign was needed and necessary.

This movie [*Mat Kilau*] had a very bad impact on our non-Malay brothers, especially the Sikh, because they were portrayed badly in the movie.

[Portraying them as] killing people, killing Malay people in the film is very wrong. So, the hashtag program was launched, initiated by ABIM, and supported by the IKRAM brothers to counter the effects. We are not going to counter the *Mat Kilau* because what can we do? The damage has already been done. We needed to find a solution for the Malaysian people. That's why the *#kitakawan* came, and after that, we are engaging more with our brothers here in Malaysia as well to promote the unity and stability of *Bangsa Malaysia*. So, *Bangsa Malaysia* came up once more encountering the effect of *Mat Kilau* (ABIM-4, personal communication, 11 March 2023).

In the case of the *Mat Kilau* movie and its repercussions, ABIM's indirect addressing through the *#kitakawan* campaign demonstrates a strategic decision to avoid direct and open confrontation with social actors promoting ideologies they deem antagonistic. This approach shows that they avoided direct and open confrontation with the antagonists to prevent alienating potential allies or escalating tensions in this example.

In addition to the "extremist" others, another *other* is the liberal groups, which can be considered closer to the antagonist end of the spectrum. It should be noted that in every interview I had with the ABIM informants, they expressed their willingness and efforts to communicate and collaborate with various social groups in Malaysian society. However, as ABIM-6 explained, their encounters with the liberal groups sometimes resulted in disappointment for being treated as unequal partners or, at times, as mere tokens. As ABIM-6 stated,

[...] to my experience working with Islamists, [even though] they openly criticise and attack us, but they never go to the extent of denying our formal position in such organisations. On the contrary, with liberals, their actions seem arbitrary, and often, they perceive us merely as a token. They require a Malay-Muslim organisation that supports them, yet they consistently treat us as unequal partners. This is why we have decided not to continue working with them. [...] We still engage with them independently, clarifying that we are not formally part of their setting. If they wish to engage, the option is open (ABIM-6, personal communication, May 17, 2023).

The informant expressed their disappointment with the liberal groups for their lack of respect for ABIM.²⁴ For him, the liberal groups do not see ABIM as a legitimate partner. Interestingly, however, the informant contrasted this experience with other Islamic movement activists, who described them as more open to criticism and respectful of ABIM's position within the organisation, even if disagreements existed. This is evident in the agonistic relationship between Islamic movements.

Although ABIM's political Islam interpretation is very similar to IKRAM, while different from ISMA to a large extent, they share the same ideals and goals to achieve, which is the Islamisation of Malaysia. As a fieldwork observation, ABIM's informants shared that although at times they have different approaches, they see other movements as friends, not enemies. It should also be noted that ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA have collaboration in some areas, such as the Islamic civil society committees. Therefore, their relationship is closer to agonistic *other*: legitimate *others* with competing interests, values, identities, and methodologies.

Nevertheless, the agonistic relationship does not refer to friendship. It signifies a competitive coexistence where ABIM and other Islamic movements position themselves as legitimate *others* rather than adversaries. The competition among these Islamic movements is not solely based on ideological differences but also on strategic positioning

²⁴ I also received similar complaints from some other Islamists in our informal conversations. These individuals, while not affiliated with any specific Islamic movement, expressed the difficulties they faced in their interactions with the liberal groups. Although they cooperate with liberal groups on various initiatives, they claimed that they have often felt that some of the liberal groups tend to look down on them. On the other hand, some of the civil society actors, who are closer to the liberal political ideologies, expressed scepticism about the sincerity of the Islamic movements and their use of terminology such as human rights, equality, or democracy, which they see as a cover for their Islamist agenda. For instance, from Expert-5 stated that "Currently we have the CSO [civil society organisations] platform for reforms, originally. I mean, the Liberal says [questions that] opening this platform to them [Ikram and ABIM] to join. We allow them to our space because we believe that this is an inclusive space. So, whoever believe in the same cause, for example, democracy and human rights, we should include them as much as possible. But the problem is that, for them, when they included in our space, they really embrace it. But to include us into their space is a no go. They never initiate a public dialogue with us." (Expert-5, personal communication, April 7, 2023). As these interviews indicated, there are clear signs of a crucial trust issue between the Islamic movements and the liberal groups.

within broader societal contexts. In this respect, Expert-3's statement clearly illustrates this competition.

ABIM is very special because we [ABIM] are also members of the Malaysian Youth Council, where all kinds of associations [such as] Chinese, Christians, and Buddhists, are there, and we are there. Not IKRAM, ISMA or HALUAN. Only ABIM. That is why our members are more grounded. We understand the society because we are already engaged through all kinds of different organisations. From religious to racial, we are able to comprehend them better compared to the three of them because they do not have access to the Malaysian Youth Council (Expert-3, personal communication, August 9, 2023).

Expert-3 highlights the ABIM's unique position in the Malaysian Youth Council and emphasises its membership in a diverse council that includes various associations representing different religions and ethnicities. Stressing its diverse engagement and suggesting that other Islamic movements lack such access, he frames ABIM as a more comprehensive and inclusive organisation. This not only distinguishes the ABIM from other Islamic movements but also frames it as a unique and necessary movement in the broader socio-political landscape.

5.2.3 Defining the Audiences

The audiences of ABIM cover a broad spectrum ranging from Muslims towards the non-Muslims in Malaysia. In the analysis, the main audience categories that were particularly evident were Muslim and non-Muslim individuals, as well as various civil society alliances in which ABIM collaborates. As a *dakwah* movement, ABIM's biggest audience is Muslims in Malaysia. ABIM's effort to frame Muslims as the primary audience aligns with the overarching frame of *dakwah*, which emphasises the dissemination of Islamic principles. Supporting a vision of national identity which comprises all ethnic identities, ABIM does not distinguish Malay and other ethnic Muslims as their audience. The deliberate avoidance of distinguishing Malay and other

ethnic groups as separate audiences reflects an effort to transcend ethnic boundaries within the discourse.

Additionally, ABIM also targets non-Muslims as their audience. While non-Muslims cannot be members of ABIM due to the legal restrictions on non-Muslims registering with a Muslim organisation, I was informed that ABIM informally invites and organises events or programmes with non-Muslim Malaysians (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023). The openness of ABIM towards non-Muslims is also related to their core value, “*lita’arafu*”, which sees non-Muslims as an opportunity for spreading their *dakwah* message by establishing good relationships with them. The inclusion of non-Muslims in ABIM’s audience is a notable discursive move. The concept of “*lita’arafu*” plays a central role, framing non-Muslims not only as potential recipients of *dakwah* but also as individuals with whom ABIM seeks to build positive relationships. ABIM was the first initiator of inviting non-Muslims to the mosques by providing them guidance and proper clothes for their visit so that they could observe and experience Muslims while they are praying, as ABIM-3 shared below,

The non-Muslims were saying that they had never entered the mosque. We are always said that they [Muslims] are preaching hatred about the non-Muslims inside the mosque. So, what we say to them is, “Rather than what you heard as a third-party hearsay, please come to the mosque and see yourself what we are doing inside.” (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023).

Along with non-Muslim individuals as an audience, ABIM informants shared that ABIM aims to establish strong relationships with other social and religious groups on various platforms. Among them, ABIM is active in the Malaysian Youth Council and the Friendship Group of Interreligious Services (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023; Expert-3, personal communication, August 9, 2023). As ABIM-3 states, through these kinds of networks, ABIM creates strong connections with a broader audience.

We have a very strong connection with the Friendship Group of Interreligious Services, whereby inside this group and this group, we have the top leaders of other religions. We have a top leader of the Syrian Church in Malaysia. We have top leaders of Buddhists. Even [more], we have the Dalai Lama branch of Malaysia. We have a very strong connection (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023).

In terms of audiences, involving in civil society alliances and engaging with diverse groups has several benefits for ABIM. Along with enabling ABIM to reach wider audiences, it enhances credibility and creates opportunities for mutual support, information exchange, and joint initiatives. Since these platforms promote dialogue and mutual understanding, they also make a feasible environment for spreading their *dakwah* message.

5.3 Malaysia Ikram Movement (IKRAM)

As the second oldest *dakwah* movement in Malaysia, IKRAM is strongly associated with the ideology of the MB and declares itself the official branch of the MB (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022). Due to this ideological and organisational connection, IKRAM's religious approaches are heavily influenced by MB. However, its political approaches have been undergoing transformation since its establishment. Following the split of ISMA in 2008, JIM experienced an organisational crisis and embarked on establishing a new identity. This section investigates this new identity—of the self and the *other*, as well as the identification of the audience of the movement.

5.3.1 Defining the *Self*: The Protagonist

Categorised within the pluralist and modernist/reformist quadrant, IKRAM is committed to societal transformation through holistic, inclusive, and ethical approaches. Positioning itself as a bridge between Islamic principles and Malaysia's diverse society, the movement emphasises a pluralistic vision of Islam that aligns with Malaysia's multicultural framework. The subsections below analyses IKRAM's historical and

organisational development, shedding light on the transformative journey that shaped its identity. Additionally, its core values and ideas are explored to better understand IKRAM's construction of the identity of the *self* as a movement.

5.3.1.1 History and Organisation

IKRAM, which was previously known as JIM, was founded in the 1990 by students who went overseas for their education and met with the revivalist Islamic ideologies. The movement has its roots in the Malay-Muslim student movements, such as the Islamic Representative Council (IRC), which was established in the UK (Maszlee Malik, 2012, p. 9). While previously known as IRC, then JIM, IKRAM is Malaysia's second oldest Islamic movement. Having over 27,000 members, 118 branches across Malaysia and 16 branches overseas, IKRAM has 58 schools and 33 institutions ranging from youth organisations, professional organisations, and foundations for *dakwah* and welfare activities, such as Hidayah Center and MyCare.²⁵ Along with a very active women's wing, IKRAM also increases their activities to attract the younger generation (IKRAM-6, personal communication, 17 September 2023). While having Malaysian Harmony Youth Association (*Persatuan Belia Harmoni Malaysia*, HARMONI) for the university students, IKRAM has established its youth wing, IKRAM MUDA, in 2023. As stated by IKRAM-1, IKRAM is experiencing growth both in membership and influence.

[...] Now, we are expanding. We do not have just members, but we also start to build our influence with mass influence. So, we start to recruit supporters, sympathisers, volunteers, and donors, different. Via maybe MyCare, also [through] all of our schools. We have 58 schools now and they also have their crowd. So, generally, IKRAM members are everywhere. Sometimes, they are members; sometimes, they are not. So, they are everywhere. They are just around (IKRAM-1, personal communication, 11 January 2023).

²⁵ The statistics are presented in IKRAM's official website. For details, see <https://ikram.org.my/kenali-kami/>. Accessed 24 October 2023.

This quote reveals significant insights into how IKRAM is positioning itself within the broader socio-political landscape of Malaysia. IKRAM-1's statement highlights IKRAM's efforts to build a broader influence through mass engagement. These efforts require diverse groups and individuals to unify under a common political project. Moreover, he stated the presence of IKRAM extends beyond formal membership, which indicates the fluidity of IKRAM's influence and identity. This fluidity is also reinforced by the statement, "IKRAM members are everywhere," which can be regarded as a way of constructing a dominant narrative.

IKRAM's history is notable in terms of showing an example of a social movement disbanding. While it is contested according to the informant from ISMA, for the IKRAM informants, both IKRAM and ISMA were a single movement under the banner of JIM. The background of this transformation is crucial to understand the competition between IKRAM and ISMA. IKRAM informants and experts noted a number of reasons for the split of ISMA. For IKRAM-3, for example, the main reason for disagreements was rooted in the different Islamic approaches between UK and US graduates and Egypt graduates.

When they [Malay students went overseas for education] came back to Malaysia to form *Ikhwan-ul Muslimin* [in Malaysia], there were batches of *ustaz* [male teacher] and *ustazah* [female teacher] from Egypt. These people have a very black-and-white approach because they came from this environment of Egypt [in which] "either you are with us or fighting us." Another huge group came back from the UK and the US. They come from a very diverse environment. They developed the Islamic understanding under the *Ikhwan-ul Muslimin* leaders who lived in the UK (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022).

Accordingly, UK and US graduates adopted a more inclusive and pluralist MB approach due to the environment in which they were exposed, whilst graduates from Egyptian universities had a stricter and more exclusive version of the MB approach because of Egyptian MB's Islamic approaches. Having two distinct Islamic approaches and understanding of the *dakwah* eventually led one of the camps to split from JIM.

Following the disbandment, JIM underwent a new branding process in 2009 and changed its name to *Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia* (Malaysian IKRAM Organisation), also known as IKRAM.

The other two informants, Expert-5 and an expert who requested anonymity for her/his particular statement, explained that the main reason for the split was the marginalisation and side-lining ISMA leaders in JIM. According to her/him, Abdullah Zaik and his friends were defeated in the election and side-lined by the other JIM members.²⁶

They had internal elections in MB-like organisations. In elections, they start to compete. There are factions, always. So, these Egypt-educated and UK-educated [groups] had some sort of factionalisms. Abdullah Zaik, if I'm not mistaken, was the head of the *dakwah* or the *tarbiyya* sector. To all the younger members, he was their Ustaz; he was their chief. He and his group within the Shura Council of JIM were all isolated or defeated in the elections. Some 20 members, senior leaders, suddenly all of them were moved out. [...] He [Abdullah Zaik] had influence in the *tarbiyya* sector; he was the chairman of Aman Palestine, ISMA, and another group. So, he decided to start his own group. He said, "OK, good luck to your group." The problem for many of these JIM leaders is that their children followed Abdullah (Anonymous, personal communication, date of the interview is omitted due to protect her/his anonymity).

As this quotation reveals, this rupture stems from ideological differences and power struggles between graduates educated in different contexts (e.g., Egypt and the UK). Furthermore, it also demonstrates how IKRAM's identity is not fixed but rather constantly negotiated through social struggles. However, the repercussions of this split were painful for JIM in many ways. As IKRAM-3 describes it, JIM faced significant financial and human resource losses following the ISMA's departure.

That process costs us a lot of energy, emotion, and even friends. For example, in my class, we divided it into two because some of the teachers were subscribing to the ISMA paradigm but working in IKRAM school at that time. Also, if you have heard about Aman Palestine, for humanitarian aid for

²⁶ Although I could not find a document confirming this split process, a similar information was given by one of the informants who had witnessed the split process firsthand through his/her family. According to his/her, JIM members were mostly UK and US graduates, and they looked down on local graduate members (Expert-5, personal communication, April 7, 2023).

Palestine. It was a foundation under JIM back then, but many of the members shifted to ISMA, and they took away this from IKRAM. So IKRAM formed another one, Aksa-i Sherif. We had a hospital in Bangi, Az-Zahra Hospital. That was under JIM, which had been taken away by ISMA. So, we found another hospital, An-Nur Hospital. So that process happened in many areas, even in schools (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022).

As the IKRAM informants noted, IKRAM was severely affected by this split by losing some of their most important institutions, but the most significant loss was their young students. As IKRAM-1 noted, they lost an entire generation to ISMA, which means a considerable loss of human capital for IKRAM. Some overseas branches of IKRAM will have to be built from scratch because they have all gone to ISMA (IKRAM-1, personal communication, January 11, 2023).

However, IKRAM's efforts to rebuild the movement after the split, such as rebranding, re-establishing the overseas branches and founding new institutions, point to the movement's attempt to reassert its identity. Thus, the history of JIM and IKRAM, and the split of ISMA, is noteworthy to underline regarding the complexity internal dynamics of Islamic movements. Although both IKRAM and ISMA adhere to the same MB ideology, factors such as culture, environment, and educational background lead to competing interpretations of Islam within the same movement and have led to their splits.

5.3.1.2 Core Values and Ideas

The data analysis indicated that the core values of IKRAM is *dakwah* and *rahmah* (compassion) concept. Similar to ABIM and ISMA, IKRAM's first and foremost core value is *dakwah*. According to IKRAM-4, IKRAM aims to introduce the Islamic ideology of the MB to Malaysia, adapting it to the local context (IKRAM-4, personal communication, January 6, 2023). Through this lens, IKRAM situates itself within the broader Islamic discourse while distinguishing itself from other groups like ABIM and ISMA in Malaysia.

Defined as a *dakwah* movement, the primary goals of IKRAM are to achieve the four pillars: *dakwah*, *tarbiyya* (education)²⁷, welfare of Malaysian society, and reform (*islah*). For IKRAM, *dakwah* refers to “spread the true understanding of Islam to the entire Malaysian community” (see, the official website of IKRAM <https://ikram.org.my/kenali-kami/>), for *tarbiyya*, an education programme for developing its members religiously and worldly (IKRAM-5, personal communication, August 27, 2023). As shared by the IKRAM informants, in terms of *tarbiyya* programs, IKRAM follows the MB’s syllabus and methodology while revising them every five years to add new content to make the message stronger and contextual (IKRAM-5, personal communication, August 27, 2023; IKRAM-6, personal communication, September 17, 2023).

IKRAM’s *dakwah* understanding consists of two major categories: socio-political and religious. From the socio-political perspective, IKRAM prioritises the gradual Islamisation of society in line with MB’s *dakwah* perspective. This process begins with the individual, extends to the family unit, encompasses broader societal structures, and ultimately influences the state (IKRAM-6, personal communication, September 17, 2023). By focusing on Islamising these fundamental pillars of society, IKRAM seeks to transform Malaysia in accordance with its Islamic principles. However, IKRAM’s approach to *dakwah*, or Islamic propagation, sets it apart from other Islamic movements, such as ISMA, which also adhere to the MB’s principles but adopt a very nationalist version. Unlike the more exclusive approach of some Islamic movements, IKRAM embraces a pluralist understanding of *dakwah*, aiming to engage with diverse segments of society and foster dialogue and cooperation across different religious and cultural backgrounds (IKRAM-1, personal communication, January 11, 2023).

²⁷ For an extensive background on JIM’s *tarbiyyah* approach, see, Malik et al., 2016)

IKRAM's emphasis on *rahmah* which underlines to inclusivity and building a society that "works together very well" transcends mere theoretical aspirations. Unlike some nationalist-Islamist groups, IKRAM informants stressed that they see non-Muslims in Malaysia as an opportunity and work with them on different occasions (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022; IKRAM-2, personal communication, January 13, 2023; IKRAM-4, personal communication, January 6, 2023). In the following quotation, IKRAM-2 from IKRAM elaborates on their vision for Malaysia and how it aligns with their pluralist *dakwah* approach.

Malaysia has that mix; it is engineered in a way that is a heterogenous society where there's a big mix of Malay which is Muslim, and then a big mix of Chinese and Indian. So, architecture in Malaysia is probably closer to *Madinah* [society], where you have a mix of that integration, so that's the fabric of the society. By having a vision of *Madinah* society, we can work with each other very well. Not just working but a society that promotes growth for each other and for Malaysia as well. All these values are aligned with the Islamic values. At the end of the day, what we envision for Malaysia is, you have a society that works with each other very well, and everyone in this society—if not everyone 100%, maybe a majority of the people—are always promoting growth and are always doing good to other people. When you see a society like that, you see Islam. So, that's probably how I vision what IKRAM wants to do, where IKRAM wants to go (IKRAM-2, personal communication, January 13, 2023).

This statement is a good example of showcasing the core values and ideas of IKRAM. Firstly, the quotation positions Malaysia as a unique society built on the "mix" of Malay, Chinese, and Indian populations. Rather than signifying a particular ethnic group, IKRAM acknowledges that non-Malays are a component of heterogeneous Malaysian society. Second, the informant employed a frame bridging strategy by utilising the *Madinah* society as a historical reference to the legitimacy of their vision. By drawing parallels between the two, the informant articulated positive associations with the principles and values associated with the *Madinah* society. Third, the phrases "working together very well", "doing good," and "promoting growth", which underline

cooperation, social cohesion and social development, align with Islamic values. From this perspective, Islam and its values are portrayed as the common good for all Malaysians.

In an article published in IKRAM's official website by Atriza Umar²⁸ (2023a) explains the role of *rahmah* concept in IKRAM's discourse by underlining the needs of fostering a harmonious and pluralistic society within Malaysia's multicultural landscape. According to Atriza Umar, Islam is inherently a religion that brings *Rahmatan lil 'alamin*—mercy to all the worlds—and its followers are envisioned as a moderate *ummah* (middle, just, and chosen community). This ideal *ummah* is expected to embody attitudes and behaviours reflective of Islam's core principles: being humane, inclusive, tolerant, and committed to spreading goodness.

In reality, Islam as a religion that brings mercy to all the worlds (*Rahmatan lil alamin*) and its followers as a moderate *ummah* (middle, just and chosen *ummah*). The best for the *ummah* is to realise the attitudes and behaviours of Islam that are humane, inclusive, tolerant and spread goodness. In the context of Malaysia, where the society is heterogeneous in terms of customs, language, culture and even religion, then Islam is a *Rahmatan* (lit., compassionate) and *wasatan* (lit., moderate) that is supported by its followers as the majority of the population in this country. Therefore, it is appropriate for them to appear as an entity that is a protector of diversity and pluralism (Atriza Umar, 2023a).

As further argued by Atriza Umar, Malaysia's ethnic and religious diversity sets it apart from Middle Eastern Muslim countries, making its experience distinctive. Atriza Umar highlights this uniqueness, noting that "This uniqueness also influences the appreciation and collective experience of Muslims towards the plurality of local religions and cultures (local wisdom). This is evidence of the uniqueness of Muslims that Muslims in the Middle East do not have" (Atriza Umar, 2023a).

²⁸ Atriza Umar is Communication and Media Department Officer of IKRAM.

Beyond engaging with non-Muslim groups in Malaysia, IKRAM's *rahmah* approach is extended to engage with diverse Malaysian groups as much as possible, such as liberal NGOs, LGBTQ groups, and non-Muslim NGOs as a part of their *dakwah* mission. As IKRAM-3 stated,

Generally, as an IKRAM policy, we sit with everybody. For example, in Malaysia, we have [in dialogue with] so many groups that are labelled as liberals like Sisters in Islam. But IKRAM will always try to sit and talk with them. For that, ISMA always attacks [us] because we want to have that dialogue. For example, ISMA is so against Chinese groups or Chinese school groups. IKRAM engages and has programs with them to try to understand their point of view and try to explain our point of view rather than confronting them (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022).

IKRAM's approach to *dakwah* emphasises dialogue, mutual understanding, and peaceful engagement, contributing to a more cohesive and inclusive Malaysian society. Although both movements follow the MB's approach to *dakwah*, IKRAM's *dakwah* differs from ISMA's in its attitude towards non-Muslims and various social groups. In fact, all these three movements have a somewhat similar Islamic ideology and advocate a conservative Islamic ideology, particularly in terms of Islamic education, *i.e.*, the *tarbiyya* of their members (IKRAM-5, personal communication, August 27, 2023). For example, IKRAM and ISMA use almost the same religious sources and texts in educating their members, such as *Usul* 20 of Hasan Al-Banna, the founder of MB, but their approaches significantly diverge when it comes to engaging with non-Muslims and other diverse groups in Malaysian society. Thus, for these movements, the major determinant of their self-identification is their political approach towards non-Muslims and other groups.

Based on the data analysis, it can be stated that IKRAM has undergone a shift towards blending its Islamic approach with a combination of local context and the principles of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and a more politically vocal stance. IKRAM informants indicated that they are gradually adopting ABIM's approach on Islam which emphasise

the role of local traditions for Malays (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022; IKRAM-1, personal communication, January 11, 2023). As IKRAM-5 noted, “We are seeing whatever ABIM is doing in some ways as more effective. So, we are learning from each other.” (Personal communication, August 27, 2023).

A key indicator of this shift is the adoption of the *wasatiyyah* concept, which is a critical element of ABIM’s discourse. In the recent statements of IKRAM’s president, the *wasatiyyah* concept was explicitly referenced as a central element of their Islamic understanding. Further analysis of IKRAM’s official website revealed that the concept of *wasatiyyah* appeared infrequently prior to 2023, but it has been used seven times since August 7, 2023, coinciding with the establishment of HIKAM—the organisation that IKRAM, ABIM, WADAH, and HALUAN founded together to fight against extremism. This surge in the use of the *wasatiyyah* concept underscores IKRAM’s evolving ideological stance and its closer alignment with ABIM’s approach to Islam. On the other hand, the growing similarity between IKRAM’s discourse and ABIM’s warrants attention, particularly in light of discourse theory and frame theory, which suggest that social movements must establish a distinct identity to effectively demonstrate their capacity to create social or political change. IKRAM’s this alignment could undermine its ability to differentiate itself and may potentially limit the movement’s capacity to construct an independent narrative.

Regarding the second shift of IKRAM, the movement’s relationship with politics has been complexed to conceptualise since they have indecisive attitudes towards politics. While IKRAM (and JIM previously) asserted itself as apolitical, the members have

actively taken positions in various political parties, such as PAS, PKR, and BERSATU.²⁹ Furthermore, IKRAM has been strongly associated with AMANAH since some of the critical IKRAM figures were among the founding members of the party (Maszlee Malik, 2017). However, IKRAM has not officially declared AMANAH as their representative political party. The non-partisan political stance of IKRAM is another element that distinguishes it from ABIM. As pointed out by IKRAM-2,

ABIM is more, I would say, they are more blatant. Blatant, I mean, they will clearly come out to say their support for Anwar or his party. So, they are, in the sense they are partisan. But IKRAM, we are also involved in (what was the term?) more of a citizen's politics. We are partly in the political process, but we are very clear that we are not partisan. And we cannot express any clear support for any party, and there is actually a *shura* decision [on this]. [The researcher: Although you seem to have close relations with AMANAH?] We do have a close relationship with AMANAH and also [with] all parties, but at the same time, we are also working closely with [the current] government. If other parties [become government], we will not close our gate to talk to them (IKRAM-2, personal communication, January 13, 2023).

Accordingly, IKRAM has shifted a more politically vocal stance as non-partisan position in politics. This position provides flexibility to work and negotiate with any political party. This is particularly important considering that since the 2018 General Election in Malaysia, IKRAM has been actively involved in politics and has taken part in the election process, either proposing their own candidates or campaigning for candidates they would like to support.

5.3.2 Defining the *Other*

The antagonistic and agonist “other” of IKRAM is very similar to ABIM’s. Drawing on Mouffe’s (1999b) work, we see that IKRAM strategically constructs an antagonistic *other* in the form of extremism, which is a threat that undermines Malaysia’s social

²⁹ Several notable members of IKRAM have held prominent positions within Malaysian politics. Dr Zulkifly Ahmad initially served as a Member of Parliament (MP) representing PAS. Following his departure from PAS, he played a founding role in the establishment of the AMANAH. Dr Syed Ibrahim Syed Noh is another IKRAM member who serves as an MP, currently affiliated with PKR. Dr Maszlee Malik, former Minister of Education, was a member of BERSATU and is now actively involved with PKR.

cohesion. Although extremism is identified as the main antagonist, it is not explicitly defined. IKRAM casts a wide net when defining its opponents referring to vague concept that can be filled with different meanings by different actors or situations. This ambiguity allows for flexibility, allowing IKRAM to associate different actors or ideologies with this negatively charged label and, at the same time, allow them not to confront opponents or potential *others* directly. The president of IKRAM, Badlishah Sham Baharin's statement can be given as an example, "We reject all forms of slander, excommunication among fellow Muslims, the use of harsh words, and any form of extremism and radicalism that disrupts harmony and undermines the unity of the Malaysian people." (Badlishah Sham Baharin, cited in Aishah Basaruddin, 2023).

Furthermore, IKRAM frames extremism as a national problem that needs to be eradicated through broader cooperation. As IKRAM-3 stated, they have approached ABIM for collaboration to fight against extremism and extremist movements,

[...] In our case, we [IKRAM] are now reaching towards ABIM, Anwar and other friends [to say], "Let's work together". "This is not only our problem; this is the country's problem. We need to fight these extremist movements as soon as we can, and we are open about it (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022).

As discussed in the IKRAM's history and organisation section, ISMA's disbandment from JIM created severe problems, such as losing some of the institutions and a significant number of young members. I posed the question of IKRAM members' relationships with ISMA members. According to IKRAM-3, although the relations with ISMA members among the older generation who witnessed the split were still somewhat tense, there is an evolving change with the younger generations. As shared by IKRAM-3,

[Relations with friends with ISMA are] generally good. Whenever we meet, we talk like a friend. [However] when a certain time frame [comes], for example, elections, on social media, you can see a bit of drift, [such as] attacking each other. But I think our generation is much more [relaxed]; we do not have the baggage like the elders [had]. They felt it first-hand. They

worked together first-hand. Even my friends from ISMA, their parents are IKRAM, and they are ISMA. So, these parents are from IKRAM, they founded the school, they sacrificed, and [now] their sons and their daughters are ISMA, attacking the school, attacking the institution, and they feel like “How dare you!” (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022).

Comparing the older generations’ perceptions of ISMA with those of younger generations of IKRAM, this quotation reveals the changes in ISMA’s position on the spectrum of antagonism and agonism. While in the older generation’s discourse, there is an apparent victimhood narrative,³⁰ younger generations carry less historical baggage, potentially allowing for more collaboration despite differences. Nevertheless, the differences still cause contestations between the two groups.

IKRAM-2, who is a former ISMA member and then joined IKRAM, found the difference between ISMA and IKRAM to be only methodological, while the core ideology is identical. Therefore, she shared that there is no enmity towards ISMA.

[Relations with ISMA] I think it’s more of a *hilaf* [disagreement]. There is probably that group of people saying that reform should be this way, and [another] group of people think that reform should be the [other] way. Like it’s not [enmity]. I think the fundamental understanding among the two groups is probably the same, but [the disagreement] is how to achieve that. [The researcher: So, is it a kind of a methodology problem?] Exactly. [...] [For my husband and I] probably IKRAM way of doing things resonates more than ISMA (IKRAM-2, personal communication, 13 January 2023).

Thus, considering the statements of IKRAM-2 and IKRAM-3, ISMA can be positioned towards the agonistic part of the spectrum. With ABIM, on the other hand, IKRAM has had much closer relationships in recent years. As noted by IKRAM-3, “We have a huge difference with ISMA that is obvious. But we work closer and closer with ABIM. Just two days before the election, IKRAM and ABIM organised an event called a declaration by Islamic Movement for general election.” (IKRAM-3, personal

³⁰ This impression is based on personal observation of the researcher and derived from the interviews with the IKRAM informants.

communication, December 1, 2022).³¹ For IKRAM, therefore, ABIM is much closer to the agonistic end comparing to ISMA's position.

IKRAM's construction of the "other" demonstrates a complex and multi-layered approach within their discourse. While "extremism" becomes a clearly antagonistic "other", their relationships with ISMA and ABIM reveal a spectrum from agonistic tensions to potential collaboration. This strategic positioning highlights how IKRAM defines itself through both opposition and alignment, seeking to present a unique and influential identity. The generational shifts, as revealed in the quotations, further suggest the subjectivity of IKRAM's identity and discourse towards *others*. Ultimately, by highlighting these complexities, we see how IKRAM navigates Malaysia's diverse religious-political landscape, seeking to solidify its position through carefully articulated relationships with allies and adversaries alike.

5.3.3 Defining the Audiences

For IKRAM, their audience has a wide ranging from non-Muslim Malaysians to Muslim-Malaysians. As a *dakwah* movement, the significant audience consists of Muslims Malaysians. Through various institutions, education programmes, community, and welfare services, IKRAM aims to serve their Muslim audience.

Non-Malay and non-Muslims are another compound in the audiences of IKRAM. Having a Hidayah Centre for *dakwah* to non-Muslims, IKRAM also emphasises having

³¹ It should be noted here, while there are collaborations between IKRAM and ABIM, some of the experts noted an ongoing rivalry between them in the politics. Following the premiership of Anwar Ibrahim, the division of financial and managerial positions, reportedly, cause tensions between them. However, since this information is not confirmed, it remains only as a speculation.

mutual relations with non-Muslim and non-Malay civil society actors, organisations, and religious institutions.³² As IKRAM-2 pointed out,

[The researcher: I was told that IKRAM promotes dialogue between different social groups, such as Chinese organisations and LGBT groups. Is that true?] Yes, because one of the 12 characteristics of the *Negara Rahmah* is unity. Unity and integration. To achieve unity, the first thing [to do] is *Lita'arafu*; you need to understand each other where the other is coming from. To understand each other, you need to speak with them. We, as Muslims, want to understand the non-Muslims, and at the same time, we also want the non-Muslims to understand us (IKRAM-2, personal communication, January 13, 2023).

As a result, IKRAM's approach as a *dakwah* movement focuses on both Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia, which indicates a multifaceted strategy in engaging with its audience. While the primary focus remains on serving the Malay-Muslim community through various educational, community, and welfare initiatives, IKRAM also extends its outreach to non-Malay and non-Muslim groups. In order to reinforce mutual understanding and dialogue between IKRAM and non-Muslims, IKRAM operates institutions such as the *Hidayah* Centre. This way, IKRAM's pursue their *dakwah* activities. Through these efforts, IKRAM aims to realise their Islamisation of the society goal and seeks to build bridges with other social groups in an inclusive manner.

5.4 Muslim Solidarity Front (ISMA)

Established as a student movement in 1997, ISMA has evolved into a prominent Islamic organisation within Malaysia, currently boasting a membership of approximately 20,000 across the country (ISMA-5, personal communication, 10 August 2023). This section provides a detailed examination of the identities, namely the identity of the *self*, the *other* and the audience that ISMA constructed.

³² As a fieldwork observation, I noticed that IKRAM informants were proudly sharing the dialogue initiatives with various different groups they have been into. My impression was that the number of different groups they have been interacting was an indicator of how influential they are in the civil society arena in Malaysia for IKRAM informants.

5.4.1 Defining the *Self*: The Protagonist

Categorised within the nationalist-traditionalist quadrant, ISMA's identity of the *self* revolves around the guardianship of Malay-Muslims and Malaysia's Islamic and cultural heritage. ISMA diverges from global Islamic movements by intricately synthesising local historical, cultural, and socio-political facets with their Islamic ideologies. The movement emphasises its defender role against perceived threats to the Malay-Muslim community, including liberal ideologies, secularism, and non-Malay dominance. The following subsections examine the two fundamental aspects of ISMA's identity of the *self*: its historical and organisational development and its core values and ideas, which define its ideological foundation and drive its agenda. These elements illustrate how ISMA constructs its identity as a protector and promoter of a Malay-centric Islamic vision.

5.4.1.1 History and the Organisation

The structure of ISMA's organisation scheme is almost identical to other Islamic movements. Apart from the main body, there is a women's wing, Wanita ISMA; a student wing for university students, National Islamic Youth Association (*Persatuan Belia Islam Nasional*, PEMBINA); the Shura Council for *ulamas*; and family development division (ISMA-2, personal communication, March 4, 2023). ISMA has 47 branches across Malaysia and also overseas branches in many countries, including the UK, Australia, and Egypt. Moreover, there are associated organisations with ISMA, such as *Aman Palestin*, which is a charity organisation for people in Palestine as well as Syria and Lebanon, Az-Zahara Hospital, media company TV Pertiwi, and allied political party BERJASA (ISMA-2, personal communication, March 4, 2023).

While established in 1997, it is contested by IKRAM informants and some experts that ISMA was not established as a different movement but as a student branch of JIM (IKRAM-5, personal communication, August 27, 2023; IKRAM-3, personal

communication, December 1, 2022; Expert-2, personal communication, August 4, 2022; Expert-5, personal communication, April 7, 2023). Nevertheless, ISMA-1 told another story by highlighting that ISMA was always a different movement on its own (personal communication, January 26, 2023).³³ According to her/him, ISMA and JIM were always separate movements while doing programs and activities together. As s/he shared, the relationship between ISMA and JIM was no further than collaboration.

Because they [JIM and ISMA activists] were friends when they were studying there. [...] They did Islamic activities together, not more than that. Actually, at that moment, there was JIM and there was also ISMA. Even though at the same time, they somehow had meetings together [to] discuss about Islamic knowledge, discuss about the state, discuss about the political future of Malaysia, they somehow did meet and discuss among themselves. But in terms of activities, they planned [to focus on a] different segment of society (ISMA-1, personal communication, January 26, 2023).

Accordingly, s/he denies ISMA's position as a student movement was operating under JIM until ISMA split from JIM. Further, s/he explains that the splits from JIM to join ISMA happened due to these JIM activists' disagreements with JIM's ideology.

What I am telling you is the official history of both organisations. Although the one you mentioned that split is actually within the JIM itself, there were people who were in this agreement, not agreeing with what actually JIM was doing. Because somehow, in their [ISMA activists] opinions, even though JIM was heavily influenced by the teachings of the MB, they were reading MB, but they were somehow trapped within the Western discourse. Maybe because of the influence of where they are studying during [their education] in the UK and the US and the people they are involved with. So, it is actually a reflection of what is also happening in the Muslim world. I mean, there are some Muslims saying that we should uphold Islam in our own way. This is one type, and then there is another type saying that we should uphold Islam, which is adapted to the modern, liberal, moderate type, and then there is another type saying that be exclusive and leave all the society and do whatever you want. I mean, the Muslim world is like that. Malaysia is actually a reflection of what is happening [in the Muslim world]. They are trying to

³³ Regarding the history of ISMA and IKRAM and their split, I could not find any official document from either side. However, as a fieldwork observation, the history related to JIM or IKRAM mostly left out in the ISMA informants' answers. None of the informants mentioned JIM during the interview unless they were asked directly. I also observed that the informants were not very comfortable to discuss JIM or IKRAM's place in the history of ISMA. The story from the JIM (IKRAM) part was confirmed by other informants who were witnessed the separation process such as Expert-5. As s/he shared that through her/his parents' close contact with these Islamic movements, the story of IKRAM was accurate. Her/his response to the ISMA's story seemed surprised, "That is how they forget? They try to erase the history! But I know they were together with JIM. I know their history." (Personal interview. April 7, 2023.)

respond. How should we, *islah* [lit., reform], reform our society according to Islam? So, the one you said that ISMA split away from JIM is the one who does not agree with the way JIM is theoretically building their worldview (ISMA-1, personal communication, January 26, 2023).

While the common ideal among Islamic movements is to uphold Islam in their country, the methodology or the appropriate path to Islamic reforms varies widely. Nevertheless, the informant's perception towards JIM should be noted. As s/he stated, "they were somehow trapped within the Western discourse," and "there is another type saying that we should uphold Islam which is adapted to the modern, liberal, moderate one type", reveals how the ISMA informant applies the logic of difference.³⁴ This concept emphasises distinctions and boundaries between identities or ideologies to create a unique position for oneself. In this case, ISMA distinguishes itself from JIM by rejecting JIM's perceived alignment with Western liberal and modernist discourses. On the contrary, ISMA seeks to uphold a purer, more traditional form of Islam, unpolluted by Western influence. ISMA's self-identity is elaborated more in the following section, which focuses on core values and beliefs.

5.4.1.2 Core Values and Ideas

ISMA defines itself as a *dakwah* movement rather than an ethno-nationalist Malay movement. Despite claiming to represent all Muslims in Malaysia, their ideology is a combination of Islamist and ethno-nationalist approaches. ISMA relies on the conflation of the "Malay" and "Muslim" identities within Malaysia and aligns their *dakwah* mission with the defence of the Malay privileges and advocating for the preservation of the Malay language and customs. For Malays, as the owner of Malaysia, it is a must to defend the

³⁴ Similar statements can be found in ISMA documents in a more tacit way rather than directly targeting ABIM and IKRAM (see e.g., Abdullah Zaik, 2018b). ISMA pejoratively refers to Muslims closer to liberal ideology as "liberals". This usage is also common among the conservative political elite (see, Saleem, 2021).

Malay agenda and the position of Islam, as argued by Abdullah Zaik Abdul Rahman, a former president and chief and the ideologue of ISMA.

Historically, in short, God gave all races a land. India has land, China has land, and likewise, other nations have their homeland. So, Malays also have a homeland; we have a sovereign border. We Malays have an identity. Therefore, it is not possible that people who fight for Islam do not want to raise the Malay agenda. [...] The Malays, as the original inhabitants of Malaya, are the ones who should be given the responsibility of bearing and restoring Islamic sovereignty (Abdullah Zaik, 2022a).

Although declaring itself an apolitical Islamic movement, ISMA has been at the centre of politics since its registration as a non-governmental organisation in 2008. Following the emergence of a reformist strand in Malaysian politics in 1998, new political actors entered the political arena and competed intensely (Embong, 2016). ISMA was one of these actors that gained significant recognition. Since the 2018 General Election, ISMA has played an essential role in discrediting PKR during the political power struggle between the ruling Malay nationalist party UMNO, the pluralist PKR, and the Islamist PAS (Ahmad Fauzi & Razali, 2023).

This narrative parallels early Malay nationalism discourses, where fears of losing their homeland to outsiders were pronounced (Cheah, 1984). Echoing this discourse, ISMA draws a line between Malays and others by emphasising the ownership of the land that gives the Malays the right to rule it. While ethnocentrism or tribal royalty (*asabiyyah*) has been condemned by some Malaysian Islamists due to its “evil influences” (Farish Noor, 2003), Abdullah Zaik contends that “Malay *asabiyyah* means the struggle of the Malay nation to defend the rights and role of the Malays as a Muslim nation and to provide them with leadership and guidance”, therefore *asabiyyah* is not in contradiction with Islamic law.

While ISMA has an impact on the political struggles, it has not transformed and established a political party. Nevertheless, as stated by ISMA-3, ISMA has a clear

methodology and philosophy on how an Islamic state should be, that other Islamic movements do not have.

I was in the UK many years ago. I was a student there. I could not find any movement that has a complete idea about what the Islamic State is and how it should be governed. How should we educate our people? From all that perspective—and this is where I think the uniqueness of ISMA—we had a very clear view of how we should develop our state from various perspectives. We believe if we implement this, even Malaysia can be—of course cannot be a superpower—but we can—to a certain extent—play a very important role in the geopolitical world, geopolitics. I think we can do that. We have that methodology. We have that thinking we have, I would say, the philosophy on how to develop a country. So, that is the uniqueness of ISMA which I could not find in any Islamic movement (ISMA-3, personal communication, March 16, 2023).

ISMA-3 emphasises that ISMA has unique features that other movements do not have. As s/he further argued, “They (other movements) are basically service-oriented. That means you know, teaching people *du’a* [prayings], to read Quran, teaching people about fasting, zakat and do some, you know, social activities.” (Personal communication, March 16, 2023).

ISMA constructs a struggle between Malays and other ethnic groups, particularly the Malaysian Chinese and Indians, to defend their land and rights. In this struggle, ISMA posits itself as a warrior (*pejuang*, in Malay language) while other Malay-Muslim social and political actors remain unconcerned. Therefore, as Abdullah Zaik stated, ISMA claims to be the sole champion of this cause:

After the campaign we made [referring to the ‘Malays Unite Islam Sovereign’ campaign], the Malay fighters are now confident to talk about the Malay agenda. That's an important achievement. UMNO, which is Malay in nature, does not dare to talk about Malays. As for PAS, his image is more about Islam. [...] Then [referring to the abovementioned campaign’s launch in 2010] ISMA was brave—all that because of the demands of *dakwah* according to *Shari’a* law. Our goal is to uphold Islam [which is] supported by a strong nation (Abdullah Zaik, 2022b).

ISMA discredits other Malay-Muslim political actors in the struggle for the rights of the Malays and the position of Islam in the country. ISMA portrays a ‘fighter’ (*pejuang*)

image by associating itself with Malaysia's independence warriors, and they have enough courage to defend the rights of the Malays and uphold the status of Islam. In stark contrast, the antagonists are perceived as undermining the sovereignty of the state and the status of Islam in the country, which is revealed in more detail in the next section.

5.4.2 Defining the *Other*

Comparing ABIM and IKRAM, ISMA's antagonists are more explicitly revealed. The main antagonists are primarily from the local context, which includes liberal-secular entities (Malay and non-Malay liberals are included), non-Malay communities, and Malaysian politicians. The most apparent antagonist in ISMA's discourse is Western values embodied with imperialism, colonialism, liberalism, and Christianity (Abdullah Zaik, 2014b). For ISMA, imperialism and colonialism are not finished but an ongoing project perpetuated by the liberal democratic system inherited from British rule. Fauzi Asmuni, the former president of ISMA, explains that the post-colonial state apparatus and legal frameworks maintain an inherent bias in favour of Western constructs, thus facilitating the ongoing struggle of liberal advocates.

The country inherits what the colonisers left behind especially the British colonisers. Included in what is inherited is the constitution and its laws. Although the freedom fighters in the past managed to maintain a few things related to Malays, Islam, and the people, it is clear that there are still things that give an advantage to the Western system, which is the basis of the struggle for liberalism fighters and their allies (Muhammad Fauzi Asmuni, 2022).

In the documents of ISMA, liberal democracy, liberals, democrats, and seculars have a very negative connotation, almost as an antidote to Islam and *Shari'a* law. In a similar vein, Abdullah Zaik defined liberalism in his very controversial statement as "the manifestation of Satan's struggle to mislead mankind" (Abdullah Zaik, 2014a). Here, too, Zaik draws on Islamic discourse, turns against liberalism and demonises it by associating

it with a very dreaded figure in Islam. Thus, using both historical and religious contexts, ISMA sees Western values and every other concept associated with it as their archenemy.

This demonisation extends to liberal-secular individuals within Malaysia, with non-Malay liberals being denounced as chauvinistic advocates of a secular state, while Malay liberals and certain politicians are accused of advocating a liberal agenda that is perceived as undermining the special status of Malays (Abdullah Zaik, 2018b). As articulated by Muhd Farhan Muhd Fadzil, president of ISMA Subang Jaya, such agendas are seen as contrary to Islamic principles and Malaysia's primary social contract.

[...] the once exalted unity did not last long when the principles of the Social Contract began to be set aside. Malay privileges began to be disputed. The equal rights of all nations began to be demanded based on common justice. [...] This situation has worsened not only because of the present generation who do not understand the true history of the formation of Malaysia, but also because of Malay leaders who fail to believe in the true teachings of Islam, and even non-Muslim chauvinist leaders who always fan the flames of racism (Muhd Farhan Muhd Fadzil, 2019).

Although the informants of ISMA preferred a reserved language regarding ABIM and IKRAM informants, underlining their close relationships and friendships with them, they were more critical of the movements' methodology and ideology. As ISMA-3 stated, ISMA finds these movements "very accommodative" in their relationships with non-Malays (Personal communication, March 16, 2023). Similarly, they conceptualised a type which combines Islamic values with modern and liberal values, naming it as "moderate." (ISMA-1, personal communication, January 26, 2023). ISMA's critique can be understood through the lens of discourse theory, particularly the concepts of antagonism and agonism. Highlighting the positive relationships with ABIM and IKRAM informants suggests an agonistic approach. ISMA recognises these movements as legitimate actors within the broader Islamic landscape in Malaysia, engaging with them in a respectful manner despite their ideological differences. This indicates that while ISMA disagrees

with ABIM and IKRAM's methodologies and ideologies, it does not seek to delegitimise or entirely oppose their existence.

However, ISMA's critical stance on the methodologies and ideologies of ABIM and IKRAM reveals an underlying antagonism. By labelling these movements as "very accommodative" and "moderate," for ISMA informants, they dilute Islamic values by incorporating them with liberal values, compromise Islamic principles by collaborating or in dialogue with non-Malay and non-Muslim civil society organisations, and therefore undermine ISMA's struggle. It can be argued, nevertheless, in comparing ABIM and IKRAM's view on ISMA, which is a more agonistic end of the spectrum, ISMA places ABIM and IKRAM closer to the antagonistic end.

The second antagonist of ISMA is the non-Malays, including Malaysian Chinese and Indians. Regarding non-Malays and non-Muslims, ISMA has been involved in many controversial discussions. In 2014, ISMA president Abdullah Zaik came under prosecution due to calling Malaysian Chinese and Indians trespassers (cited in Dina Murad, 2014). Although Zaik has been more cautious in his accusation tone since then, the same perspective is still persistent in ISMA. Mohammad Faezuddin (2021), chairman of an ISMA branch, call Malaysian Chinese and Indians "guests" who are given citizenships:

Time flies, the privileges given make some of the guests [referring to Malaysian Chinese and Indians] forget themselves by constantly challenging the privileges and rights of the Malays. Anything involving the privilege of the Malay people will be completely opposed. The religion of Islam, the Malay language, the position of Malay Kings are challenged one by one to change the landscape of this country. Malays are still patient especially there are still many from the guest group who are still loyal to their home country (Mohammad Faezuddin Shamsualharis, 2021).

This statement is an indication that the loyalty of Malaysian Chinese and Indians is being questioned, not to mention the very notion of being Malaysian. This inquisition is

closely related to the debate on the loyalty (*wala'*) of non-Muslims in Malaysia. The religious scholar of ISMA, Muhammad Firdaus (2019), argues that the citizenship status of non-Muslims depends on their loyalty to the country under *Shari'a* law, and the ones who are not loyal to the country are *kafir harbi* (a non-Muslim with whom war can be waged). The criterion for their loyalty is the recognition of Islamic sovereignty. Since the Malays are the Muslim owners of the country, non-Malays and non-Muslims must recognise the Malay language, culture, and values for ISMA. Therefore, those non-Malays who demand equal rights with the Malays in Malaysia have their loyalty questioned.

Crucially, as Brubaker (2017) notes, there is the concept of 'internal outsiders' – "those living in our midst who, even though when they are citizens of the state, are not seen as belonging to the nation" (Brubaker, 2017). Within ISMA's narrative, by identifying non-Malays who are demanding equal rights with Malays in Malaysia, they are categorised in this way. ISMA frames them not only as antagonists but also as internal outsiders whose place in Malaysian society is being fundamentally questioned.

The third category of antagonists are politicians and political leaders. Politicians, whether Malay or non-Malay, are self-serving and morally corrupt people. DAP, a Christian Chinese dominant political party, is ISMA's archenemy among the non-Malay political parties. Besides, ISMA is also very critical of the Malay-centric UMNO for not caring about the Malay or Islamic agenda and of PKR for being a liberal democrat and supporting secular and liberal people (Abdullah Zaik, 2018; see also, Aminuddin Yahya, 2022). For ISMA, most Malay politicians are only interested in power. As one of the founders and former presidents of ISMA, Aminuddin Yahaya (2020) claimed in his column published on Malaysiakini.com,

For them [politicians], matters of dignity, matters of religion, matters of race no longer carry any meaning. All of that is just used as merchandise when they want to get votes and for power. So that's why, until today, all the rights of Malays and Muslims have been mortgaged. [...] Are there still political leaders who really think about all this for the sake of the people (Aminuddin Yahya, 2020)?

The protagonist and antagonists of ISMA reveal that it actively employs boundary-making practices, constructing a polarised opposition between “us” versus “them” – “Malay fighters” and non-Muslim enemies and politicians. On closer inspection, ISMA employs divisions on both vertical and horizontal dimensions, which Pierre-André Taguieff (1995) defined as “nationalist populist.” At the vertical level, ISMA creates an opposition between the people, all Malaysians, and the politicians. Horizontally, the opposition lies between insiders and outsiders where Malay-Muslims are the insiders, and the West, capitalism, globalisation, or the enemies of Islam are the outsiders.

5.4.3 Defining the Audiences

ISMA’s audiences are three groups, ‘the people’, ‘Muslims’, and ‘Malays’, and each group is strategically invoked in different contexts. ‘The people’ is preferred to call every Malaysian citizen and, most of the time, criticising politicians and political leaders in the documents. As Yahaya argues, “The people continue to be poor and lose their source of income, but have you ever met a political leader today who lives in poverty?” (Aminuddin Yahya, 2020). The statement does not make any selections among Malaysians but considers them the victims of political leaders.

The second category is “Muslims”, which is employed with precision by ISMA because every Malay is Muslim, but not every Muslim is Malay in Malaysia. Therefore, distinguishing “Malay” and “Muslim” carefully, ISMA uses “Muslim” to refer to all Muslims globally (*ummah*). Especially when ISMA asks for unity or fights for Islam’s sovereignty. Additionally, ISMA calls Muslims in Malaysia, underlining the perceived threat to Islam in the country: “If we all strengthen this [the building of the Malay nation]

as an *ummah*, we can restore the position of Islam and [...] restore the Malay supremacy that has been lost. If today we play politics and focus on seats and let the elements of strength within the *ummah* dissipate, then it is impossible that we will get the results.” (Abdullah Zaik, 2022b).

ISMA posits that both Malays and Muslims would be the ones irreversibly affected by these threats; therefore, they must act together to protect the country and so Islam. Nevertheless, when it comes to leadership, ISMA asserts that “Malays” have the inherent right to govern the country. “The worsening problem of national unity in our beloved homeland can only be resolved through Islamic leadership based on the true balance of *Shari’a*. Hence, this solution must begin with the Muslim-Malays, who are the pillars of the citizenry” (Muhd Farhan Muhd Fadzil, 2019). In this narrative, other Muslim minorities have not been mentioned as ISMA views Malaysia as the divine homeland of the Malays, as stated by Abdullah Zaik (2022a). Other indigenous groups framed as the “original inhabitants” of the country – a small minority of them are Muslim – are also excluded from the audience group. Thus, the primary audience that ISMA addresses is specifically Malay-Muslims.

5.5 Comparative Analysis of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA’s Identity Fields

This section explores the identity constructions of three major Malaysian Islamic movements: ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA comparatively (*see*, Table 5.1 below). First and foremost, the findings reveal that each movement employs distinct articulatory practices to construct unique identities for themselves and others. Through these practices, ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA aim to differentiate themselves from one another, emphasising their distinct roles and ideas within the broader Islamic movement landscapes. For ABIM, the concept of “*Manhaj Malizi*” which integrates global Islamic principles with local Malaysian realities, is the central nodal point for its identity construction. For IKRAM,

on the other hand, its identification revolves around its affinity to the MB. By adapting MB's approach to Malaysia, IKRAM's identity emphasises a pluralist version of Islam, which promotes dialogue with diverse social groups in Malaysia. Nevertheless, it needs to be noted that IKRAM's approach has been in transition. While grounding their *dakwah* approaches in the Islamic philosophy of the MB, IKRAM demonstrates greater openness to traditional Islamic practices. This shift underscores the evolving nature of their perspectives and their adaptability to the Malaysian sociocultural context.

Table 5.1 Overview of the Identity Fields of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA

Identity	ABIM	IKRAM	ISMA
Protagonists	Core Values: <i>Manhaj Malizi</i> – Combines global Islamic principles with Malaysian-Islamic traditions, and moderation Ideas: A balanced, inclusive Islamic identity rooted in local culture	Core Values: Moderation and <i>Rahmah</i> (Compassion) – Pluralist Islamic approach Ideas: Inclusivity, social justice, and dialogue with diverse groups	Core Values: Malay-Muslim ethno-nationalism Ideas: Upholding Malay-Muslim rights, intertwining Malay identity with Islamic principles
Antagonists	Religious and nationalist extremism	Exclusivist and nationalist ideologies that oppose inclusivity and pluralism	Non-Malays, non-Muslims, and those seen as threats to Malay-Muslim supremacy
Agonistic Opponents	Other Islamic movements in Malaysia; although they have differences ideologically, still views them as allies in promoting Islamic values	Other pluralist and moderate movements; aligns with groups promoting tolerance; other Islamic movements	Other Islamic movements, viewed as rivals in the struggle for influence and legitimacy

Audiences	Muslims who value both tradition and modernity, and seek a locally grounded Islamic identity	Broad audience, including Muslims and non-Muslims; focuses on Malaysians open to pluralistic ideas	Primarily Malay-Muslims with a conservative or nationalist outlook
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Source: Author's compilation based on the data presented in this chapter.

Comparing the identity fields of ABIM and IKRAM, the similarities between the categories are striking. With IKRAM's adoption of the principles of *wasatiyyah* and *Manhaj Malizi*, the differences in their identity fields have become more subtle, primarily reflected in their use of different concepts as nodal points within their discourses. This growing proximity suggests that the differences between IKRAM and ABIM are less rooted in political views and more evident in their methodologies. One notable difference lies in IKRAM's approach to religious education, which remains closely aligned with the MB traditions, particularly in its emphasis on *tarbiyya* (Islamic education and character development), as IKRAM-5 highlighted.

ISMA's identity, on the other hand, combines Islamist and ethno-nationalist ideologies, conflating Malay and Muslim identities. This movement focuses on defending Malay privileges and Islamic sovereignty in Malaysia, presenting itself as a warrior for Malay-Muslim rights. ISMA's identity construction involves a more exclusive approach, distinguishing itself from other Islamic movements by emphasising a purer, traditional form of Islam. ISMA's identity also highlights the dynamic nature of the social and political identities of social movements. Although IKRAM and ISMA once shared a common identity rooted in the MB ideology under the JIM banner, their current identities—particularly their political orientations—have diverged significantly. This divergence emphasises the dynamic nature of identities within Islamic movements in Malaysia.

ISMA consistently employs collective identities by delineating clear boundaries between protagonists, antagonists, and the audience. These boundaries are reinforced and justified through Islamic references and historical grievances, particularly concerning Malay experiences, including colonial history. Such references enhance the persuasiveness and legitimacy of the collective narratives constructed by ISMA. Religious references, in particular, bolster the antagonist's position in a manner considered indisputable within the Muslim community. For instance, Malay-Muslims critical of ISMA's stance on non-Malays is labelled as "liberal and secular," perceived as opposing Islamic governance advocated by ISMA.

On the spectrum of antagonism and agonism, the relationship between ABIM and IKRAM is clearly positioned towards the agonistic end, reflecting a dynamic of mutual respect and shared core values despite occasional differences. However, their identification with ISMA, and ISMA's perception of them in return, presents a more complex dynamic. For ABIM and IKRAM, extremism is the primary antagonist in their discourse, defined as behaviours and ideologies that deviate from the balanced path of Islam (*i.e.*, *wasatiyyah*) and lead to division, harm and distortion of Islamic teachings. This definition, rooted in its commitment to inclusivity and moderation, focuses on the rejection of rigid and exclusionary practices, especially those that undermine social unity.

While ISMA's discourse contains elements consistent with this understanding of extremism —particularly its strong ethnocentric tone— ABIM and IKRAM informants emphasised that such elements pose a significant threat to Malaysia's social cohesion. In their view, ISMA's promotion of Malay-Muslim supremacy contradicts the inclusive and pluralist approach necessary for national unity. This ideological divergence places ISMA closer to the antagonistic end of the spectrum.

A similar complexity is evident in ISMA's perspective. For ISMA, Malay-Muslim groups that do not actively promote the Malay agenda—centred on safeguarding the special position of Malay-Muslims in Malaysia—are perceived as failing to uphold Islamic values. ISMA accuses such groups of perpetuating the postcolonial order and serving liberal-secular ideologies imposed by Western countries. From ISMA's standpoint, these Malay-Muslim groups are seen as antagonists who undermine their vision of a Malay-Muslim-dominated Malaysia and, as such, should be eliminated from the political landscape. In this context, ABIM and IKRAM, which advocate a more egalitarian and inclusive approach toward non-Malays and non-Muslims, stand in sharp contrast to ISMA's ethno-religious exclusivism. By prioritising multicultural harmony over fierce Malay-Muslim supremacy, ABIM and IKRAM needs to be positioned by ISMA as ideological antagonists, reinforcing the deep divisions in their respective visions for Malaysia's socio-political order.

However, informants from ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA emphasised that their relations on a personal level remained friendly. Although the potential for informants to prioritise political correctness and avoid making negative comments in order not to cause friction between movements should be taken into account, in some cases these groups cooperated on specific issues of common interest. This demonstrates that the antagonism in their discourses does not entirely preclude practical cooperation. This duality highlights the complexity of inter-movement relations, where ideological differences coexist with pragmatic alliances, reflecting a nuanced interplay of antagonism and agonism in their mutual identification.

The findings also revealed that these constructed identities, particularly the self and *other*, are not static but are fluid and continuously reconstructed or re-negotiated in response to internal dynamics and external pressures. The split between ISMA and

IKRAM in this regard should be highlighted. Following the split, each movement rebranded itself with new self-images while also constructing a new *other*. In this respect, the findings showed that not only the identity of self is in flux, but antagonisms are also (re)constructed and (re)negotiated in response to internal demands or external difficulties.

Thus, these identity constructions provide an ideological foundation for ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM, enabling them to establish their own discourses on their activities and advocacy. This foundation, on the one hand, legitimises their positions within the Malaysian Islamic landscape. On the other hand, it provides them a framework to articulate a cohesive discourse for a hegemonic formation.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the identity constructions of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA highlighting how each movement defines the *self*, the *other*, and the audiences. By applying concepts from both frame theory and discourse theory, the analysis has demonstrated that these movements strategically construct their identities through their histories, core values, and ideologies, while also engaging in the dynamic process of defining their antagonists and agonistic opponents and appeal to their audiences. This comparative analysis of identity fields has shown how these movements navigate their positioning within Malaysia's complex socio-political landscape and reveal the differences in their discursive practices and their efforts to mobilise support while maintaining distinct identities in a competitive environment. Chapter 6 elaborates on the discursive frames of these social movements and reveals their interaction with these constructed identities.

CHAPTER 6: COMPETING REALITIES: DISCURSIVE FRAMES OF ABIM, IKRAM AND ISMA

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter reveals the identities of the *self*, the *other*, and the audiences which ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA constructed. This chapter focuses on the discursive practices of the Islamic movements to understand how they construct social reality, give meaning to the world around them, and combine words, objects, ideas, and concepts to articulate a discourse. In discourse theory, to give meanings to cognitions, acts or speeches, they have to be established in a discourse in which meanings are constantly negotiated (Torfing, 1999). In a similar vein, frame theory claims that identities that the social movements constructed are embedded in framing tasks to build an integrated narrative in which the movement's values, goals, and actions are inherently linked with the constructed collective identities (Gamson, 1992).

In this chapter, I employed the core framing tasks concept of frame theory: diagnosis, prognosis, and motivational frames of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA. Frame theory systematically analyses how social movements produce and maintain meaning for their supporters and audiences through core framing tasks (Benford & Snow, 2000; Johnston et al., 2005; Snow & Benford, 1988; Snow & Byrd, 2007). As Snow and Benford (1988) argue, for the success of a social movement to build a consensus and mobilise the constituents, the core framing tasks of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing have a strategic importance (p. 199).

The diagnosis frame refers to problem identification and attributions. This task aims to determine the real problem that needs remedies and the sources of causes and effects to answer, "What is or went wrong?" and "Who or what is to blame?" questions (D. A. Snow & Byrd, 2007). The prognosis frame indicates to solutions to these problems and

identifying strategies, tactics, and targets; in other words, how to achieve the solutions. The motivational frame refers to calls for action. Even though the movement components agree on the cause of a problem and solution, mobilisation cannot occur spontaneously; therefore, motivational frames yield mobilisation through socially constructed vocabulary, which activates participants (Benford & Snow, 2000).

In analysing the discursive practices of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA, it was necessary to limit the scope of the data since each movement generates a vast array of discursive material ranging from Islamic teachings, education, youth, family relations to women's health. Examining every aspect of their discourse is beyond the extent of this study. Therefore, three key issues in which these movements show significant ideological divergence have been selected for analysis of the discursive framing strategies and core framing tasks of the Islamic movements, which are ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA's perspectives on political Islam, the implementation of *Shari'a* law, and inter-ethnic relations within Malaysian society. These three areas revealed the striking ideological and discursive differences among the movements. Although these movements are primarily focused on *dakwah*—spreading Islamic teachings, their revivalist character also encourages them to construct political projects reflecting their Islamic approaches so that a comprehensive Islamic way of life should be implemented both in social and political spheres. In this chapter, therefore, rather than their *dakwah* understanding of the religious philosophy, I focus on their *dakwah* vision affecting Malaysians' social and political life. Thus, these three issues are among the central topics on which the movements expend considerable effort and generate diverse ideas and frames.

While *dakwah* movements in Malaysia have somewhat similar ideas and opinions, particularly on religious matters, and aim to Islamise the society and the Malaysian state, the definition of the Islamic way of life or their aspirations and practices for the

Islamisation of Malaysia are far from monolithic. In terms of political Islam and related topics, each movement holds distinct opinions and levels of criticism towards one another. The literature on revivalist movements mostly refers to them being against the modern ideologies of modernism, nationalism, secularism and communism while defending reform and change with Islamic values and institutions (Azhar Ibrahim, 2019; Abdullah Saeed, 2007). ABIM and its former president Anwar Ibrahim's efforts on Malaysia's Islamisation process in the early 1990s, for example, align with this argument. JIM was also noted to have a similar mindset (Lemiere, 2009). My interviews with senior ABIM and IKRAM members also affirmed a similar outlook. However, my field observations and interviews with ABIM and IKRAM members who are holding administrative positions revealed a significant mindset shift in these movements. As discussed later in this chapter, rather than seeing Islam as a third alternative to liberal-democratic and communist political ideologies, they seem to be more favourable towards liberal-democratic systems.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: First, each movement is examined individually, focusing on the core framing tasks: diagnosis, prognosis, and motivational frames. Following, I discuss the core framing tasks of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA comparatively. Finally, concluding remarks summarise the insights and implications of the analysis.

6.2 Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM)

To understand how ABIM constructs its social reality and addresses key societal and political issues, it is essential to analyse the discursive frames of ABIM. This section examines the core framing tasks of ABIM—diagnosis, prognosis, and motivational frames.

6.2.1 Diagnosis Frame

The data analysis of ABIM has identified four diagnostic frames that have evolved over time. Initially, ABIM focused on colonialism and its lasting effects as the core issue facing Malaysian Muslims. However, as the socio-political landscape has changed, ABIM has shifted its attention to new concerns. Three additional diagnostic frames that are highly interconnected dominate ABIM's discourse: the problems of social cohesion and unity in Malaysia, the rise of extremism, and the discussions over the Islamic state and the implementation of *Shari'a* law. These three diagnosis frames imply that ABIM's constructed social reality reflects a concern with the fragmentation of society that needs effective remedies.

In the post-independence period, Islamic movements in Malaysia often employed a rhetoric that was strongly anti-Western, anti-colonial, and anti-modernist (Ahmad Fauzi, 2009; Lemiere, 2010). The cultural and political legacy of Western colonial powers and the adoption of Western modernity were severely criticised. They perceived that Western values were incompatible with Islamic values; therefore, the solution would be a return to authentic Islamic principles as a foundation for societal reform and national identity. Through ideological stance, the *dakwah* movements were aimed to construct an identity and affirmation of their place in the new world order (Azhar Ibrahim, 2019, p. 59).

The interests of ABIM in the 1970s were very similar to these revivalist thoughts; Malaysia was in need of being free from the colonial legacy, replacing the secular mindset with the Islamic one. In this regard, the interview with Expert-3 provided insights into *dakwah* movements' fight against colonialism and its legacy, not only in Malaysia but across other Muslim countries as well. As s/he put it, "After our independence, the entire Muslim world got fed up because the locals, their own people, were running the country just like the British were running. So, where do we go? That is why in the 1970s, we call

it the revival of Islam, ‘Islamic renaissance, [happened].’” (Expert-3, personal communication, August 9, 2023). Therefore, the answer to “What went wrong?” and “Who is to blame?” for ABIM in the early years of its formation was the Western powers and their colonial remnants who were local elites perpetuating the colonial legacy.

The interviews I conducted with the ABIM members who holds administrative positions, however, revealed a significant mindset shift within ABIM regarding the diagnosis frames of ABIM. The new diagnosis frames are mostly focused on national-level problems. As the ABIM executives underlined, Islamic revivalism was successful in the past, particularly in the 1970s, but the main issue facing Malaysia today is the challenge of national unity, a consequence of an unsuccessful ethno-nationalist identity politics. Therefore, the main diagnosis frame is that Malaysia has a social cohesion and unity problem, according to the ABIM informants. As ABIM-3 noted,

At the end of 2023, approximately 30 years after it [ABIM] was founded, the challenges [it faces] touching on the question of national integration and cohesion have not yet been fully resolved. Thickened racial sentiments and prejudices against each other are always the seeds of problems that can erupt at any time (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023).

ABIM informants, particularly ABIM-3, ABIM-4, and ABIM-8, underlined the post-election reactions among the Malay-Muslim community after the general election in 2022. For them, Malaysia faces ongoing racial divisions, prejudices, and a lack of national unity, which came to light even brighter after the election. As shared in the ABIM’s media statement published in their official website,

The Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) takes the people’s concerns regarding the rising racial sentiments following the recent 15th General Election seriously. In this regard, ABIM welcomes the firmness of the Royal Malaysian Police as well as concerned Malaysians in combating this phenomenon which is reported to be spreading through social media applications. In addition, ABIM calls on Muslims to refer to the model proposed by the prominent scholar, Al-Biruni, for interaction between different religions and races. This includes the concept of mutual recognition to eliminate any prejudices that hinder dialogue (ABIM, 2022).

Therefore, the main problem that ABIM is currently working on is how they will tackle these “extremist” ideas. The reason for focusing on this issue, particularly elaborated by ABIM-4, “ABIM does not want to see Malaysia and the Malaysian people to be [divided] into fragments. [...] [We saw] the influence of extremist ideas on our elections, particularly on the youth. So that is why we are currently working on the problem, and the problem is to tackle extremist ideas.” (ABIM-4, personal communication, March 11, 2023).

Further, ABIM challenges the “extremist” thoughts which they see as connected with the ethno-nationalist discourse on the “dominant race” and the religion by referencing the society of *Madinah*. In ABIM’s discourse, the *Madinah* society represents a social and political framework where people of different religions coexist as citizens. By drawing on this example, ABIM counters the nationalist rhetoric and emphasises the importance of citizenship and respect for minority communities. As stated by ABIM-3,

[...] the idea of *Madinah* and also the idea of *Madani* [civil] was mentioned by many Islamic organisations, especially because of the idea of the *Madinah* Charter. It is very significant to Malaysians because we are talking about different tribes in *Madinah*, and we are talking about different tribes in Malaysia and different ethnicities. So, many Muslim preachers use this example to portray Malaysian reality. Unfortunately, there are some misconceptions by saying that “we are the dominant race” and “we are the dominant religion.” Therefore, “we need to suppress the other religious communities.” This is wrong because, in Islam, we always believe in the idea of citizenship, the idea of respecting others, minorities, and the idea of fellow citizens (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023).

It should also be noted that the focus of ABIM on national unity and countering extremism is a continuation of the colonial legacy. ABIM has not framed the national unity problem or the fight against extremism in a vacuum but placed it in a national-historical context referring to colonial history. As discussed by Muhammad Faisal bin Abdul Aziz, the former president of ABIM, in his article on “Cosmopolitan Islam,” the seeds of the ethnic clash between Malays and non-Malays were sown during the colonial

period when the British employed a divide-and-rule strategy that exacerbated ethnic tensions.

For so long, the nation had been silenced by nonsensical colonial myths that weaken the identity of native peoples through various negative labels, as well as the separation of religious values from life. This wave of Islamic awareness in the 1970s breathed new life and empowered locals to develop themselves, their families, and their country – leaving behind the darkness of the past. The events of 13 May 1969 were among the casualties of colonial occupation. The momentum of Islamic awareness then occurred at the right time to appear as an initiative and solution to put the country on a balanced and stable track (Muhammad Faisal Abdul Aziz, 2022a)

Therefore, the current problems that ABIM has diagnosed, which are extremisms and unity problems, are associated with ethnic segregation and separation between ethnic groups in Malaysia, which brought about the colonial rules.

An essential component of *dakwah* approach in Malaysia is the implementation of *Shari'a* law, which has long been a controversial topic. While often closely associated with the *Hudud*³⁵ penal code, *Shari'a* law is much more comprehensive, encompassing all aspects of life by enforcing legal rulings derived from Islamic sources (Ahmad Fauzi, 2018a). Its defence and implementation have been top priorities of ABIM, as the former executives shared in their public speeches (Lemiere, 2010). As shared by former ABIM ideologue Nik Abdul Rashid,

The process of Islamisation inevitably must include the legal aspect. This does not mean that we are too legalistic in approaching this process of Islamisation; we are aware that Islam is not just a legal framework, but those who are well-versed in Islam will not object to the fact that legal thought has a special position in the Islamic *Shari'a*. Therefore, we must continue to convince all quarters that the demand for the Islamisation of legal institutions is not the demand of a fanatical group. This demand has a strong justification; that is, religious justification, constitutional justification, historical justification, and the current justification (as cited in Azhar Ibrahim, 2019, pp. 81-82).

³⁵ Hudud law refers to a “class of punishments that are fixed with certain crimes” as defined by Azhar Ibrahim (2019).

In the early 1980s, ABIM strongly advocated the implementation of Islamic law, but the ABIM informants' approach is notably different. Discussions around Islamic law have caused significant tension in Muslim-non-Muslim relationships, such as the custody cases of children of newly converted Muslim and non-Muslim spouses. Acknowledging these issues, ABIM aims to create an environment where the implementation of *Shari'a* law would not harm any members of Malaysian society (ABIM-1, personal communication, January 11, 2023).³⁶ They have also highlighted potential problems that could arise from incorrect or unjust applications of the laws, particularly the Hudud laws. As a result, ABIM's current stance is to postpone the implementation of these laws to avoid exacerbating social tensions and injustices.³⁷ As explained by ABIM-4,

We took a very different stance on this. [...] We are not denying *Hudud*. We are just postponing it further for better consequences because, in our Islamic world now, it is not possible to implement *hudud* fully and ideally as good as we can. But if you ask this for the PAS members, they will say that we can implement and later on we can improve. [...] It should not be a concern if you were a son of the Dato or Datuk, they will not cut your hand. You would find your way to steal things and move away. But if you were from low-class, they would cut your [hand] directly. So, that is the question. We, ABIM, saw this duality of society has not been tackled in the best possible way. I think, implementing *hudud*, we are not denying it. We are postponing it to a better time (ABIM-4, personal communication, March 11, 2023).

As a result, ABIM informants' responses indicate a significant shift from its early years, reflecting a change in priorities and strategies to address the contemporary challenges facing Malaysia. As discussed above, ABIM's diagnosis frame at the beginning was more interested in liberating Malaysia from its colonial legacy and replacing the secular mindset with an Islamic one, framed within a solid anti-Western,

³⁶ As ABIM-5 explains further: "Back to have a harmonious country, harmonious people, how can we achieve [this]? It cannot [be achieved] by dictating or forcing people to follow. Then, that means that we need to create an understanding, [provide] knowledge to all the communities, all the society first. [For them] To understand. Because Malaysia is where Muslims and non-Muslims live together." (ABIM-5, personal communication, March 14, 2023).

³⁷ It should be noted that ABIM's this stance is different from the *maqasid Shari'a*, which refers to realisation of higher objectives of the *Shari'a* in order to implement hudud law in a modern context (Ahmad Fauzi, 2018b).

anti-colonial, and anti-modernist discourse. However, the current diagnosis frames revolve around the issues of national unity and the rise of extremist ideas, particularly in the aftermath of the 2023 general election. This shift reveals how social movements change, adapt, or strategically articulate their frames to respond to changing contexts and challenges and remain relevant.

6.2.2 Prognosis Frame

The prognosis frames ABIM offers as solutions to these challenges focus on addressing Malaysia's identity issues, particularly as remedies for the social cohesion and unity problems highlighted in its diagnostic frames. ABIM's proposed solution is to promote more flexible and fluid identities that enable Malaysians to transcend rigid ethnic and religious boundaries. ABIM also constructs concepts such as Cosmopolitan Islam and *Bangsa* Malaysia, which connects its prognosis frames with Islamic references. These concepts reflect the social reality that ABIM aims to establish.

The former president of ABIM, Muhammad Faisal (2021), discusses in his article that the division between ethnic groups, rooted in Malaysia's colonial history, has been exacerbated by extremist and ethno-nationalist discourse. As Malaysia's most prominent youth movement, ABIM has assumed a large share of responsibility for fostering national unity and counter-extremism in this challenging situation. As stated in the article "Cosmopolitan Islam and the Core of Malaysian Nation Building", Muhammad Faisal (2021) indicated this responsibility: "The year 2021 requires us to increase our efforts and ideas to build stronger unity among Malaysians. Especially youth organisations, which have a big responsibility in shaping a positive narrative for the younger generation."

The anchor of their prognosis frames to build national unity is the argument that ethnic identities can be permeable and multiple. As ABIM-4 stated, for example, ABIM accepts the idea of permeable ethnicity, which means that ethnic identities are not fixed as in

Western perspectives (ABIM-4, personal communication, March 11, 2023). Articulating identities as permeable allows for a more flexible and fluid understanding of identity, opposing the dominance of single, dominant ethnic or religious identities. Furthermore, ABIM believes that social identities can be multiple, extending beyond racial and religious realms. As ABIM-6 explains, this concept covers multiple identities by using the metaphor of WhatsApp groups.

As a Muslim, you can take Islam as an identity, but that does not mean that you have to stick to that one identity. In our workshops, we always explain what we call that: Just open your WhatsApp groups. What kind of groups you are in? [Let's say] You have a group from UIA [*Universiti Islam Antrabangsa*, International Islamic University of Malaysia], you have this identity of a family member, you have this political party, you are one of those who are in love with sports. So, all these are identities. But what ISMA wants to do is that if you're Muslim, you're Muslim, that is it, right? You're forced to take a position that this is your only identity, and so is the question: are you Malaysian first? Are you Malay first? Are you Muslim first (ABIM-6, personal communication, May 17, 2023)?

ABIM advocates for a pluralistic understanding of identity, where individuals, including Muslims, can possess and express multiple identities —religious, familial, social, political, and professional—simultaneously. It suggests that while the Islamic identity is important, it does not preclude the presence of other identities. This idea of multiple and flexible identities ties into ABIM's concept of Cosmopolitan Islam and the broader national narrative of *Bangsa Malaysia*.

Cosmopolitan Islam promotes the idea that the Muslim community in Malaysia is interdependent with other ethnicities and religions. Drawing on the historical cosmopolitan nature of Islamic civilisation, mainly the Prophet Mohammad's *Madinah* Society and the Constitution of *Madinah* examples, ABIM aims to construct an Islamic vision suitable for the ethnically and religiously diverse Malaysian society. As stated by ABIM-3, "[...] we know that Islam is *Salim*, and *Salamat* [which means it] is taking care of everybody. That was the *Madinah* [society]; the Prophet's *Hijrah* [migration] to

Madinah, they lived all together with the people of *Madinah*, regardless of Muslim or non-Muslim. We need to live together [too].” (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023). The Cosmopolitan Islam vision attempts to transcend not only ethnic identities but also religious identities by highlighting equal citizenship and unity in diversity concepts, as discussed by the current president of ABIM, Ahmad Fahmi Mohd Samsudin and Raja Nurul Balqis bt Raja Md Arif (2021) in “ABIM’s Role in Building Bridges Towards Harmony Through Values and Peaceful Co-Existence.”

Cosmopolitan Islam is central to the foundation of the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia*, which highlights the national unity agenda of ABIM by emphasising common values among all races and ethnicities in Malaysia rather than focusing on a single ethnic identity. According to ABIM’s (2021) media statement, *Bangsa Malaysia* has three core principles, which are:

1. Post-political Nation Building: This pillar highlights the nation-building endeavours going beyond the traditional politics and politicians and refers to the “bottom-up” transformation rather than the “top-down” that comes from grassroots people through the Civil Society Organisation (CSO) stage.
2. Agreement on Common Values: This pillar includes an agreement on common values for an advanced society through, for example, the values of a dignified nation, rejection of corruption, self-reliance, mutual help, and love for nature.
3. Inclusive Community Empowerment: The last pillar aims to solve the problems of all citizens based on a common perspective, ensuring no race is left behind. It supports creating a united, dignified nation that lives together in peace and upholds justice and truth.

It should also be noted that ABIM frequently applies Islamic references, such as the concept of *li’tagrufu*, historical examples, such as the *Madinah* society and 1969 racial riots from the Malaysian context and Islamic philosophy, in their prognosis frames (Muhammad Faisal Abdul Aziz, 2021, 2022; Risalah, 2021). As ABIM-4 argues, the Cosmopolitan Islam vision is in accordance with Islam and Islamic values.

Basically, we are going to use cosmopolitan Islam to show that our existence as a Muslim community in Malaysia is co-dependent. We are co-dependent

on other ethnicities with people of other religions. And it is okay with Islam and Islamic values because Islam is open to exchanges of cultures exchanges of ideas between the West and the East (ABIM-4, personal communication, March 11, 2023).

Referring to the Islamic source and providing an Islamic basis for their discourse allow ABIM to counter-narratives that may promote exclusivity or extremism by offering a well-rounded and historically grounded alternative. The integration of Islamic philosophy and historical precedents in their discourse underscores the adaptability and inclusivity of Islam, promoting a vision of a harmonious and united society.

More importantly, however, in the construction of this vision, ABIM redefines some of the core concepts of the Islamic tradition. “*Ummah*,” for example, traditionally refers to the global Muslim community, but ABIM reinterprets the concept to include all Malaysians, reflecting a more inclusive understanding (Ahmad Fahmi Mohd Samsudin & Raja Nurul Balqis bt Raja Md Arif, 2021, p. 353). Similarly, the term “*ukhuwah*”, which refers to the brotherhood founded on the same faith, as in the MB terms, has been redefined to include brotherhood in citizenship and humanity, not just Islamic brotherhood (p. 353). From a discourse theory perspective, the re-articulation of these key terms and concepts is a strategic move to challenge the existing religious and nationalist discourse and establish an alternative one. In this respect, these concepts work as floating signifiers that embody the ideals of national unity and inclusivity. Their re-articulation as floating signifiers is significant for leveraging their national unity ideals and the *Bangsa Malaysia* agenda as a nodal point while at the same time challenging the existing hegemonic discourse that emphasises religious exclusivity.

ABIM has re-articulated another concept, which is the Islamic state. For *dakwah* movements, the state’s Islamisation has been the primary goal (Ibrahim, 2019; Saeed, 2007). Nevertheless, what an Islamic state is and what its characteristics and features have remained contested and ambiguous. In discourse theory, the concept of the Islamic state

works as a floating signifier that has been interpreted in various ways in different discourses. Moreover, as a highly contested concept, there are other social and political actors, such as PAS, ISMA and IKRAM, who have their own definitions and criteria for an Islamic state. They also have considerable discursive power over the concept (Liow, 2022). Nevertheless, ABIM-6 stated that ABIM has distanced itself from the Islamic state discussions and offered a new approach.

So, if we declare this as an Islamic State, then we need to put down the criteria for what this Islamic State is. [It] uses the Quran and Sunnah. So, now [we need to decide], should we then follow Saudi or should we [follow] our constitution? There is a lot of debate today, but now, we do not want to dwell on such a conundrum. Rather, we focus on things we want to do which is *dakwah* (ABIM-6, personal communication, May 17, 2023).

It can be argued that by focusing on *dakwah*, ABIM is making a practical shift away from the idea of establishing an Islamic State, recognising that the concept is ambiguous and presented with challenges. ABIM strategically emphasises “*dakwah*” (Islamic outreach) as its primary focus, diverting attention to its strengths and moving it away from areas where other movements hold significant power. This emphasis aligns with ABIM’s inclusive and pluralist approach and their desire to engage in dialogue. As the same informant further argues, the Islamic state discussion is futile and divisive because it hurts the inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. Therefore, by setting aside the controversies surrounding the concept of an Islamic State, he underscores that for ABIM, Malaysia is the *dakwah* state rather than the Islamic State.

[...] We always try our best to avoid the debate of “Are we Islamic State or are we a secular state?” We don’t want to get involved in that discussion. That is why we come up with the idea that this [Malaysia] is a *dakwah* state [...] In Malaysia, whatever you call it, [whether] it is a Christian state or Buddhist state or a secular state, our responsibility is to do *dakwah*. God has given us this to live here, to do *dakwah*, and *dakwah* means to convene, not convert. So, this means that we have this understanding, this responsibility that makes us understand as a member of ABIM who see Malaysia as a *dakwah* state to be active in doing *dakwah* and doing good work. So, that is how we change. Rather than debating whether the Islamic State or a secular state, that is how

we see it. So, the damage [has done]. Because that topic is divisive, right (ABIM-6, personal communication, May 17, 2023)?

ABIM's strategic shift from the Islamic state to the *dakwah* state is noteworthy in terms of navigating Muslim and non-Muslim relations in Malaysia. ABIM's *dakwah state* constructs a more flexible and less controversial concept, which also lacks a precise and fixed definition; therefore, it can be considered as a more practical discourse to appeal to a broader audience, particularly non-Muslims. Besides, with this concept, ABIM distinguishes itself from the more radical groups and maintains its unique identity.

As a result, the prognosis frames offered by ABIM emphasise the need for national unity and the rejection of extremist and ethno-nationalist discourse. By articulating social identities as permeable and multiple, ABIM promotes a more flexible and inclusive understanding of identity that supports national cohesion. This articulation is the foundation of their vision of Cosmopolitan Islam and *Bangsa Malaysia*, which serve as nodal points and central concepts around which ABIM organises its discourse on national unity and inclusivity.

ABIM's *Bangsa Malaysia* reflects the logic of equivalence and difference. While linking various groups and identities under the goal of national unity and inclusive Islamic values, ABIM creates a chain of equivalence. On the other hand, they differentiate themselves from groups like PAS and ISMA, which are seen as promoting extreme religious and ethnic identities. Thus, ABIM's prognosis frames employ key concepts from discourse theory to construct a discourse focused on inclusivity and national unity. By strategically re-articulating Islamic concepts to enhance legitimacy and avoid divisive debates, ABIM aims to establish a dominant discourse. This approach helps attract broad support while maintaining ABIM's distinct identity. ABIM's application of logic of equivalence and difference is elaborated comparatively in Chapter 7 under the section of Competition over Hegemonic Projects.

6.2.3 Motivational Frame

Along with diagnosing the problem and offering Cosmopolitan Islam and *Bangsa Malaysia* concepts that promote multiple and fluid identities as solutions, ABIM also seeks to create a sense of shared goal and collective responsibility. This section explores how ABIM motivates individuals to engage with their audience and the broader Malaysian society. The findings have shown that as a social movement, ABIM's contention repertoire has mostly consisted of programs to raise awareness, education, advocacy, and community services rather than mass protests, rallies or riots, except the BERSIH and *Reformasi* protests. ABIM also utilises social media campaigns as both an awareness campaign and a protest.

A similar pattern can be seen in their motivational frames. By publishing books, such as *Kosmopolitan Islam & Pembinaan Bangsa Malaysia* (Cosmopolitan Islam and Malaysian Nation Building) by Muhammad Faisal Abdul Aziz, *Toleransi Islam* (Islamic Tolerance) by Yusuf Qaradawi (translation to Malay), newspaper articles (see, (Muhammad Faisal Abdul Aziz, 2021a, 2022b), and issues in their official magazine *Risalah* (2021) and public seminars³⁸ ABIM seeks to engage its audience intellectually and cultivate a deeper understanding of its core values, thereby fostering a more nuanced discourse around identity, tolerance, and social cohesion in Malaysia.

Besides, ABIM has established digital platforms to promote *Bangsa Malaysia* (see e.g., Bangsamalaysia.info. [[@bangsamalaysia.info](https://www.instagram.com/bangsamalaysia.info)], 2021). As part of this project, ABIM organised several seminars and public speeches discussing the problems of ethnic groups

³⁸ In this regard, ABIM's *Bangsa Malaysia* seminars are noteworthy. For details, see, Bangsamalaysia.info ([@bangsamalaysia.info](https://www.instagram.com/bangsamalaysia.info)) on Instagram.

in Malaysia and the solutions to national unity problems. However, the events and activities seem to have halted since no content has been published since October 2021.

Regarding the motivational frame and call for action of ABIM in social media, this study examined two recent campaigns organised in 2022 and 2024 respectively. There campaigns are the *#kitakawan* (literally, we are friends) and the movement *Maaf Zahir Batin Hari-Hari* (#MZB365). As revealed in the previous chapter, the antagonists of the ABIM section, the *#kitakawan* campaign, was organised by ABIM as a response to the racist comments that upsurged after the election results in 2022. ABIM called Malaysians to post their photos with fellow Malaysians to refute the negative perceptions and show solidarity with minority Malaysians (*see*, Image 6.1 for ABIM's campaign call on X, former Twitter).



Source: X.com/ABIMalaysia (@abimalaysia, 2022)

Image 6.1 #Kitakawan Campaign Call³⁹

This social media campaign, which calls Malaysians to spread peace messages emphasising their friendship with fellow Malaysians, garnered a massive following among Malaysian internet users. ABIM-3 reported that the hashtag received a staggering 15 million mentions on TikTok and 13,000 retweets on X within the campaign's first day (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023). This success significantly boosted ABIM's media presence as well. Notably, a prominent Chinese media outlet, Sin Chew Daily (and its online portal <https://mysinchew.sinchew.com.my>), shared the campaign

³⁹ The translation of hashtags respectively; spread the greetings, reject hatred, we are friends, and love my Malaysia.

and the stories of Malaysians who participated by posting photos with the hashtag (Lee Jia Hui, 2022).

The impact of the campaign has not remained limited to these achievements. On 2nd of April 2024, Zulkifli Hasan, who is the deputy minister of religious affairs and former chief of ABIM Negeri Sembilan branch, launched the #kitakawan campaign “to foster the spirit of togetherness, unity, and harmony through dialogue and advocacy.”(Mohd Farhan Darwis, 2024). The launch was preceded by a dialogue session in which around 300 NGOs, including the Malaysian Scholars Association, Malaysian Islamic Youth, IKRAM, Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs, and Friendship Group of Inter-Religious Services, participated (Mohd Farhan Darwis, 2024).

This achievement is crucial for ABIM because this campaign exemplifies a strategic use of hegemonic practices. Initially, the campaign became successful on social media, which demonstrated ABIM’s ability to set the agenda and influence public conversation. Later on, the involvement of the media and the deputy minister provided an institutional endorsement (*see*, Image 6.2 for the campaign’s impact on political spheres and policy making) and was further strengthened by ABIM’s position and power within the discourse of Malaysian identity.



Source: Mohd Farhan Darwis, 2024

Image 6.2 The Campaign's Impact on Political Spheres and Policy Making

The other campaign examined is the *Maaf Zahir Batin Hari-Hari* (#MZB365). While ABIM is not the initiator, it is among the collaborators along with 17 other civil society organisations and media outlets. The aim of the campaign is to combat hateful and provocative speech about ethnicity and religion in a compassionate manner. According to the campaigners, “the issue of extreme provocation is starting to cause concern among the people; if left unchecked, it can paralyse the country, destroy society and collapse the bridge of unity that has been maintained all this time.” (Noor Mohamad Shakil Hameed, 2024). To support this campaign, Zairudin bin Hashim, in his media statement, noted that ABIM, with over 130 branches across Malaysia, would play a significant role in its promotion. ABIM members and volunteers would advocate for the campaign in Islamic kindergartens and primary and secondary schools, as well as through social media platforms (cited in The Star, 2024).

The collaborative effort between ABIM and other civil society organisations highlights their solidarity and exemplifies the effective use of the logic of equivalence. Despite their diverse identities and characteristics, these organisations cooperate for a

common cause. Through this motivational frame, ABIM calls upon its constituents and supporters to collaborate with these organisations in combating racist and religious extremism once again.

On the other hand, Zairudin bin Hashim's call is crucial to show the power of ABIM. By underlining 130 branches across Malaysia, he demonstrates the network capacity of ABIM to mobilise resources, including activists and volunteers, to advocate for the campaign. Furthermore, the mention of ABIM-maintained schools highlights a strategic dimension of its influence. These educational institutions serve as vital platforms for engaging with younger generations, allowing ABIM to instil values, shape attitudes, and cultivate behaviours aligned with their advocacy against hate speech. By including educational programs in its strategy, ABIM uses its power to create a permanent change in Malaysian society. This helps the movement play a substantial role in influencing public opinions and cultural values.

6.3 Malaysia Ikram Movement (IKRAM)

As discussed in the previous chapter, IKRAM's identity fields, particularly the identity of the *self* and *other*, have been in transition towards a gradual Islamisation approach that combines the values of the MB with the diverse social and political fabric of Malaysia. With this vision, IKRAM constructs its core framing tasks to respond to contemporary societal challenges. The following sections analyse IKRAM's core framing tasks, which are diagnosis, prognosis and motivational frames, and show how they strive to bridge the gaps between different communities while remaining true to their Islamic principles.

6.3.1 Diagnosis Frame

IKRAM's diagnosis frame, similar to other *dakwah* movements, focuses on the political system problem. As IKRAM-4 explained in the interview, the primary motivation behind the revivalist thought was to establish a new system that was neither capitalist nor communist (IKRAM-4, personal communication, January 6, 2023). As s/he discussed, Islam, a comprehensive religion comprising both religious, social, economic and political realms, is capable of being a system on its own. That is the IKRAM's main agenda since the beginning (IKRAM-4, personal communication, January 6, 2023).

Following the MB's legacy and methodology, IKRAM's core framing tasks revolve around the realisation of Islamisation in Malaysia. As this legacy suggests, Islamisation should be through a gradual transformation rather than a revolution. With this mentality, IKRAM's main diagnosis frame is that "Malaysia needs to be Islamised," however, since there are multiple understandings in the definition of "Islamised," IKRAM aims to impose their own interpretation of Islamisation on the country. For IKRAM, the gradual Islamisation has to start from the micro elements of the society, which are individuals and family, towards the macro level, which is society and country. As IKRAM-6 argued, IKRAM believes that the transformation of individual and family levels has been successful; therefore, IKRAM has altered its focus on society and country.

[...] If you know the legacy of the MB, we want to change the nation. We want to change the country. So, we start from the individual [because] if you want to change the nation, you have to change the individual. Now, we have the opinion that we have covered the individual [so far]. Then, the family. We have covered that [as well]. And then, we have the opinion that now, it is our time to change the country. So, we need [to change] our society (IKRAM-6, personal communication, September 17, 2023).

IKRAM's Islamisation approach is very much in line with its identity fields. Positioning itself as a moderate Islamic movement, IKRAM promotes a pluralist *dakwah* approach that inherently counters extremist versions of Islamic interpretations. As

IKRAM-1 pointed out, “IKRAM is also against extremism, and we do not want ourselves to be portrayed as part of Daesh.” (IKRAM-1, personal communication, January 11, 2023). Hence, one of the priorities of IKRAM is to tackle the national unity problem.⁴⁰ IKRAM President Badlishah Sham Baharin argues in his statement on IKRAM’s official website that the urgent need to tackle issues that threaten the unity of the Malaysian people.

Recently, the issues of religion, race, and royalty (3R) have been increasingly stirred up by irresponsible parties despite the existence of the Sedition Act and the Communications and Multimedia Act to address them. What is happening is just the tip of the iceberg, a small part of a larger problem that can threaten the unity of the people in this country. The community seems to harbour prejudices in silence, which can easily erupt when provoked. Several incidents, such as the controversy over stockings with the word “Allah”, petrol bomb attacks on convenience stores, and derogatory remarks towards certain religions and races on social media, are examples of events that have manifested these issues. Even though these 3R issues have been reported to the authorities and brought to prosecution in court, they continue to occur, further dividing the people of this country (Badlishah Sham Baharin, 2024).

Moreover, the president calls for a collective effort to restore harmony and prevent further division. Badlishah Sham Baharin (2024) further urges,

Stop any behaviour that is like pouring oil into the fire. Instead, take a lesson from what has happened and work together to find ways to restore harmony. [...] No one wants to return to the Tragedy of May 13. It is a dark event and history that should be taken as a lesson so that the solutions used at that time can be understood in the context of today’s societal conflicts.

This statement illustrates the framing strategies of IKRAM utilised, particularly frame amplification and frame bridging. In this quote, IKRAM amplifies the value of national unity, and the lessons learned from historical conflicts in order to highlight the importance of unity and social cohesion. By employing frame bridging, the IKRAM president uses the historical memory of the Tragedy of May 13 and the fears of conflict to connect with

⁴⁰ Interestingly, the diagnosis frames of IKRAM are not clearly and explicitly presented in the documents of IKRAM. Even in their proposed agenda, such as *Negara Rahmah*, IKRAM declares the proposal without the problems are named or defined. Therefore, the analysis had to be extended to the other media statements of IKRAM. Consequently, the diagnosis frames are mostly found in the media statements published against specific incidents that caused serious public discussions.

current societal issues. This effort also guides and supports the discourse of IKRAM in terms of its position, establishing good relationships with non-Malays and non-Muslims. Furthermore, the utilisation of these framing strategies also contributes to the reconstruction of IKRAM's discourse and its cohesion.

On the other hand, it is found that IKRAM's approach towards *Shari'a* law and its implementation, as one of the significant components of the Islamisation of Malaysia, is changing in a similar way to ABIM. While ABIM was drawing attention to the complexities of its implementation, IKRAM attained the concept with a much broader and more abstract meaning. This shift in perspective signifies a strategic re-articulation of *Shari'a* within the context of modern Malaysian society. As elaborated by IKRAM-5,

I guess, when IKRAM mentions *Shari'a*, we do not necessarily narrow down on the Hudud law itself, [but] *Shari'a* as a source of inspiration. The methodology of how we come up with decisions, and all of that. We believe [that] *Shari'a* is wider than this Hudud law. This [law] is just the tail, and it is the end game of what *Shari'a* is, if necessary. But the wider message or operational solutions that we should be offering is a lot wider than that. For example, how do we come up with solutions to solve poverty, right? So, for us, *Shari'a* and injunctions are even more important than Hudud itself. We should be focusing on these things first (IKRAM-5, personal communication, August 27, 2023).

From the discourse theory perspective, IKRAM's re-articulation of the meaning of *Shari'a* is strategic.⁴¹ Initially, the concept could be seen as a floating signifier because its meaning was contested and debated within Malaysian society by different Islamic groups. By giving them a much broader meaning, IKRAM can draw connections with

⁴¹ Another informant from IKRAM, IKRAM-3 shared a similar approach on IKRAM's *Shari'a* understanding, which also supports this claim. As he stated, "I think in terms of understanding *Shari'a*, pretty much same across all the Islamic Movements, but we differ in terms of priorities. Which comes first? So, for example, some group they want to implement the hudud first. But we see *Shari'a* as broader going to the good-governance that is *Shari'a* law, maintaining peace and order, unity is *Shari'a* as well. So, the way Islam and *Shari'a* being talked and discussed, IKRAM is more like achieving the objectives of *Shari'a* first." (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022).

other elements within its discourse, such as good governance, justice and equality and align it with their vision of *Negara Rahmah*, which is its hegemonic project.

6.3.2 Prognosis Frame

The prognosis frames of IKRAM are mainly connected to the vision of *Negara Rahmah* (lit., Compassionate Nation). This vision is not only targeted to make the state and its institutions compassionate but also civil society organisations, industry and ordinary people as a whole. The primary motivation behind *Negara Rahmah* is to build a country where each element of society performs better and lives together harmoniously (cited in Atriza Dan Basmin, 2023a). The Islamic concept of *Rahmah*, which broadly signifies compassion or mercy towards all of humanity, serves as the foundation of this vision. By strategically adopting this concept, IKRAM aims to construct a discourse that resonates with all segments of Malaysian society. In this respect, *Negara Rahmah* is a vital component of IKRAM's hegemonic project.

The *Negara Rahmah* vision consists of 12 pillars covering almost all aspects of social and political life, ranging from national leadership, government, law implementations, family, economy, development, and public and international policies, as listed below (IKRAM, n.d.).

1. Competent and Integrity-based National Leadership
2. Effective Checks and Balances in Government
3. Good Governance
4. Just Laws
5. Knowledgeable, Ethical, and Caring Society
6. An Intact Family Institution
7. Harmonious Ethnic and Religious Relations
8. A Sustainable Economy
9. Equitable Distribution of Wealth
10. Sustainable Development
11. Welfare, Health, and Safety of the People
12. Leading Efforts for Peace and Universal Well-being

The critical aspect of these pillars is that they are overly general and abstract categories. While these pillars are derived from an Islamic concept, it is interesting to note that none of them is related to the Islamisation of Malaysia. As indicated by IKRAM-6, when IKRAM executives were articulating these concepts, they strategically chose them so that these pillars could reflect the values of all Malaysians and resonate with both Muslims and non-Muslims (IKRAM-6, personal communication, September 17, 2023). This approach ensures that IKRAM advocates for a vision that is inclusive and appealing to the entire Malaysian society. IKRAM-2 from IKRAM elaborates on the importance of this inclusive approach.

Part of the reason, I guess, is that it is the most dominant aspect of Islam epistemologically. We have it in the Quran: *Rahmatan lil alamin* [mercy to the worlds]. That's the main cause, so we should highlight that as the main value to portray the message we are carrying to the people. That is one reason. Secondly, I guess Malaysia, as a society, is probably one of the most unique Muslim countries, where only 50 per cent of the population is Muslim. There are quite a number of non-Muslims. So, the face of Islam in this day and age is underrepresented in the wider global context. It is quite strategic for Malaysia to have that kind of image where Islam is portrayed in the *Rahmatic* approach to the 40% of non-Muslims in Malaysia. That also builds Malaysia's value in the global context (IKRAM-2, personal communication, January 13, 2023).

She points out that the compassionate face of Islam is often underrepresented globally. By promoting this aspect of Islam, Malaysia can enhance its image as a nation that upholds and practices the true, compassionate face of Islam.

In line with the vision of *Negara Rahmah*, IKRAM aims to cultivate young leaders and help them become more powerful in the decision-making mechanisms and politics in Malaysia.⁴² Thus, they have decided to be more present in Malaysian politics, not as a

⁴² While IKRAM administration took this decision, as IKRAM-5 shared, there are disagreements on this decision within the movement, "It's an internal discussion within IKRAM. Where do you cross the line between the Islamic movement and the politics? Politics has its own logic. Islamic movements [have its own] as well. So that we don't affect it with whatever is happening in the political scene. [Also] how do you effectively delegate work? [...] Yes, they are trying to find a solution." (IKRAM-5, personal communication, August 27, 2023). Moreover, as IKRAM-6 pointed out, some IKRAM members left the movement after this decision because they did not approve of IKRAM's decision of active political presence in Malaysian politics (IKRAM-6, personal communication, September 17, 2023).

political party but as a counterpart of political parties (IKRAM-6, personal communication, September 17, 2023; IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022). While IKRAM is often associated with AMANAH, the informants highlighted that IKRAM does not have an official political party affiliation, thereby maintaining a non-partisan stance. IKRAM-1, explained this position further,

So, they [ABIM] are, in the sense, partisan. But IKRAM we are also involved in the citizens' politics. We are partly in the political process, but we are very clear that we are not partisan. And we cannot express any support, clear support for any party and there is actually a Shura decision or legislation. [...] We do have a close relationship with AMANAH but and all parties. But at the same time, we are also working closely with the government. If other parties [is the government], we will not close our gate to talk to them (IKRAM-1, personal communication, January 11, 2023).

From the perspective of discourse theory, IKRAM's stance on political engagement and its emphasis on non-partisanship can be seen as a strategic effort to construct and maintain a particular discourse that aligns with its broader vision of *Negara Rahmah*. By emphasising their non-partisan stance, IKRAM constructs an identity that differentiates them from other movements like ABIM. IKRAM's rejection of explicit party affiliation allows them the flexibility to communicate and collaborate with different political parties without a distinct political identity. This non-partisan political approach, therefore, enables IKRAM to promote and pursue the implementation of its hegemonic project, ensuring that its ideals and objectives can resonate across the political spectrum.

6.3.3 Motivational Frame

IKRAM's activities as a social movement predominantly constitute community work, advocacy, and lobbying aiming to raise awareness or expand the movement's influence. Organising mass protests, rallies, or petition campaigns is not IKRAM's primary method for grassroots mobilisations. IKRAM's motivational frames can be analysed into two categories: its own members, the audience, and potential supporters. For its members, IKRAM's activities are in the context of *tarbiyya* (religious and spiritual education). This

method ensures that members gather regularly and strengthen their religious knowledge, spiritual commitment, and sense of community. As described by IKRAM-3,

We, as members, start from the very smallest unit we call it *halakah*, *usrah*. What we do on a weekly basis is that we meet, we call this *usrah*, we read the Qur'an, understanding *tafsir*. And then, we always talk about what is the social project that we need to spread out. That is the priority of every constituency (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022).

These regular interactions through *halakah*, or *usrah*, foster a sense of community and shared purpose among members. Moreover, the focus on social projects during these meetings ensures that IKRAM's initiatives are continuously aligned with its broader objectives and community needs. These meetings are not only about discussion and spiritual growth but also serve as a starting point for community-orientated activities. IKRAM uses these meetings to motivate its members to become actively involved in community work and emphasises the importance of practical involvement in social issues. IKRAM-3 further explained,

You must always go back to the society. Not just. You should not stay just within the circle of discussion. So, we have so many programmes; for example, when there are low-income areas, we do training for the parents on how to guide children academically. It also comes with the certain assistance of food baskets. We also have democracy level of advocacy. Under IKRAM, there are many agencies formed, according to the niche. Some are related to mental health, some to political awakening, and some to environment, recycling, and climate change. We have various agencies. So, all the young IKRAM members can choose which space they can perform well so they can work in that area (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022).

The informant shows how IKRAM uses the weekly meetings with its members as a lever to engage members in community projects. These community projects, which range from educational programmes for parents in low-income neighbourhoods to food assistance and from mental health support to environmental advocacy, serve to connect IKRAM with potential members and a wider audience. IKRAM strategically designs its programmes to meet the specific needs of target communities. This approach ensures that

IKRAM can reach a wider audience across different segments of society. As IKRAM-6 noted, IKRAM uses these initiatives as a means of indirect introduction to the audience.

We separate [our activities] into the areas. So, for example, we want to introduce IKRAM to the villagers or B40 people, the lower income people. Because they do not know what IKRAM is. We create a program to create awareness. For example, we do not enter the area to introduce IKRAM, but we introduce our program, such as tuition for education. So, indirectly, we can introduce ourselves. [...] Under IKRAM, we have numerous agencies. We divided our activities into those agencies. For education, we have MOSLEH. We have our own syllabus. For the economy, we have the MUBIN agency. We conducted a big event and called it “Youngest Economists in Malaysia.” We give [young people] support [through] education. [Now] we want to introduce IKRAM to the villagers. For example, villagers or B40 people (IKRAM-6, personal communication, September 17, 2023).

Along with community service activities, IKRAM also mobilises its constituents for political purposes. As IKRAM-6 stated, IKRAM campaigned in favour of opposition parties in the 2018 general election process for a government change; “Our 2018 vision or aim was to change the government. At that time, we sent our candidates, the best candidates, [for] the opposition to win.” (IKRAM-6, personal communication, September 17, 2023). In another statement, IKRAM-3 described the IKRAM’s efforts in the election campaigns, “as for now [in] every constituency of Parliament, there are IKRAMs in that district. So, when there is an election, every constituent has IKRAM members [who] will help. [...] if the party is that we kind of choose, if this is the one that we want them to win, so our members will work as helpers across Malaysia.” (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022). It is evident that there is a pragmatic shift in IKRAM’s approach to politics, which is constructing a non-partisan political stance to allow necessary political manoeuvring. In this political approach, IKRAM utilises its intellectual and human capital resources, which creates a stage where it is “a partner in nation-building.” (IKRAM-1, personal communication, January 11, 2023). IKRAM’s active participation in Malaysian politics also indicates that it will play an increasingly critical and influential role in the future.

6.4 Muslim Solidarity Front (ISMA)

As discussed in the previous chapter, the identity fields of ISMA, the movement positions itself as a defender of Malay-Muslim rights and identity and portrays the liberal and secular forces within Malaysia as significant threats to the nation's Islamic and Malay character. ISMA's identities of the *self* and *other* are intricately tied to the movement's core framing tasks, through which the movement constructs its worldview, diagnoses societal challenges, and advocates for specific solutions to preserve its vision of Malaysia's Islamic and Malay identity. This section, therefore, examines ISMA's core framing tasks to unpack the movement's ideological orientation, its critiques of the current system, and its proposed solutions, and mobilisation calls.

6.4.1 Diagnosis Frame

While the departure point for the diagnosis frames is the same as that for ABIM and IKRAM, which is the system inherited from colonials and is not compatible with Islam, the articulation of the diagnosis frame is radically different. ISMA sees Malaysian society from an ethno-religious perspective and argues that Malay rights and the position of Islam are under threat. Calling it the "Malay issue", this has been found to be the only diagnosis frame of ISMA's discourse.

The current system, which is inherited from the colonials, does not benefit the Muslims, in general, and the Malay-Muslim community in particular; therefore, it diminishes the political influence and strategic positions of Malays. As the former president of ISMA stated in his article,

The Islamisation project that has been going on for a long time allows it to happen. In fact, sometimes it also runs it. [...] Islamisation of banking, for example, will revolve around Islamising some banking products and financial instruments. It will never enable Muslims to get out of dependence on banks. Not to mention developing a waqf system, community takaful and so on to become the core of the economic development of Muslims (Muhammad Fauzi Asmuni, 2022).

ISMA's diagnostic frames are primarily derived from the local Malaysian context and are grounded on a significant boundary-making effort polarising between "us" and "them". ISMA sees Malaysian society from an ethno-religious perspective and argues that Malay rights and the position of Islam are under threat because of the diminishing political influence and strategic positions of Malays. ISMA, as a protagonist positing itself as a defender of Malays, calls this situation the "Malay issue" (Abdullah Zaik, 2022a). For ISMA, the Malay issue is the root of the problem encompassing Malays' deprived social and economic conditions and the potential loss of their special rights and positions in the social hierarchy. As Abdullah Zaik articulates this in his statement below.

"New Malaysia" is no longer a country based on Malays and Islam when liberal democratic practices are practised and applied in the Malaysian government. So, when this [strategic positions are now taken over by liberal and secular leaders] happens, it will marginalise the position of Islam, Islamic idealism, Islamic political philosophy, the concept of construction or the life system of civilisation government based on Tawhid⁴³, revelation, and religion (Abdullah Zaik, 2018b).

This fear of loss is rooted in the colonial trauma experienced by the Malay community. During the colonial era, Malays primarily engaged in agriculture and government services, while the Chinese dominated urban areas, particularly manufacturing, construction, and commerce (Syed Husin Ali, 2015). Hence, there was a clear division of power: Malays held political power while the Chinese wielded economic influence. Since the pre-independence period, there has been a fear among Malays of losing control of political power, which could result in losing control of the land (Noorani Noor, 2009). ISMA's discourse exacerbates this fear of loss by associating it with liberal Malays and

⁴³ In Islam, the concept of tawhid refers to believing Allah who is the One, Unique, and the Creator. This fundamental understanding forms the core of Islamic faith and guides the practical efforts of Muslims in their daily lives according to the principles of the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (see, Fontaine & Nuhu, 2022).

non-Malays, implying that they are remnants of colonial influence (Muhammad Fauzi Asmuni, 2022).

Equally crucial is the threat posed not only to the political power of Malays but also to the position of Islam by the antagonists, comprising liberal and secular Malaysians, as well as politicians. ISMA perceives that Islam, along with its symbols, values, and institutions, faces constant insults and ridicule from these groups. Given that the PH government includes Malay politicians affiliated with this coalition, ISMA believes that the political influence of liberal-minded politicians jeopardises the future of Islam in Malaysia. (Sekretariat Malaysia Negara Islam (MNI), 2018). Therefore, their power leads to great danger for ISMA, as discussed by one of the executives of ISMA, Badhrulhisham, below.

Where is the country headed with these plans? Do all these plans lead to building a nation and give meaning to our lives, or are they just tools to fulfil the “will of certain parties” who do not believe in our ethos and identity as citizens of the archipelago? [...] We need to review the current state philosophy. If this topic is not discussed now, our national narrative will be guided by other interest groups. At that point, we would be servants who make other parties’ agendas and projects successful in our own homeland (Badhrulhisham Abdul Aziz, 2023).

From the perspective of ISMA, the current system of Malaysia is defined as liberal-democratic, which is emphasised as a legacy of colonial power, needs to be changed. Nevertheless, other Islamic movements have dramatically different views on this. As ISMA-1 argued, these movements are upholding a system that perpetuates the issues they claim to oppose. ISMA sees this as a fundamental betrayal of Islamic principles and a failure to address the more profound, systemic problems facing the Malay-Muslim community.

For ISMA, they [ABIM and IKRAM] view the current situation cannot be solved. Just by joining and just by, you know, fixing some things in the current system. I mean, we have democracy as the current system, capitalism. Of course, there are things that are problematic with this system. ABIM and

IKRAM view that we can live with the system. It is just that we have to fix it and make it more Islamic. So, democracy could be Islamic, according to them. They live with it, and they participate in the system. Actually, they are very actively upholding the system. They are, I think, very much involved in the political in the democratic system in Malaysia (ISMA-1, personal communication, January 26, 2023).

Consequently, the identity fields of ISMA play an essential role within ISMA's diagnosis frames. Its discourse disputes Western-style liberal-secular entities as a fundamental threat to the country's existence. In doing so, ISMA assigns blame to both Western entities and non-Muslims and non-Malays. The diagnosis frame amplifies the fear of danger and the fear of losing out, evoking sentiments reminiscent of the pre-independence period and employing them against liberal and non-Malay political actors. ISMA also provides an ideological underpinning for their reasoning that the liberal-democratic system is not merely a neutral structure but conflicts with Islamic values. The movement believes that this system inherently limits the implementation of true Islamic principles.

6.4.2 Prognosis Frame

ISMA proposes various solutions to the issues it identifies. Its primary prognosis frame is centred on addressing the problem of national unity. ISMA advocates for "Malay unity and the sovereignty of Islam," encapsulated in its campaign slogan. By framing it as "the Malay agenda," which validates Malay-Muslims as the indigenous inhabitants of Malaysia, ISMA advocates for the promotion of the Malay language, culture, moral values, and attire as the national culture essential for fostering national unity (Shuaib Ar-Rumy, 2022). The term also refers to putting Malay-Muslims in the highest position in the country, which also means that upholding Islam as well, therefore, has been placed in a much broader context than merely nationalist understanding. As stated in ISMA's campaign statement in 2023,

[...] the mission [is] to produce individuals and communities who are proud of their national cultural identity based on Islam & Malay and rise with a high patriotic spirit and fight faithfully for the good of the country and Muslims. In addition, this campaign also aims to increase the understanding of the community, especially the Malays and Muslims in Malaysia, regarding the importance of the Malay language as the national identity of Malaysia, as well as the values of the national culture based on Islam and Malays which are the pillars of the national identity (ISMA, 2023).

As discussed in the sections outlining the antagonist and diagnostic frames, ISMA vehemently opposes the Western-style liberal democratic system, which advocates for equal rights for all citizens. Given the divergence between the Malay agenda and unity and this system, and considering Malaysia's Islamic status, significant adjustments are deemed necessary. ISMA proposes that rather than advocating for equal rights for every citizen, Malay-Muslims should hold a leading position, as stated by Muhd Farhan:

The problem of national unity that is getting worse in our beloved homeland can only be solved through Islamic leadership based on the true balance of *Shari'a*. Therefore, the solution to this issue must begin through the Muslim Malays, who become the pillar of the citizenry by prioritising religious demands over the needs of lust, solving first the unity of fellow Malays, and choosing a leadership capable of making Islam sovereign in its true dignity (Muhd Farhan Muhd Fadzil, 2019).

Finally, for ISMA, Malay-Muslim leaders and politicians must promote and protect Malay rights and Islam's position in Malaysia (Abdullah Zaik, 2022b). By declaring most of the politicians as not Islamic enough, ISMA argues that national leaders must have certain qualities, "They must have a perfect and clear understanding of Islamic religion, have an agenda to make Islam sovereign, understand the federal constitution, and understand the scheming of the enemies of Islam, whether from within or outside the country, in addition to actively improving the country's economy (Muhd Farhan Muhd Fadzil, 2019). Hence, ISMA expects a political leader to go beyond merely being Malay-Muslim but to be one who will advocate for the interests of Malays and Islam while confronting the antagonists.

ISMA believes that other movements, such as ABIM and IKRAM, are too willing to compromise by participating in this system. Instead, ISMA calls for a more radical approach that involves rethinking and potentially replacing the current system with one that aligns more closely with Islamic principles. As ISMA-1 pointed out,

The main distinction between us, ISMA and other groups [referring to ABIM and IKRAM] is that we are questioning it [referring to the liberal-democratic system]. And we say that yes, we do not have any complete solution for it, but we can think of something new. We are challenging [the current system] because we think that there should be another system, and we are capable of thinking about it. The Westerners are saying that we are not capable of offering a system like this; see Iran and see Afghanistan. So, we are being humiliated that we Muslims think that we should just follow them, and we do not have the capability to think of ourselves. [After] researching, studying the knowledge that our scholars have done, have written in many books, we say “no, we have our own experience in Islam, and our challenge is to formulate [a new] system and then offer it as an alternative to the current reality” (ISMA-1, personal communication, January 26, 2023).

ISMA’s discourse and actions aim to establish a hegemonic discourse. By challenging the existing liberal-democratic framework and aiming to replace it with an Islamic system of governance that reflects their interpretation of the Quran and Sunnah, this endeavour is not merely about political change but about asserting a new hegemonic order where Islamic values and Malay-Muslim interests are central. Besides, ISMA employs the logic of difference to distinguish itself from other Islamic movements like ABIM and IKRAM. This logic involves highlighting the fundamental differences between ISMA’s approach and the perceived compromises of other movements. ISMA criticises ABIM and IKRAM for their willingness to work within the liberal-democratic system, which ISMA views as inherently flawed and incapable of truly accommodating Islamic principles. By doing so, ISMA creates a logic of difference between ABIM, IKRAM, and the ideologies of liberalism and secularism. This logic helps to single out ISMA and its discourse as the only legitimate one while delegitimising others.

6.4.3 Motivational Frame

Since 2018, ISMA has frequently used motivational frames to call supporters and their audiences to action. In what Tarrow (1993) has called repertoires of contention, ISMA's motivational frames employ various contention methods. At times, ISMA urges the audience to provide material support, such as participating in rallies or signing petitions, while at other times, it seeks immaterial support to sway the audience's decisions, such as through awareness campaigns. Throughout these appeals, careful and repeated utilisation of identity fields, diagnostic, and prognostic frames is evident. Certain frames resonate particularly well with the Malay-Muslim audience, effectively motivating mobilisation and facilitating change.

One significant event was the rally *Himpunan 812*, organised in 2018 with the backing of opposition parties. The rally aimed to protest the government's proposal to ratify the ICERD. ISMA and supporting opposition parties urged Malay-Muslims to join the rally to safeguard the special rights of Malays, aligning with their diagnostic frame that Malay and Muslim rights were under threat. One of the most vocal frames in the rally was ISMA's slogan, "Malay unity and Islam's sovereignty." According to the estimates of Kuala Lumpur Police, 55,000 Malays responded to the call and participated in the rally (cited in Azaman, 2018).

Another call by ISMA was against antagonist politicians who were either non-Malay or liberal-minded Malay political candidates in the 2018 and 2022 General Elections. The Conscious Voter Movement (*Gerakan Pengundi Sedar*, or GPS) was launched in 2018 by ISMA. While most Malay politicians are corrupt, oblivious, or against Malays and indigenous rights like non-Malay politicians, this campaign urged Muslims to vote for "credible Muslim candidates" who would raise the Islamic agenda in the Parliament, fight for Malay and indigenous rights, and be free from corruption (see, Image 6.3 for the

campaign call poster). With this campaign, ISMA was actively involved in election campaigns, even though it did not participate in the elections with any party.

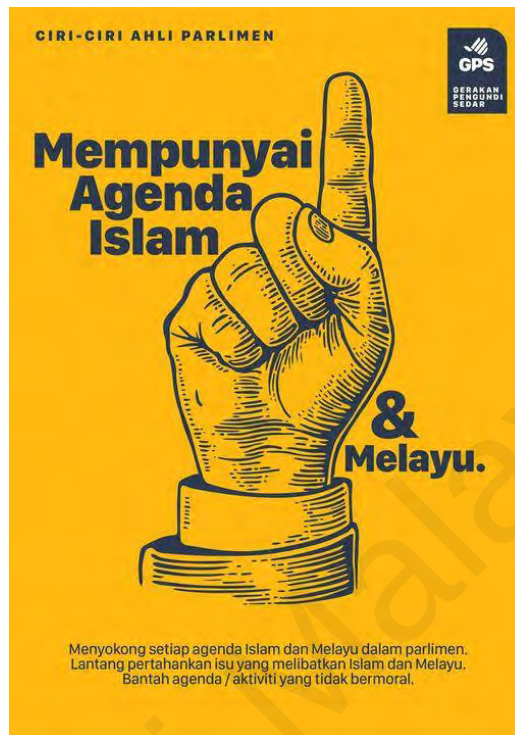


Image 6.3 The Campaign Photo of the Voters Awareness Campaign⁴⁴

This image illustrates how ISMA links the concepts of Islam and Malay identity, presenting them as intertwined and inseparable. The raised index finger, a gesture that symbolises the oneness of “Allah” in Islam, is used to visualise the campaign. Combined with the text, this gesture may be interpreted as an appeal for electoral backing for candidates who express these shared values, suggesting that Islamic and Malay rights should be at the forefront of political preferences.

In 2018, ISMA undertook another significant initiative through a petition campaign advocating for Malaysia to be officially recognised as an Islamic state. The campaign

⁴⁴ The English translation of the headline at the top: Characteristics of A Parliament Member. Main text: Have an Islamic and Malay agenda. Subtext: Support every Islamic and Malay agenda in parliament. Openly defend any issues involving Islam and Malay. Oppose agendas/activities that are immoral. “Vote for Malay Candidates Campaign”, 5 April 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/pengundisedar/posts/ciri-ciri-ahli-parlimen-yang-kita-inginkan-adalahmempunyai-agenda-keutamaan-islam/1783233935318829/>

positioned its opponents as proponents of a secular state, labelling them as the “champions of secularism,” predominantly comprising non-Malays. Utilising the diagnostic frame of “Islam being under threat,” ISMA launched a petition urging the Prime Minister and the King (*Sultan Agong*) of Malaysia to declare Malaysia as an Islamic state unequivocally. However, the level of resonance with the public remains uncertain. ISMA aimed to garner one million signatures for the petition, yet as of November 2023, only around 150,000 signatures had been collected (Sekretariat Malaysia Negara Islam (MNI), 2018).

As these calls show, ISMA’s motivational frames unify the audience around a shared cause and heightens the urgency and legitimacy of Malay-Muslim “fighters” response. Such strategic framing ensures that the ideology is not merely a disparate collection of concepts but a cohesive system that shapes the perceptions and behaviours of Malay-Muslims. By directly linking their identity to political and social action frames, ISMA strengthens its position and influence within the discourse on Malay nationalism and Islamic identity.

6.5 Comparative Analysis of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA’s Core Framing Tasks

This section examines the core framing tasks of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA (*see*, Table 6.1 below). These movements, while sharing a common foundation in Islamic revivalism, diverge significantly in their framing strategies and discursive practices, reflecting their unique ideological orientations and political aspirations.

Table 6.1 Overview of Core Framing Tasks of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA

Core Framing Tasks	ABIM	IKRAM	ISMA
Diagnosis Frames	Focuses on social cohesion and counters extremist ideologies.	Emphasises social cohesion, ethical governance, and countering extremism. Diagnosis includes challenges to harmonious multi-ethnic relations.	Critiques liberal-democratic system as incompatible with Islamic principles and harmful to Malay-Muslim interests.
Prognosis Frames	Advocates for Cosmopolitan Islam and Bangsa Malaysia, promoting an inclusive national identity that transcends ethnic and religious lines.	Presents <i>Negara Rahmah</i> as a vision of a compassionate and just society, emphasising gradual Islamisation and ethical governance.	Promotes Malay-Muslim leadership and the establishment of an Islamic state aligned with <i>Shari'a</i> , reinforcing Malay-Muslim rights.
Motivational Frames	Recent most effective motivational frame of ABIM is #kitakawan social media campaign. Mobilises for a united Malaysian society grounded in shared values and mutual respect.	Encourages dialogue with different social groups in the Malaysian society to foster national unity.	Uses various types of contentions, such as petitions, rallies, and demonstrations to mobilise its audience to guarantee Malay-Muslim supremacy.

Source: Author's compilation based on the data presented in this chapter.

The findings suggest that both ABIM and IKRAM's discourse has evolved from its early anti-colonial and anti-Western stance to a contemporary focus on national unity and countering extremist ideologies. Their current diagnosis highlights the challenge of social cohesion and the rise of racial and religious extremism, particularly in the wake of the 2022 general elections. On the other hand, the prognosis frames are different. ABIM's prognosis frames, rooted in the concept of Cosmopolitan Islam and *Bangsa* Malaysia, advocate for an inclusive national identity that transcends ethnic and religious boundaries. By strategically re-articulating key Islamic concepts, ABIM promotes a vision of a united Malaysian society grounded in shared values and mutual respect.

IKRAM's prognosis frames, on the other hand, centre on the vision of *Negara Rahmah*, which seeks to establish a compassionate and just society through gradual Islamisation. The movement's prognosis emphasises the importance of ethical governance, social justice, and equitable development, appealing to both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. By advocating for a non-partisan approach and engaging in community-oriented activities, IKRAM aims to foster national cohesion and promote its inclusive vision of an Islamic society.

ISMA's core framing tasks are radically different from ABIM and IKRAM's tasks. Strongly emphasising the Malay agenda and the defence of Malay-Muslim rights and Islam's sovereignty, the movement's diagnosis frames portray the current liberal-democratic system as incompatible with Islamic principles and detrimental to Malay-Muslim interests. ISMA's prognosis advocates for the prioritising of Malay-Muslim leadership and the establishment of an Islamic state that aligns with their interpretation of *Shari'a*. Through its polarising rhetoric and mobilisation campaigns, ISMA seeks to challenge the existing political order and assert its vision of a hegemonic Islamic state.

The analysis of the discursive frames also shows the interplay between identity fields and the core framing tasks. The construction of identity fields provides the movements a foundation for diagnosing the problems, proposing solutions and mobilising the audience for action. For example, as non-Malays are considered as an audience in the discourse of ABIM and IKRAM, it was found that the prognosis frames are articulated in a way that resonates among the non-Malay communities. On the contrary, the same group is considered as the antagonist in the ISMA's discourse. Furthermore, the diagnosis frames of ISMA articulated in a way that target them as the antagonists. ISMA's construction of identity fields and core framing tasks is significantly influenced by the ideology of Malay nationalism and the historical struggles and grievances of Malay-Muslims during the

colonial era. For instance, the term “colonial West” is positioned as an antagonist, while “Chinese” are depicted as immigrants, guests, or trespassers. Malays are portrayed as the rightful landowners, urged to unite to defend their heritage. These frames resonate strongly with Malay-Muslims owing to their presence in the collective memory of Malays. These are the frame alignment strategies that ISMA utilises to bridge its audience’s values, beliefs, or interests with the movement’s goals, ideology, or activities.

Comparing the core framing tasks of these movements in terms of the use of emotions, the findings show that ISMA use them — most evidently, fear, anger, and resentment— more effectively, particularly in diagnosis and motivational frames. While the role of emotions is often overlooked in frame theory, they are a crucial dimension of ISMA mobilisation. As noted by Goodwin and Jasper (1999), collective identities are imbued with strong emotional components. Fear and anger serve as potent catalysts for participant mobilisation (van Zomeren et al., 2004).

In the case of ISMA, emotions play a pivotal role in shaping identity fields and core framing tasks, intimately intertwining with socio-political issues, perceived threats, injustices, and historical grievances. By incorporating these emotions into its frames, ISMA cultivates a collective sense of resentment, fear, and anger towards its perceived antagonists, effectively harnessing these sentiments to galvanise its audience into action. The findings elucidate that emotions are not merely irrational reactions but strategic tools in ISMA’s discourse.

In conclusion, the discursive frames of ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA demonstrate the dynamic interplay between ideology, identity, and political strategy within Malaysia’s *dakwah* movements. The findings reveal that framing is not merely a rhetorical exercise, but a dynamic process shaped by historical contexts, identity constructions, and emotional appeals. This suggests that while Islamic revivalism in Malaysia is heavily influenced by

local socio-political challenges, it constructs different trajectories in response to these challenges.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to deconstruct the discursive frames employed by ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA to elucidate how each movement constructs its identity, diagnoses societal problems, and proposes solutions. This analysis provided insights into how these movements construct social realities, articulate their visions, and mobilise their audiences. It also highlighted how these framing strategies reflect and shape their ideological orientations, identity fields, and responses to socio-political challenges.

The framing strategies of ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA reflect the dynamic interplay between ideology, identity, and political strategy in Malaysia's socio-political landscape. Their discourses are not static but evolve in response to historical and contemporary challenges. This suggests that Islamic revivalism in Malaysia is neither monolithic nor uniform; rather, it encompasses diverse trajectories shaped by local contexts and global influences. These divergences illustrate how Islamic movements navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity, localism and universalism, and unity and division.

CHAPTER 7: COMPETITION OVER HEGEMONY: STRATEGIES OF THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS

7.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters explored the identity construction processes and the identification of antagonists and audiences of Islamic movements in Malaysia, followed by ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA's meaning-making processes by utilising core framing tasks. While identity fields and core framing tasks revealed how movements construct and communicate their identity and vision, competition strategies represent the operational dimension of these frames. Through resource mobilisation, legitimacy-building, influence, and hegemonic projects these movements transform discursive constructions into actionable strategies to assert dominance within Malaysia's Islamic landscape.

This chapter examines the competition strategies under four sections which are resources, legitimacy, influence, and hegemonic projects. The first strategy analysed for ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA is the competition over resources. This competition encompasses both human capital and material resources, including financial assets and physical properties. The second strategy is the competition over legitimacy, which is examined through public perception and the role of *ulama* in this study. ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA actively use diverse platforms, particularly social media, to shape and influence public opinion. However, the struggle for a positive public image comes with challenges, including external attempts at discrediting and negative labelling, which can undermine their efforts and erode public trust. Thus, the efforts of these Islamic movements to establish and maintain a positive public image become crucial. The role of *ulama*, or Islamic scholars, is another layer of complexity to the competition for legitimacy. In the Malaysian context, *ulama* holds significant power as interpreters of Islamic principles, making their endorsement crucial for the movements. Each movement

strives to align itself with authoritative *ulama* to bolster its legitimacy and appeal among Malaysian Muslims. This alignment is not without its challenges, as movements must navigate the dynamics of attracting and retaining respected *ulama* within their ranks.

The third strategy is the competition over influence which showed itself in the access to the media and grassroots communication. Finally the fourth strategy is the competition over hegemonic projects. In this section, drawing on the identification processes, core framing tasks, and collaboration and consensus of these movements, two main projects have been detected and analysed comparatively. The chapter, then, presents the concluding remarks.

7.2 Competition over Resources

As the resource mobilisation theory claimed, social movements, as rational bodies, compete for limited resources (Koopmans, 1993; Zald & McCarthy, 1980) which can be for participants' money, time, energy and skills (McCarthy & Zald, 2001; Zald & McCarthy, 1980), for symbolic goods such as prestige, or for gaining legitimacy and credibility from the authorities (Benford & Zurcher, 1990), or support from public, elites and other external groups (Zald & Useem, 2017). In this section, I analyse the competition between ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM regarding human capital and financial resources.

7.2.1 Human Capital

The informants of ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA strongly emphasised that the resources, particularly human capital, are vital for them for several reasons, such as to maintain the movement's legitimacy, credibility, and political influence and to provide a networking capacity to the movement. Firstly, the number of members is considered a significant indicator of the movement's success. As the ex-member of one of these Islamic movements pointed out, "If they can recruit more people, they are winning, you know. Same as ABIM. With more people or more youngsters [they recruit], they think, 'We are

better than ISMA', 'We are better than this and that!'" (E-1, personal communication, August 10, 2023). Thus, the number of members can be considered a significant indicator of symbolic competition because it can signify the movement's ability to attract and recruit new members. This ability is a testament to the movements' legitimacy and popularity compared to others.

Secondly, there is an inevitable competition over human capital between ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA because they share the same constituency: Muslim middle and upper-middle-class Malaysians. University students are the main target group of these Islamic movements. Expert-2 shared that all Islamic movements actively and openly engaged with university students until the early mid-2000s. "Every university had this kind of recruitment, which was very visible. 'Which *jamaat* are you following?' was a normal question during my time."⁴⁵ As s/he noted, the main reason for targeting particularly university students is that "These university students will be somebody in the future. They will join the government forces. They [the Islamic movements] are developing connections." (Expert-2, personal communication, August 4, 2022). Expert-1 explains this recruitment plan further,

They [the Islamic movements] are predominantly in urban areas and their support base is basically Muslim middle, upper-middle-class professionals. People like them, basically. There are many Western-educated professionals who are the supporters [of these movements]. They attract the same [ideology], and they [the movements] recruit [them, the supporters] in universities among university students here and abroad. They are very active in Australia, in the UK, and in the US recruiting students from there. So, these are the people who come back and then become professionals themselves and join (or they are already a part of) the movement (Expert-1, personal communication, August 10, 2023).

⁴⁵ S/he also noted that this recruitment strategy has almost completely changed to a more indirect approach, and the reason behind this shift is open to speculation. S/he pointed out that one of the reasons could be the UMNO government's pressure on universities to restrict the activities of Islamic movements on campus; "UMNO made a very huge strategy. So, they did a lot of things to make sure that this Islamic student power can be curbed and can be curtailed. And suddenly the students who were studying at the university were no longer active. They no longer choose certain schools. They have done a lot of things. For example, they did not give accommodation to students. Students from certain states, students from certain faculties were expelled from residential colleges. So, they used this pressure." (Expert-2, personal communication, August 4, 2022).

Islamic movements' investment in Muslim middle and upper-middle-class professionals, many of whom are Western-educated, provides strategic capabilities necessary to exercise substantial political influence. Furthermore, by recruiting university students both locally and internationally graduated, particularly those who graduated from Australian, British and American universities, as Expert-1 pointed out, these movements cultivate a strong network of ideologically aligned individuals. As these students return and assume professional roles, they integrate into influential positions within various institutions, advocating for the movement's goals. This transnational network has the capacity to enhance the movement's power for mobilisation. Consequently, the movements' association with well-educated professionals lends them greater legitimacy and credibility reinforcing their overall political and social impact.

On the other hand, having a strong middle and upper-middle-class member base causes drawbacks, such as struggling to permeate to the lower classes. Having a significant middle-class, upper-middle-class intellectual, and professional members base, IKRAM severely faces this struggle. IKRAM-3 explains; "There is a challenge because as a group of intellectuals who try to change the paradigm, and to, actually, touch the ground is not easy. If [we cannot], IKRAM [remains] more exclusive and elite. So, I think we are struggling grounding [the movement]. (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022)." This struggle is elaborated and discussed in detail in the Grassroot Communication section below.

7.2.2 Material Resources

Another dimension of resources over competition is material resources. This category of resources refers to financial and physical resources, including monetary, property, office space, equipment, and supplies (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). In terms of access to these resources, Edwards and McCarthy (2004) detected four mechanisms: aggregation

from constituents, self-production, appropriation/co-optation, and patronage. Among these mechanisms, according to the Islamic movements informants and some experts, the main access mechanisms to the financial resources are aggregation from constituents and self-production, as elaborated below.

Human capital is vital for these movements, not only for their operations but also for their financial sustainability. Financial resources are intrinsically connected with the movements' human capital because a substantial part of the financial resources comes from the regular donations of the members.⁴⁶ Consequently, an increase in membership directly translates to a greater capacity for aggregating financial resources.

In addition to member donations, the financial stability of Islamic movements relies heavily on their associated organisations and institutions. Schools, hospitals, and foundations play a crucial role by covering administrative costs and generating revenue. These institutions are essential physical resources that support the movements' operations and activities. For ABIM, schools ranging from kindergarten to college level are a significant source of income. ABIM-3 noted that these educational institutions "helped them survive" financially (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023).

The importance of these resources can also lead to competition between movements as they fight for control of these valuable assets to support their financial stability and operations. A notable example of this competition occurred between IKRAM and ISMA over the *Aman Palestin* Foundation, which was among the biggest foundations in Malaysia and Az-Zahra Hospital. As IKRAM-3 explained, after ISMA split from JIM,

⁴⁶ Expert-4 claimed that the donations can reach up to 30% of the income of their members. As far as IKRAM is concerned, this information was confirmed to me by an IKRAM member who had his/her name withdrawn. (Expert-4, personal communication, August 5, 2022).

ISMA members, who were the majority in the administration of these entities, severed ties with IKRAM.

If you have heard about Aman Palestine, Aman Palestine is a foundation under JIM back then for humanitarian aid for Palestinians. But [because] many of the members shifted to the ISMA paradigm, they took it away from IKRAM. So IKRAM formed another one, “Aksa Sherif.” We had a hospital in Bangi, if you know, Az-Zahra Hospital. That was under JIM, which [also] was taken away by ISMA. So, we found another hospital, An-Nur Hospital (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022).

The take-over of these organisations, coupled with the transfer of human capital from IKRAM (formerly, JIM) to ISMA,⁴⁷ demonstrates that the competition between IKRAM and ISMA extends beyond ideological differences. This competition highlights how both movements strive to secure and keep important resources, therefore indicating a broader contest for influence and survival among Islamic movements in Malaysia.

As a result, this section reveals that ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM compete over limited human capital and material resources to sustain their existence. While this competition is mostly non-confrontational, it can sometimes lead to direct conflicts, as seen in the split between ISMA and IKRAM. These conflicts show that the competition extends beyond ideological differences to include the struggle for control over vital resources. Despite these tensions, each movement has developed strategies to manage and mobilise resources to continue their activities and achieve their goals, as evidenced by their ongoing operations and adaptations.

⁴⁷ Following ISMA’s split from IKRAM, a large number of members, who are mostly the university students in overseas have joined ISMA. IKRAM-1 explains this situation as follows. “A lot of these young ISMA people, who are late 30s to middle 40s, are all actually the children of people in IKRAM. [...] They [ISMA] took the children because at that time, we had a lot of personnel that we send overseas to take care of the children in the universities in the Middle East and Australia. They were the people who take care of them. Instead, [they] took them away. So, it is very sour. But having said that, they may have different views on that. But we cannot hold that grudge for too long. I think we have to just move on.” (IKRAM-1, personal communication, January 11, 2023).

7.3 Competition over Legitimacy

Legitimacy is among the most important moral resources for social movements (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004a). As Koa (2021) argues “legitimacy is a critical moral resource around which political communication campaigns of social movements revolve.” He also contends that legitimacy sheds crucial light on how social movements attempt to shore up this moral resource and how they deploy it to frame themselves credibly to enhance their image and win the hearts and minds of their target audience to fulfil their political desires (p. 88). To gain legitimacy and respectability, social movements actively seek to align their values, goals and behaviours with the prevailing values, traditions and normative standards of the larger society. In this vein, they employ different tactical strategies, such as promoting the perception that their actions and goals are in line with societal expectations and seeking the support of public figures or celebrity endorsement (Snow, 1979).

In the case of ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA, data analysis shows that all three movements actively employ strategies to foster a positive public perception, and they seek endorsements from influential figures, which is the *ulama* in the context of Islamic movements in Malaysia. The next sections, Public Perception and the Role of the *Ulama*, examine these efforts in detail.

7.3.1 Public Perception

Social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram and YouTube have become essential tools for ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA in their efforts to influence public opinion and consolidate their standing in the Malaysian community. These movements use a variety of content on topics ranging from social and political to family well-being and child development. These contents vary, including videos, infographics, and written posts, to convey their messages. One prominent example of

their activism on social media is their vocal support for the Palestinian cause. By highlighting the suffering of Palestinians, these movements address a widespread and emotional issue within the Muslim community. They share updates on the situation in Palestine in the context of Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza, organise virtual solidarity events and call for collective action such as boycotts or petitions.

Creating a positive public perception is a strategic tactic not only to provide legitimacy to movements but also to attract more members, build social capital through networks outside their immediate circles, and achieve a higher level of influence. In this regard, IKRAM-5 explains the impact of a "professional-looking" image and good reputation of IKRAM and its benefits to the movement.

What is our strong point is the way we organise the movement. In many ways, [we are] well-organised. IKRAM uses more cutting-edge knowledge in terms of psychology, organisational theories, how they should be structured, and how to make good decisions. And hence, I think this is why we grew in terms of numbers probably bigger than ISMA and ABIM. And the leaders or the members, many of them, I guess high performing individuals in Malaysia and in the academia, professional bodies, all of that. So, that is the kind of image and reputation that IKRAM has. We tend to be able to garner more trust from the professional community (IKRAM-5, personal communication, August 27, 2023).

The informant's insights illustrate the interrelation between positive public perception, reputation, and other resources that social movements draw heavily on, such as social capital. This, in turn, provides the movement with the resources required to sustain its activities and achieve its objectives. As the Islamic movements' activities from ABIM and IKRAM highlighted, both movements' commitment to the development of positive relationships with different social groups through "dialogues," as they call it. In line with

their “inclusive” core values, both ABIM and IKRAM members strive to establish bridges across various social groups in Malaysia.⁴⁸

Political positions of the Islamic movements in Malaysia represent another significant dimension of public perception; this has been particularly evident for ABIM. While ABIM informants strongly emphasised that ABIM is an independent entity distinct from Anwar Ibrahim and the People’s Justice Party (PKR), they are aware that the public image often conflates ABIM with Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar Ibrahim’s active presence at ABIM’s events and programmes, especially after his tenure as Prime Minister, and his appointment of high-profile senior ABIM figures, such as Fadhlina Sidek, Mohamad Sabu and Zulkifli Hasan to top state positions, have reinforced this association. Therefore, in terms of ABIM’s public image, as ABIM-2 stated, one of the biggest challenges is this association. Because in the event of Anwar’s government failure, ABIM’s image would also be severely damaged (ABIM-2, personal communication, February 2, 2023).

On the other hand, while building a positive public perception is vital for social movements, this perception is also susceptible to efforts by outsiders to discredit and label them negatively. These efforts can undermine the movements’ legitimacy and erode public trust through misinformation, negative media coverage, or the strategic use of derogatory labels. In the case of ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM, these movements often engage in labelling each other with derogatory terms, either openly or tacitly. For instance, ABIM and IKRAM label ISMA as extremist or far-right in terms of its political approach towards non-Muslims. Conversely, ISMA labels ABIM and IKRAM as

⁴⁸ While this endeavour is a part of their *dakwah* mission, it, at the same time, helps them to construct a public image consistent with the values they supported.

“liberal” and “secular,” terms that carry negative connotations in the Malaysian context.⁴⁹

This mutual labelling strategy is designed to discredit and delegitimise opposing movements, thereby influencing public perception and weakening the *other*’s appeal. For example, both ABIM and IKRAM informants noted that the “liberal and secular” labels seriously damaged the public perception of their movements. As ABIM-3 and IKRAM-6 shared, this image curbs ABIM’s and IKRAM’s influence in more religious and rural regions of Malaysia, such as Terengganu or Kelantan (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023; IKRAM-6, personal communication, September 17, 2023). Thus, these efforts to negatively label and discredit other movements not only complicate the movements’ efforts to build a positive public image but also reflect the intense competition for ideological dominance and membership within the Islamic community in Malaysia.

Labelling and discrediting can significantly impact social movements’ reactions and responses. A notable example of this is the public perception competition between ISMA, ABIM and IKRAM over the film *Mat Kilau*, which tells the story of a Malay warrior and his friends’ fight against the British colonialists. The film broke the record for the highest-grossing movies of all time in Malaysia (Mumtaj Begum, 2022); nevertheless, it also faced a severe backlash from the minority communities, particularly the Sikh Malaysians, for portraying them as villains (Shahrin Aizat Noorshahrizam, 2022). In the context of this movie, ISMA is located opposite IKRAM and ABIM. ISMA-1, praised the movie

⁴⁹ As shared by informants who were previously members of these Islamic movements, all three movements engage in discrediting each other to some extent. They accuse members of other movements of being on the wrong side or criticise the political struggles of other movements as misguided or inaccurate. From ISMA’s ex-members words, s/he have heard criticisms about other movements as outlined; “I am not really sure about ABIM because I did not really [heard about it from other movements]. But ABIM, of course, is about politics. They are more focused on politics. “Politics is dirty, politics is cunning” and everything. As far as IKRAM [is concerned], during that time, they were telling things like “IKRAM is not settling the issues of the *ummah*.” Because IKRAM has so many active wings. ISMA also has many wings, but not as active as IKRAM. IKRAM itself is active, their Palestine support wing is very active, and even their Harmoni [the youth wing of IKRAM] is also active. Compared to IKRAM, [it was] mostly ISMA that suddenly went into this fight in social media. The petty, petty fights on social media, they are mostly from ISMA” (E-1, personal communication, August 10, 2023).

and its success, stating that the movie reflects ISMA's political ideology by underlining Malays' struggle against colonialism.

Mat Kilau is an indicator that the Malays are looking for their origins and their own identity that has been lost due to colonialism and the current system of the country that is suppressing their search for their own self. The film I think [has been] seen over 100 million [times]. But for me, it translates to the eagerness of the Malay to look for what they have lost. So, in this sense, what ISMA is saying has gained popularity among the Malays. We are just reminding them of who actually we were before, we were being invaded. So, I think in that sense we can say that ISMA might be more popular now. I'm not sure about the number of who become members, but it [ISMA] is growing (ISMA-1, personal communication, January 26, 2023).

Although ISMA aligns with the political stance showcased in the film *Mat Kilau*, ABIM and IKRAM informants shared many critical views, concerned about the film's divisive portrayal of minority communities and its potential to exacerbate ethnic tensions.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, having these concerns, their response to the film illustrates the complexities of addressing public perception when faced with a widely popular cultural phenomenon. According to IKRAM-3,

Normally, they [referring to IKRAM's administration] were confronted with articles with social media posting. But when it comes to *Mat Kilau*, we [IKRAM] could not respond directly because that movie captured the hearts of many millions in this country. Even the Royals endorsed it. [...] You know, popular culture always prevails and then [the movie] also transpired in the recent election (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022).

This response highlights the challenge of countering a powerful narrative endorsed by both the masses and influential figures, such as the Royals. The widespread acceptance and endorsement of the film limited IKRAM's ability to discredit it or oppose ISMA's interpretation effectively. While these strategies can be effective in other situations, they

⁵⁰ Although I repeatedly searched for an official statement from ABIM and IKRAM on the film *Mat Kilau* and its possible negative impact on Malaysian society, I could not find one. IKRAM-3 explained that IKRAM deliberately refrained from issuing a statement in this regard due to the high public interest in the film and even the royal endorsement (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022). Therefore, these concerns were only raised in the interviews.

fall short of the overwhelming influence of popular culture that resonates deeply with the public.

For ABIM and IKRAM, these criticisms are often subtle. They typically avoid explicitly naming their targets, even though the informants from these movements expressed explicit critiques of ISMA in the interviews. In the official documents, both ABIM and IKRAM prefer to use vague terms such as “extremists” or “far-right,” which allows them to address their concerns without directly identifying the subject of their criticism. This indirect approach enables them to maintain a level of diplomacy and avoid open conflict while still conveying their disapproval of certain practices or ideologies.

On the other hand, ISMA has had a more direct approach to their criticism. For example, ISMA openly criticises the *Rahmah* concept that IKRAM has been employing by claiming that IKRAM distorted it (Muhammad Izzat Husman, 2017). While the *Rahmah* concept signifies compassion towards all mankind regardless of ethnicity or religious denomination, ISMA argues that although Islam urges Muslims to be compassionate to others, there should not be tolerance or compassion towards “infidels” who are clearly against Islam (Muhammad Izzat Husman, 2017). In a similar vein, ISMA-5 argued that Malays have already been compassionate to others, but there are limits. As s/he explained below,

You see the other movement promoting *Rahmah*. In my opinion, Malaysia is already *Rahmah*. [...] No one is more *Rahmah* than Malays. [...] When they came to teach *Rahmah*, when the three children of a Muslim [man] were raised as Muslims [referring to the Indira Gandhi case⁵¹], when [that] happened, the dispute between the father and mother, the court wanted to decide to give their children to their [non-Muslim] mother. Is this acceptable?

⁵¹ For details of this case see *i.e.*, By Ida Lim (2018, February 1). Simplified: The Federal Court’s groundbreaking Indira Gandhi judgment. *Malay Mail*. Retrieved July 19, 2024, from <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2018/02/01/simplified-the-federal-courts-groundbreaking-indira-gandhi-judgment/1567409>

Where is the *Rahmah* [in this case] (ISMA-5, personal communication, September 17, 2023)?

As this statement illustrates, ISMA-5 directly targets IKRAM's *Rahmah* concept, criticising its application in the Malaysian context by asserting that Malays are inherently compassionate. However, s/he emphasises the limits of this compassion, arguing that when the rights of Muslims are at stake, this compassion is not reciprocated. With this argument, ISMA-5 also questioned the fairness and the practicality of IKRAM's *Rahmah* approach in terms of Muslim people's rights while reinforcing ISMA's narrative of defending Islamic sovereignty and Malay supremacy.

As a result, ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA employ different strategies to shape public perception and increase their legitimacy and influence. By addressing emotive issues such as the Palestine issue, these movements seek to align their values, goals, and behaviours with Malaysian society and increase their relevance. However, their positive public perception is also vulnerable to labelling and discrediting. The competition between ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA, which manifests itself in the mutual use of pejorative terms, undermines their reputation. The impact of this competition is exemplified by the reactions to *Mat Kilau*. The film contributes positively to the public perception of ISMA because it presents the same ideological view, while ABIM and IKRAM criticise its divisive portrayal of minority communities and its potential to exacerbate ethnic tensions. Nevertheless, the endorsement of the film by the masses and influential figures challenged the ability of IKRAM and ABIM to counter the discourse the film represented. This demonstrates the complexity these movements face in maintaining a positive image amidst external and internal adversity.

7.3.2 The Role of *Ulama*

The second aspect of legitimacy that the data analysis indicated was the role of *ulama* in the Islamic movements. While the term *ulama* refers to Islamic scholars in general,

Saeed (2004) identifies two groups of *ulama*: official and non-official. Official *ulama* represents the ones who hold the state's bureaucratic positions, whereas non-official *ulama* refers to the ones who are independent from the state. *Ulama* has had a powerful place in the context of Malaysia because they have been considered to hold the sole authority in religious matters due to their proficiency in the Arabic language. As Dr Muslim Imran stated, this power is mostly seen in non-Arabic countries because only the *ulama* can speak proficient Arabic and interpret the religious text (Dr Muslim Imran, personal communication, February 2, 2024). For this reason, the *ulama* has been seen as the key interpreters of "right" or "wrong," or "Islamic" or "un-Islamic," and their words carry significant weight in shaping religious and social norms. Thus, as IKRAM-3 pointed out, having the *ulama* on their side is strategically significant for the Islamic movements to gain more public legitimacy. As s/he further noted,

The same could be seen in the Indonesian context. Even Jokowi appointed a senior chief of *ulama* as his deputy. To balance the support. So, I think, in some ways, we are similar to Indonesia. We look up to the *ulama* too much. And we have the problems now. One of the reasons why this wave [referring to the PN's election victory] happened is that during the election, the celebrity *ulama*, preachers, many of them openly expressed their support for PAS (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022).

There are also other informants confirming IKRAM-3's statement regarding the *ulama* support for PAS and more conservative interpretations of Islam (One of these informants is politician and the former Member of Parliament Khalid Samad, personal communication, December 26, 2022). Therefore, ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA have needed to develop strategies to prove to Muslims that they are approved by the *ulama*, either official or non-official. To achieve this, each movements have its own *ulama* within the movements for consultation or guidance. ISMA, for example, has a special *ulama* council, the Malaysian Muslim Union *Ulama* Council (*Majlis Ulama Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia*, MUIS), as a separate body. Nevertheless, they still need the endorsement of authoritative *ulama* figures for legitimacy. IKRAM-3 describes this necessity further.

Yes, there is [a competition or rivalry between Islamic movements in terms of gaining more support from the *ulama*]. Even we are struggling to have well-known, established *ulama* to have on our leadership. Because our *ulamas* are maybe very reserved, very internal, and not an icon in the society (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022).

As a result, in the Malaysian context, the Malaysian *ulama* has been considered vital interpreters of “right” and “wrong” positions, making them the gatekeepers of religious knowledge and legitimacy. Besides, the power they hold has a direct impact on Malaysian politics, which underlined the strategic importance of gaining the support of influential religious figures. Thus, being approved by the *ulama*, ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA can enhance their appeal and credibility among Muslims and increase their influence and support base. However, the reliance on *ulama* endorsement can also cause challenges. Movements may face difficulties in attracting and retaining well-known and respected *ulama*, as highlighted by IKRAM-3’s comments on IKRAM’s struggle to integrate prominent *ulama* into their leadership. This difficulty can create tension and necessitate careful strategy to ensure that the movement’s goals and the *ulama*’s influence are aligned.

7.4 Competition over Influence

This category encompasses the strategies employed by movements to gain influence, engage the public, and navigate organisational challenges. Under this theme, the access to the media and grassroots communication are examined.

7.4.1 Access to the Media

Since media exposure is crucial for these movements to increase their awareness and make their discourses known to a much wider audience, the role of mainstream media is another aspect of competition between these movements (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). All the Islamic movement informants whom I interviewed somewhat agreed that they have been having difficulties being featured in mainstream media. This trend is now

different for ABIM members as they noted that after the PH government, they could find more access to mainstream media, particularly the state-owned channels. As Expert-3 pointed out, for example, in the last 24 years, he has only recently been allowed to speak live on TV (Expert-3, personal communication, August 9, 2023).

IKRAM, however, shared another aspect of the difficulty of media coverage. As pointed out by IKRAM-3, IKRAM has been struggling to find a place on some of the TV channels that have predominantly Islamic content. As he stated,

When it comes to religious content, there is an Islamic state[owned]-radio called IKIM. It is now controlled by the conservative Perlis group. Before, we had slots in IKIM. [But] Now it is difficult to get there. The same goes for TV Al-Hijrah, the state TV for Islamic [content]. It is also controlled by the conservative Malays. They are very critical to IKRAM's preaching. So, we are more [inclined] to social media. But we still engage. Certain times, we pay them to get the slots (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022).

While IKRAM has been marginalised by the Islamic-oriented media, ISMA has had a similar experience with mainstream media. For ISMA-2, ISMA hardly has a chance to appear in the mainstream media, and when it does, its portrayal is mostly negative and derogatory. In media outlets such as Malaysiakini or New Straits Times, they are often labelled as extremists or a far-right movement (ISMA-2, personal communication, March 4, 2023). However, while ISMA has had negative experiences, its ideas and discourses have been disseminated by more conservative media such as the Merdeka Times, TV Pertiwi, samudera.my, and *Harakah*, the PAS communication portal. This shows that although ISMA has struggled to reach non-Muslim Malaysians through the mainstream media, unlike IKRAM and ABIM, it has found it easy to reach the Malay-Muslim audience through these channels. Therefore, there seems to be a discrepancy in the audience that ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA reached. ISMA can closely make its voice heard by the Malay-Muslim community through Malay-Muslim media, but ABIM and

IKRAM cannot easily access these channels.⁵² Thus, it can be inferred that ABIM and IKRAM may not be able to reach a Malay-Muslim audience through the English-speaking mainstream media, whose readers and followers are ethnically, religiously, and economically very diverse (Majid, 2020) as ISMA could through Malay-speaking media.

On the other hand, ISMA has another strategy to overcome the media siege against it. As ISMA-2 pointed out, they use mass mobilisations, such as street protests or demonstrations, to gain coverage in the mainstream media.

Sometimes, people ask, “Why are you always demonstrating?” because this is the only way the media will catch us. If not, do you think the media will catch you if you do not demonstrate? Make your voice loud. [Otherwise] they do not catch you. Sometimes, you have to play with this thing (ISMA-2, personal communication, March 4, 2023).

This strategy emphasises the importance of the media for social movements. ISMA’s strategy of mass protests and demonstrations and ABIM’s experience with the #Kitakawan campaign, as examined in the previous chapter, which gave ABIM a lot of media attention, have highlighted another aspect of successful mobilisation. Through successful mobilisation, social movements express their grievances and demands. The subsequent media coverage provides them with an excellent opportunity to reach a much wider audience, which helps them gain public support and attract new members. The examples of ISMA and ABIM, therefore, show that effective mobilisation is not only about physical presence and activism but also about ensuring that these actions are visible enough so that they can reach a much wider audience through media channels. However, ISMA-2’s statement also needs further analysis in regard to their positive or negative

⁵² Majid’s (2020) explores Liberal Islam and Religious Pluralism issues representation in mass media comparing Malay-speaking and English-speaking media outlets. His article shows interesting results. It demonstrates that Malay-speaking media outlets such as *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia* generally offer limited support for liberal Islam and religious pluralism. Instead, they predominantly adopt neutral or critical stances. On the contrary, English-language outlets like *The Star*, which publish a relatively higher proportion of supportive articles on liberal Islam and religious pluralism, reflecting differences in ownership and editorial policies. This finding confirms IKRAM-3’s statement regarding their experiences on accessing Malay-speaking media.

visibility. It can be inferred that the informant is not much interested in the tone of the media coverage, as long as they are given the visibility. This means that “being seen” is more important than “being favourably portrayed.” ABIM and IKRAM, in this respect, tend to portray a much-controlled positive visibility preference avoiding negative portrayals. ISMA, on the other hand, willing to embrace controversy and polarisation as a way of emphasising its presence in the mainstream media and mobilise its audience.

As this section reveals, each of these three movements has developed different strategies to access mass media, including utilising their political networks, purchasing time slots, and utilising alternative platforms, such as social media. These diverse strategies underscore the importance of strategic media engagement for these movements to enhance their public profiles, legitimacy, and influence.

7.4.2 Grassroots Communication

As examined in the human resources section, members are crucial for these movements to maintain their activities. Nevertheless, all informants from the three movements agreed that it has become increasingly difficult to persuade and recruit the younger generations because of their reluctance to join.⁵³ As Expert-2 pointed out, the motivation to join an Islamic movement has been lost due to easy and ample access to religious information. As s/he explained,

The problem is the children. They no longer get involved with Islamic movements. Because they do not see that Islamic movements can offer

⁵³ As they shared, there are several reasons for this reluctance. Firstly, with the advent of technology and social media, the younger generation prefers to socialise online rather than through physical participation, as IKRAM-3 noted, “Looking into the youth now, the trends are changing. Back then, they like to be in [civil] society. But this generation is more like ‘I do not have to be with any institution or group. I can give it to myself. I can do whatever I want. If I want to voice up, I have my social media.’ So, we are managing how to win the hearts of the youth. To bring them into the movement and work as a team. They are very critical as well because they can get information from so many sources. Back then, maybe an *Ustaz* or the leader of those, whatever he says people would believe. But now, no. They ask questions. ‘Convince me, why I should do this?’ So, it is becoming more challenging.” (IKRAM-3, personal communication, December 1, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has reportedly exacerbated this tendency among young people. Secondly, the younger generation already receives substantial information about Islam through their formal education, reducing the perceived need to join an Islamic movement for further learning. Thirdly, as Expert-2 pointed out, political pressure on students within university campuses makes them hesitant to officially affiliate with an Islamic movement. (Expert-2, personal communication, August 4, 2022)

anything beneficial to them. Because if you want to learn Islamic knowledge, everything is online. You can learn about your religion online; you do not have to attend any school. [In the past] People got involved with the Islamic movement because they wanted to learn about their religion. Because they were not satisfied with the local mosque's religious studies. Because it was not well-organised in the mosque. [That is why] they joined the Islamic movements [so that] they can have a continuous study circle. But, this young generation, they can access the knowledge easily (Expert-2, personal communication, August 4, 2022).

Confirming this tendency, ABIM-3 shared that one of the biggest challenges that ABIM faces is to be and remain relevant for the younger generation (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023), a struggle that is also shared by other social movements. Therefore, these movements have to establish new strategies to become relevant to the younger generation in particular and the broader society in general. These strategies differ according to age groups, socio-economic classes, or interests. While all these movements have women wings and student wings, each wing organises its programmes to reach out to potential audiences. From ISMA's perspective, for example, ISMA-2 provides insights on their strategies to engage with Muslim parents,

For example, for the primary school students, we have programmes. It is more of a combination of like *hafazan* memorisation of Quran] games. Like for example, this weekend they are going on a camping trip, and we open it to society. When we charge minimal when they come for the like a 3-hour session, they bring let's say, 3 ringgits, just for the food. So, we do not charge because there are many segments of society, and we also have the lower income people here [*Bangi*]. This is a strategy. You get kids, you get the parents, right? Because the parents are also looking forward to [joining] cheap but quality programmes for their children. So, you get the kids, you get the parents (ISMA-2, personal communication, March 4, 2023).

This strategy illustrates the implicit and indirect methods of recruitment employed by the Islamic movements. They organise events that address common interests or societal needs, subtly embedding their ideologies within these activities. ISMA-2's example from ISMA highlights how programs for children, such as Quran memorisation and recreational activities, serve as entry points for engaging Muslim parents. This approach underlines the shared values within the community and frames the movement's activities

as beneficial and appealing so that the programs can create a sense of belonging and trust towards the movement. In a similar vein, ABIM-3 shares their approach to engaging with potential members, which demonstrates a comparable implicit strategy.

If you ask me, one of our strategies is to use our own niche; for example, I love football, and I am a part-time football commentator at a local television and also a part-time blogger. I wrote a lot about Malaysian football history. [...] When people know me, they do not know me, do not know me as an ABIM leader; they will know me first as a football commentator. And so they will talk about football with me, and then I will tell them about ABIM. [...] We also produce several movies, short movies. In fact, one of the movies we get, 10 million views, is about *Bangsa* Malaysia. [...] We also organise dialogues and forums about movies and films. This is another weird thing about ABIM that people find quite strange. For an Islamic organisation, organise a movie forum (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023).

As shown in this quotation, personal passions and popular media can be used to attract and recruit new members. As a football commentator and blogger, ABIM-3 builds a relationship with his/her followers through his expertise and passion for football. This creates an initial point of contact that is free from overt religious or ideological undertones. Once this connection is made, as s/he shared, s/he introduces ABIM's values and goals and seamlessly integrates them into conversations about football. This strategy is in line with frame theory's concept of "frame bridging," which connects unrelated but ideologically complementary ideas to create a broader and more structured narrative.

The testaments of ISMA and ABIM members confirm Expert-1's observations. As s/he discussed in the interview, the Islamic movements employ long-term recruitment strategies to ensure the development of lasting relationships with the new members who will serve the intellectual human capital as well as financial resources of the movements, as Expert-2 pointed out. As Expert-1 explained,

The thing about Islamists is that they do their work on a very personal basis. Always one-on-one because they need to develop the trust, they need to develop the relationship. The trust comes with that relationship, right? They do not do this kind of mass-preaching and things like that [...] Instead, they

rather focus on this one-on-one [relationship], [...] they do not even talk about the religion and things like that. Just to talk about whatever it is, KPOP or series on Netflix and things like that, something that people tend to share, something in common, and then just hang out, go to the movies, and go to eat together and things like that. Slowly and slowly, you gain the trust. And then, of course, finally, they say, “Hey, I am going to this study circle. Would you like to come, and see? I think you will be interested. [There are] some good people there.” Of course, now, this friend is already trusted just because you do all these things [together] (Expert-1, personal communication, August 10, 2022).

Expert-1 stresses trust relations that Islamic movements aim to build with potential members. This strategy prioritises solid and devoted relationships with the members rather than a loose one in order to ensure the movement’s sustainability and influence in the long term.

From a frame theory perspective, the strategies that ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA use to connect with the younger generation and the grassroots are critical to maintaining relevance and expanding their membership. These movements create frames that tie into the interests and needs of potential recruits. For example, ISMA uses children’s programmes such as Quran memorisation and recreational activities to indirectly appeal to parents by portraying their activities as beneficial to the family and community, which creates a sense of belonging and trust. ABIM utilises personal passions and popular media, with leaders such as ABIM-3 using their roles as football commentators and bloggers to make initial, non-religious contact. These frame bridging strategies facilitate the movements’ public engagement and recruitment process.

On the other hand, the movements also employed strategies to protect their members’ commitment to the movement. These strategies included delegitimising the other movements, physically obstructing the presence of and restricting communication with the members of competing movements. For example, ABIM-3 shared that following Anwar Ibrahim’s accession to UMNO in 1982, he was considered a *kafir* (literally, infidel), and the blood of ABIM leaders was *halal* during that time. Moreover, ABIM

leaders' participation in some events, or even event halls, was restricted by the IRC members. The ABIM leaders had been isolated and suffered financially due to the restrictions and isolation (ABIM-3, personal communication, February 2, 2023).

In a similar vein, ISMA-1 shared that following ISMA's establishment, IKRAM forcefully banned its members from befriending people who were JIM members but joined ISMA. Because they were considered as rebels (ISMA-1, personal communication, January 26, 2023). In addition to the members, Prof Dr Mohd Al Adib, who had experienced several Islamic movements in his bachelor years, noted a similar restriction. As he shared, attending different movements' study groups and events was considered unacceptable by the seniors of the movement because "when you commit to one organisation, you must belong to that organisation." (Mohd Al Adib, personal communication, August 4, 2022).

7.5 Competition over Hegemonic Projects

The competition dynamics of Islamic movements in Malaysia are characterised not only by resources, legitimacy and influence, but also by collaboration and intense competition for ideological and strategic dominance. This competition unfolds across discursive and non-discursive arenas as these movements strive to construct hegemonic projects that reflect their vision of Islam's role in society. Drawing on discourse theory, this section examines how ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA articulate competing visions by utilising alliances, and contesting the meaning of key Islamic concepts and national identities to establish or challenge hegemonic positions.

This section is divided into three parts. The first part explores the dimensions of collaboration and consensus among these movements, highlighting the dynamic and negotiable nature of political identities despite ideological differences. The second part focuses on the concept of hegemonic projects, analysing how ABIM and IKRAM align

under HIKAM to counter extremism while contrasting their demands with ISMA's alternative project. Finally, the third part examines demands linkages and chains of equivalence, detailing how these movements use contested concepts to construct their ideological narratives and assert their visions of hegemony.

7.5.1 Collaborations and Consensus

Despite competition in certain areas and differing political ideologies, ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM collaborate and form alliances to achieve their goals. They work together with various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and movements in Malaysia. Among these alliances, all three movements are counterparts of the Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs (ACCIN)⁵⁴ and Malaysian Alliance of Civil Society Organisations in the UPR Process (MACSA),⁵⁵ while only ABIM and IKRAM are members of the Malaysian *Dakwah* Association (*Gabungan Dakwah Malaysia*, GDM),⁵⁶ and HIKAM which is established in 2023 (see, Atriza Umar, 2023). These collaborations between ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA illustrate how dynamic and negotiable political identities are despite their competitive and ideological differences.

Among the others, HIKAM is of greater importance because it brings four prominent Malaysian Islamic movements, which are ABIM, IKRAM, WADAH and HALUAN, under the same organisation. The aim of HIKAM, as announced by the IKRAM President Badlishah Sham, is to fight “extremist and excessive narratives in the context of religion and race” by proposing “the concept of *wasatiyyah*” approach in collaboration with the

⁵⁴ For details see, <http://www.accin.org>

⁵⁵ For details see, <https://macsa.com.my/who-we-are/>

⁵⁶ For details see, <https://dakwah.org.my>

Malaysia *Madani* vision of the prime minister Anwar Ibrahim (cited in Atriza Umar, 2023b) .

From the perspective of discourse theory, bringing together ABIM, IKRAM, WADAH, and HALUAN under HIKAM's umbrella represents an attempt to construct a hegemonic project within the Islamic movements landscape in Malaysia. Having a consensus over an ideological position embodied as a "fight against extremism" grounded on the *wasatiyyah* concept is a strategic discursive move. This discursive move aims to establish a dominant discourse that frames moderation as the legitimate and desirable approach to Islam while positioning itself against the "extremist" political and religious versions in Malaysia. In the next section, this discourse is examined in detail as a hegemonic project of ABIM and IKRAM.

7.5.2 Hegemonic Projects

The hegemonic projects constitute the conjunction of discursive and non-discursive strategies, such as ideological and symbolic competition and collaboration and consensus. Built on the works of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and elaborated by Martin Nonhoff (2019), the hegemonic project refers to a specific world description that aims to be valid or dominant in a given context. These descriptions are, at the highest level of their struggle, linked with normative valuations or become common sense in Gramscian terms. Nevertheless, hegemonic projects are often challenged by alternative projects. These alternative projects contest for the dominant position by delegitimising the initial projects as "non-useful," "factually false," or "morally detestable" (Nonhoff, 2019). Thus, hegemonic projects constantly compete over what is true, right, and good, which this section aims to examine.

The primary aim of this section is to examine the competition between two hegemonic projects within the landscape of Malaysian Islamic movements. To do so, it is essential

to address the key question: How can we analyse a hegemonic project? While the concept of hegemony has been thoroughly theorised by Laclau and Mouffe within their discourse theory, their methodological framework lacks concrete empirical application tools for data analysis. To address this limitation, scholars have developed own methodological approaches to apply this theory to empirical cases systematically. One such approach is that of Martin Nonhoff (2019), who offers a more structured method. His approach includes a focus on discourse, discursive demands and their linkages, the concept of hegemony, discursive subjectivities, and discourse coalitions, all of which are essential for analysing a hegemonic project. In this section, the analytical approach draws extensively on Nonhoff's method to provide a comprehensive examination of the hegemonic projects under study.

The hegemonic projects analysed in this section include ABIM and IKRAM's consensus project under the umbrella of HIKAM, as well as ISMA's project. As discussed in the previous section, Malaysian Islamic movements have formed collaborations and reached consensus at various levels. The HIKAM initiative stands out as a significant collaboration, bringing together ABIM, IKRAM, WADAH, and HALUAN in a collective effort to combat extremism and support Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's *Malaysia Madani* (Civil Malaysia) vision. The examination of ABIM and IKRAM's identity fields, particularly their conceptualisation of antagonists and audiences, and their core framing tasks in the previous chapters reveals that ABIM and IKRAM's discourses have increasingly overlapped in various aspects. This initiative is thus viewed as a hegemonic project in which ABIM and IKRAM have aligned their goals and agendas to address a shared antagonist: extremism. Consequently, the first hegemonic project in this section is of HIKAM, representing the collaboration between ABIM and IKRAM.

7.5.2.1 Hegemonic Project of HIKAM (ABIM and IKRAM)

HIKAM represents a significant hegemonic initiative led by ABIM and IKRAM, seeking to advance a unified vision for Malaysia's Islamic movements. By embracing *wasatiyyah* as their central framework, these movements articulate a counter-narrative against extremism while advocating for inclusive national values. This section analyses how ABIM and IKRAM, through their collaboration under HIKAM, construct a shared hegemonic project. It examines the key objectives, discursive strategies, and framing techniques employed to consolidate support, establish legitimacy, and articulate a vision that aligns Islamic values with pluralism and harmony in Malaysia's multicultural society.

The objectives of HIKAM, as stated in its first published statement, are to promote *Wasatiyyah* Islam in building the civilisation of the *Ummah*, to build a common Malaysian citizenship comprising all ethnic and religious groups in Malaysia, and to consolidate Muslims in developing the civilisation of the *Ummah*. The statement is elaborated on these objectives below.

We, together with the pulse and heartbeat of the Malaysian people, express our love for this blessed homeland, which is rich with various blessings and endowed with a peaceful and serene atmosphere despite the diversity of religions and races throughout the ages [...] We call on all Muslims and Malaysians to embrace the idealism and ideals of the common struggle, namely: 1. Build *Ummah* civilisation based on *wasatiyya*-Islam values which are characterised by principles of justice and progress as well as universal humanity. 2. Build a united citizenry based on the *Rukun Negara* [The National Principles] and the Constitution in order to guarantee harmony and peace in the lives of pluralistic and *Madani* Malaysians. 3. Consolidate the full potential and strength of Muslims towards developing a robust and solid *Ummah* civilisation in all aspects of life (HIKAM, cited in Atriza Dan Basmin, 2023a).

This text must first be analysed in terms of signifiers, which are “moments” within a discourse that represent particular meanings (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 29). The key

moments employed here are *ummah*, Islamic values, *Rukun Negara*,⁵⁷ the Constitution (of Malaysia), unity, harmony, and *Madani* civilisation. These key moments are crystallised around the *wasatiyyah* concept which work as the nodal point in HIKAM's discourse. They articulated to signify the ideal Malaysian identity and a progressed civilisation. This deliberate articulation of these concepts aims to fix their meaning in the discourse and steer them away from interpretations associated with extremism or divisive politics to create a coherent and inclusive national narrative.

HIKAM utilises these moments and extend them to articulate its chains of demands. In these articulations, the audience was set as all Malaysians rather than merely Malays or Muslim Malaysians. In the first demand, the text calls for the construction of a civilisation for the *ummah* that is rooted in *wasatiyyah*-Islamic values. This demand places Islamic values at the centre of their civilisation project but specifies the *wasatiyyah* version in order to distance itself from the other versions of Islamic approaches, particularly more extremist ones. While the text uses "*ummah*" as the name of its civilisational project, the term is not used in the traditional sense to refer to the global Muslim community. In this text, the meaning of "*ummah*" has been expanded to include not only a religious community but also a broader civilisational project that includes social, economic and political dimensions.

In the second demand, the text urges the building of a united citizenry grounded in the *Rukun Negara* and the Malaysian Constitution to ensure harmony and peace in a diverse society. This demand attempts to articulate a national identity that is inclusive of all citizens, regardless of religion or race, aligning the nation's pluralistic nature with the

⁵⁷ Rukun Negara refers to the national principles that was declared on 31 August 1970 to create a strong unity among all ethnic and religious groups in Malaysia. These principles can be summarised as, Belief in God, Loyalty to the King and Country, Supremacy of the Constitution, Rule of Law, Courtesy and Morality. Source: MyGovernment, National Principles (Rukun Negara) <https://www.malaysia.gov.my/portal/content/30110> accessed August 10, 2024.

foundational principles of the state. The demand for a “united citizenry”, as referred to in the Constitution, reflects a strategic move. The demand, as well as the rest of the text, does not mention or elaborate on the social or political status of non-Malays but instead refers to the Malaysian Constitution, which enshrines the special position of the Malays and recognises Islam as the official religion. By referencing the Constitution without explicitly addressing these hierarchical aspects, the text constructs a discourse that appears to promote unity and equality yet implicitly upholds the existing social hierarchy.⁵⁸

This subtle choice reflects the hegemonic strategy of incorporating the interests of the dominant group (Malays and Muslims) while simultaneously appealing to the broader, pluralistic society. The absence of any explicit discussion on the social hierarchy between religious groups, such as the privileged position of Muslims, allows the discourse to present a façade of inclusivity. However, by strategically anchoring the demand in the Constitution, the text ensures that the dominant group’s position is preserved and naturalised within the broader national identity.

The last demand calls for the consolidation of Muslims potential and strength to develop a robust *Ummah* civilisation across all aspects of life. This demand seeks to mobilise the Muslim community towards a common goal, reinforcing a collective identity that is strong and influential in shaping broader societal structures. Nevertheless, the absence of demanding an Islamic state needs to be noted. The Islamic state concept is frequently employed by different groups amongst the revivalist Islamist movements to

⁵⁸ This argument was also raised by Expert-1, who mentioned that defending inclusivity by positioning Islam as the superior religion is contradictory. “On one side, Islamists talk about all the state’s inclusivity and this and that. At the same time, they also want to maintain Islam as the superior religion. But you cannot have both. When you have inclusivity, when it is these things, and then at the same time, we still believe that you are supreme and sit above everyone else. But that is how it is with these Islamist movements because when they preach, they like to talk about this language of inclusivity. I am not talking about ISMA; I am talking about IKRAM and ABIM” (Expert-1, personal communication, 30 August 2022).

demand a political system governed by Islamic principles, although its exact meaning and implications are vague, allowing for various interpretations. ISMA, for example, clearly demanded an Islamic state as they campaigned for Malaysia to be officially recognised as an “Islamic state.” On the other hand, ABIM tends to avoid the divisive debate over whether Malaysia should be labelled an Islamic state or a secular state. Instead, it focuses on the “*dakwah* state” as a way to achieve their goals without getting entangled in definitional disputes, while IKRAM interprets Islamic State quite broadly that the Islamic state is associated with good governance, justice, or economic well-being. In this way, HIKAM could prevent the contentious debate between non-Muslims and Muslims in Malaysia in order to maintain social harmony and avoid contributing to polarisation.

The statement also needs to be analysed through frame theory lenses. In the text, HIKAM emphasises issues of “extremism, racial and religious division” as the main diagnosis frame and highlights the need for a united and harmonious Malaysian society. The main antagonist in this diagnosis frame is the forces that threaten social cohesion and harmony, although the statement avoids explicitly naming the antagonist. As stated by Ahmad Azam Abdul Rahman, Malaysia has been experiencing “a narrative war that is clearly disrupting society and the nation.” As he elaborated in his speech,

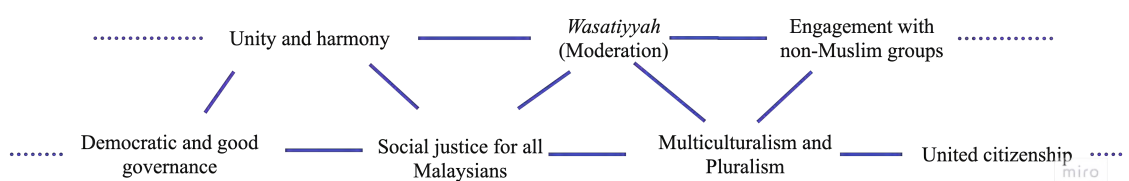
The political narrative being promoted is not in line with the Islamic approach that emphasises the message of *wasatiyyah*, which is moderation and balance in all aspects. Instead, what is happening now is a harsh and extreme narrative that is divisive, insulting, and derogatory. [...] If this positive narrative loses to the corrupt political narrative, the country will face disaster when power falls into the hands of those who do not appreciate the history of awakening and seek power for its own sake. The ‘me,’ ‘me’ mentality will spread everywhere, disrupting peace in the country (Ahmad Azam Abdul Rahman, cited in Atriza Dan Basmin, 2023).

In this statement, there is a striking contrast between “harsh and extreme narrative” and “positive narrative” with the ideal of moderation and balance building on justice, progress, and universal humanity. This dichotomy evokes fear, danger, and insecurity

feelings to warn that the country will face disaster if the positive narrative fails to prevail. Furthermore, the depiction of a divisive, insulting, and derogatory political climate is employed to underline the possibility of power falling into the hands of those seeking power solely for their self-interests. This scenario threatens the social cohesion of Malaysian society and national stability by escalating a sense of insecurity about the future. These emotional appeals, finally, create a sense of urgency, motivating the audience to act in defence of their nation, values, and future by rejecting extremism and embracing a narrative of justice, progress, and universal humanity.

Against all these threats and dangers, HIKAM proposes to embrace the values of *Wasatiyyah* Islam, build citizenship based on the *Rukun Negara* and the Constitution, and harness Muslim potential to create a strong *Ummah* civilisation as a prognosis frame. These solutions propose an ideal society centred on justice, progress and universal humanity that allows different religious and racial identities. Lastly, the motivational frame of HIKAM is to inspire action by appealing to a shared love for the homeland and a common struggle for unity and harmony by positioning these values as universal and centred on national principles. As Ahmad Azam Abdul Rahman urged, HIKAM encourages different groups, parties, or NGOs to collaborate to achieve these ideals through a new *wasatiyyah*-based narrative and to counter this “harmful” narrative because there is “no alternative but to win this narrative war.” (cited in Atriza Dan Basmin, 2023). Figure 7.1 illustrates the linked demands of HIKAM as the chains of equivalence.

Chains of Equivalence-
HIKAM (ABIM and IKRAM)



Source: Author’s compilation

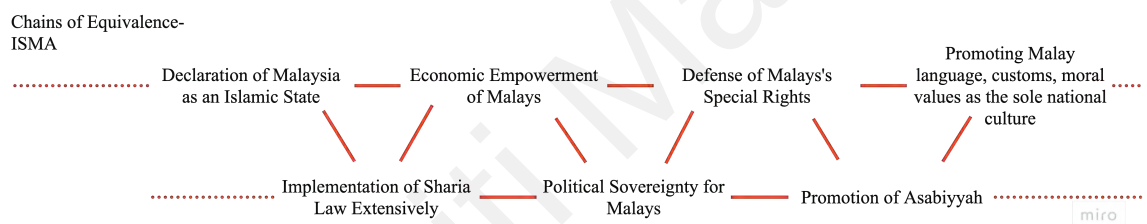
Figure 7.1 Chains of Equivalence of HIKAM (ABIM and IKRAM)

Under the HIKAM umbrella, both ABIM and IKRAM more clearly explain and frame their projects. Their hegemonic project aims to unite Malaysians under a common set of values, emphasising unity and harmonious coexistence while rejecting extremism and racial or religious division as antagonistic forces. HIKAM, at the same time, establish a counter-hegemonic discourse against the more “extreme” versions of political and religious ideologies, which are “divisive, insulting, and derogatory” by advocating the adoption of *wasatiyyah* and principles of justice, progress, and universal humanity. In the articulation of their project, the Islamic references have been less utilised compared to ISMA, but instead, they carefully picked words, such as humanity, progress, unity and harmony, that are appealing to any ethnic and religious groups in Malaysia. Thus, ABIM, together with WADAH and IKRAM, collaborate and reach a consensus over the discourse they construct as their hegemonic project. In this project, they successfully utilise emotions, particularly urging senses such as fear, danger, and insecurity, diagnose the problem, propose a solution and call other social actors to work together against the “dangerous” narrative promoted by the antagonistic “extreme” groups in Malaysia.

7.5.2.2 Hegemonic Project of ISMA

As illustrated in Chapters 5 and 6, ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM exhibit diverse identity fields and employ diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames. ISMA constructs its identity around the principles of Malay-Muslim supremacy and the establishment of a *Shari'a*-aligned governance framework. This vision is reflected in its diagnostic frame, which identifies liberal democracy, secularism, and pluralism as antithetical to Islamic values and detrimental to the primacy of Malay-Muslim identity. For ISMA, the current political and social systems are fundamentally flawed, and mere reforms within these frameworks are insufficient to realise Islamic governance as envisioned in the Quran and Sunnah.

Its prognostic frame proposes a radical transformation of Malaysian society, emphasising the need for policies that prioritise Islamic law, Malay political sovereignty, and the explicit recognition of Malaysia as an Islamic state. To mobilise support, ISMA's motivational frame calls for collective action to protect the sanctity of Islam and the special position of Malays, portraying these as under constant threat from liberal and pluralist ideologies. By framing its narrative as the defence of Islam and Malay rights, ISMA positions itself as the true guardian of Islamic principles, distinguishing its approach from movements like ABIM and IKRAM, which it critiques for compromising with secular systems and democratic frameworks. Figure 7.2 below provide an overview of ISMA's demands as chains of equivalence.



Source: Author's compilation

Figure 7.2 Chains of Equivalence of ISMA

In comparison of ISMA with ABIM and IKRAM, the problems, solutions, and methods of addressing them sometimes overlap but often contradict each other. For instance, ABIM and IKRAM diagnose the current political and economic systems as flawed but not incurable. Therefore, they tend to work within the current liberal-democratic system, advocating for reforms to make them more Islamic. They believe in participating in democracy and capitalism, aiming to infuse these frameworks with Islamic principles. On the other hand, ISMA fundamentally disagrees with this approach, arguing that the current systems cannot be adequately reformed and instead require a more radical transformation. As ISMA-1 pointed out, ISMA's diagnostic and prognostic frames

are in dispute with those of ABIM and IKRAM due to their irreconcilable approaches.

This ideological divergence represents the real competition between them.

The competition is actually about ideas rather than for gaining followers or political mileage. These are just secondary objectives. I mean the most distinctive differences between them are their ideas. For example, for ISMA, the current situation cannot be solved just by joining and fixing some things in the current system. I mean, we have democracy and capitalism as the current system. [...] So ABIM and IKRAM, I think, they view that we can live with the system. It is just that “We have to fix it and make it more Islamic,” right? So, democracy could be Islamic, according to them. They live with it, and they participate in the system. And actually, they are very actively upholding the system (ISMA-1, personal communication, January 26, 2023).

The ISMA-1 further explains this perspective, highlighting the fundamental incompatibility they see between democracy and Islamic governance.

The matter is the differences in diagnosing the problem. So ISMA asked the other side, the other groups [ABIM and IKRAM], “If we are living and we are depending on this system, can we achieve what we want that is being taught in the Quran and Sunnah?” It is a theoretical question, of course. If yes, then, we do not have any problem with that. But, through so many studies [found that] it is actually quite impossible to do that. Because somehow, in democracy, there is a shilling for what you want to do because the system itself is not just a system, it is a system that comes from a certain worldview, right? Certain philosophy of way of life. So, for example, democracy is actually a system of managing the philosophy of secularism and pluralism. Yeah, where liberty is, you know, the highest principle of it (ISMA-1, personal communication, January 26, 2023).

This positioning also reveals how ISMA distinguishes itself from other Islamic movements, particularly ABIM and IKRAM, by employing logics of difference. In the informant’s portrayal of ABIM and IKRAM, as movements, they compromise on fundamental Islamic principles by accepting and participating in a liberal-democratic framework. By criticising ABIM and IKRAM’s participation in the existing system, ISMA informant distinguished ISMA from these movements and the ideologies of liberalism and secularism. This positioning reinforces ISMA’s the true defender of Islam image, standing in stark contrast to what it perceives as the compromised stances of ABIM and IKRAM.

Along with the core framing tasks, these Islamic movements also dispute the meanings of certain concepts. For example, the terms “*Madinah* society” and “*Rahmah*” are points of contention between ABIM and IKRAM contrary to ISMA, each attributing different interpretations and implications to these concepts. The *Madinah* society example was cited several times by the ABIM and IKRAM informants to emphasise a historical and theological example of a successful multi-faith society ruled by Islamic principles. According to them, this example can be applied to the context of Malaysia. This strategy constructs a bridge between an existing understanding of Islamic history and principles and IKRAM’s vision for Malaysian society.

On the contrary, for ISMA, *Madinah* society represents Islam’s sovereignty and dominance over other religious groups. According to this view, all components of the society, regardless of religion, are defined as “one *ummah*.” Nevertheless, they were expected to recognise the supremacy of Islam, as well as Prophet Muhammad’s leadership, promising to defend Medina against enemies. As stated in the media statement of ISMA’s *Ulama* Council issued by Muhammad Firdaus bin Zalani below,

The concept of Islamic sovereignty in society is based on the fact that all individuals, regardless of religion, have a responsibility to recognise Islamic sovereignty. It is for this reason that this community is called *mujtama’ Islami* or *ummah* (as in the charter of *Madinah*); their agreement is not to follow the same religion but to recognise the same principle, which is the sovereignty of Islam. In the charter of *Madinah*, many took the argument of how the Prophet (SAW) recognised the Jews and other nations who did not follow Islam as ‘one *ummah*’ together with the believers, but they did not see why he gave such recognition to them. In the charter, it is clear that the recognition was given on several bases, namely recognising Islam as the main reference (clauses 23, 42), recognising Muhammad’s leadership not as an ordinary man but as a messenger of God (clause 47), promising to defend Medina from the enemies of Islam (clause 46). When all these are fulfilled then it is worthy to call them ‘one *ummah*’ together with the believers (Muhammad Firdaus bin Zalani, 2019).

This statement clearly illustrates the frame disputes between IKRAM and ISMA over the meaning of *Madinah* society. IKRAM’s interpretation of the “*Madinah* society”

recognises the importance of Islamic principles while emphasising coexistence and mutual respect among different religious communities without necessarily requiring explicit recognition of Islamic sovereignty. In contrast, ISMA's comprehension of the *Madinah* society conditions the inclusion of non-Muslims in the community on their acknowledgement of Islam's supremacy.

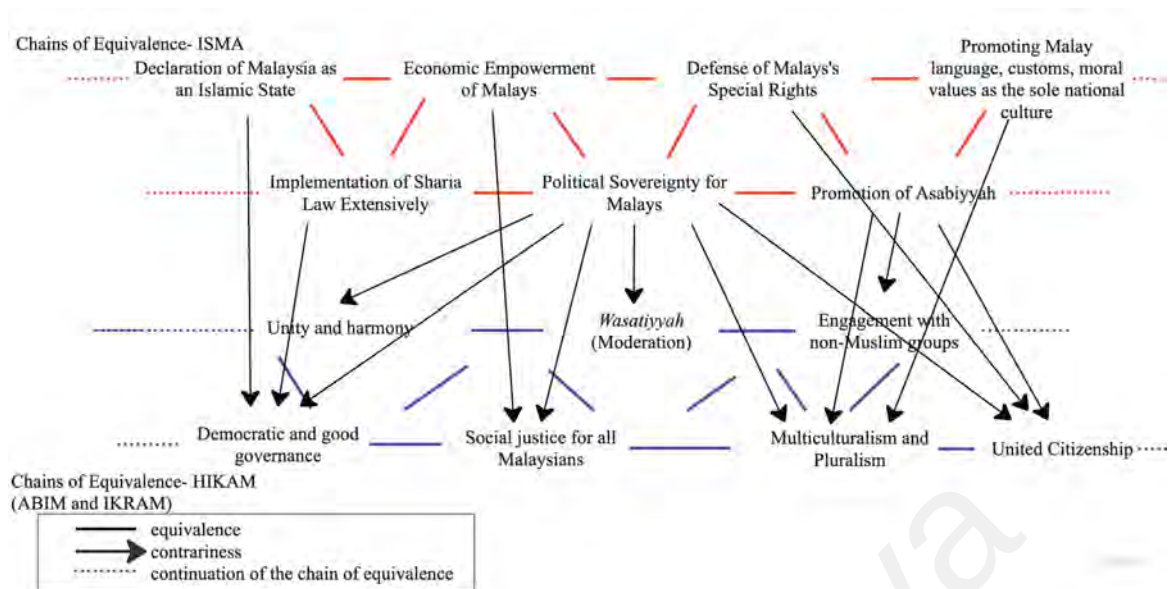
The counter interpretations of the "*Madinah* society" by ISMA and IKRAM demonstrate how social movements employ the process of signification to construct their ideological narratives. In this example, the *Madinah* society serves as a floating signifier, and the meaning is contested by ISMA and IKRAM by counter definitions. While for IKRAM it signifies a pluralistic Malaysia where Islamic principles coexist harmoniously with mutual respect among diverse religious communities, for ISMA, it signifies Islamic sovereignty and Malay supremacy. Therefore, as the example of the *Madinah* society reveals, ISMA and IKRAM constantly negotiate the meaning of this concept, integrating it with other signifiers to strengthen their broader discourse.

7.5.3 Demands Linkages and Chains of Equivalence

Hegemonic projects should have the ability to construct and maintain chains of equivalence, linking various demands, values, and ideologies to form a coherent narrative that appeals to a broad constituency. This section examines how Islamic movements, particularly ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA, create unity within their respective hegemonic projects by using chains of demands. By strategically linking a series of demands, these movements seek to align disparate social, political, and religious concerns under a common cause, thereby reinforcing their broader discourse. This process, help them to expand their influence, mobilise support, and challenge competing narratives, while simultaneously defining what is considered legitimate and desirable within the context of Islamic governance and societal values.

In discourse theory, elements that are open to varying ascriptions and meanings are referred to as floating signifiers (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). These signifiers serve as a battleground for competing discourses, each striving to invest them with new meanings. As a result, they become sites of contestation over the interpretation of these signifiers. In the context of revivalist Islamist movements, “Islam as a comprehensive way of life” functions as a floating signifier, whose meaning is contested by different Islamic movements. Despite this contestation, it holds a foundational role in the discourse of these movements, shaping their views on the social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions of Islam. This framework allows various movements to align their goals and strategies under a shared vision of an Islamic society.

By ascribing a specific meaning to this floating signifier, each discourse seeks to fix its meaning, transforming it into a nodal point around which their ideological framework is structured. Through these nodal points, movements establish chains of equivalence, linking other elements and ideas that align with their vision, thereby unifying diverse discourses under a common cause. At the same time, these nodal points also create chains of difference, demarcating their ideology from opposing movements and highlighting the contrasts that distinguish their specific interpretations. This dual process of creating both equivalence and difference, therefore, helps shape their broader strategies and goals. Figure 7.3 demonstrates the ideological differences and the relationships between the chains of equivalence and differences between ISMA and ABIM and IKRAM in consensus under HIKAM.



Source: Author's compilation

Figure 7.3 Chains of Equivalence and Differences of ISMA and HIKAM (ABIM and IKRAM)

A hegemonic project involves the creation and maintenance of a dominant ideological framework that aims to generalise particular interests by linking them to broader social demands. Therefore, the degree of hegemonic success is strongly associated with the possibility to expand and maintain such chains of equivalence (Luqman Nul Hakim, 2023). As shown in the diagram, ISMA seeks to establish a hegemonic project centred around the primacy of Malay-Muslim identity, which is a part of their *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) ideology. In their chain of equivalence, their demands, such as the Declaration of Malaysia as an Islamic State, Political Sovereignty for Malays, and Implementation of *Shari'a* Law, are interconnected. The movement's hegemonic ambitions are supported by linking economic, cultural, and legal demands under a singular nationalist-religious framework. By doing so, ISMA attempts to assert dominance over the political discourse, marginalising alternative voices and promoting a particular understanding of Islamic governance and Malay identity. ISMA's discourse constructs Malay-Muslim supremacy as the central nodal point, embedding it within a chain of equivalence that links demands for *Shari'a* law, political sovereignty for Malays, and the recognition of Malaysia as an Islamic state. ISMA employs antagonistic framing

to delegitimise competing discourses, characterising ABIM and IKRAM's pluralist approach as compromising core Islamic values. By juxtaposing itself against secularism, liberalism, and pluralism, ISMA constructs a logic of difference that reinforces its ideological boundaries and positions its vision as the guardian of authentic Islamic governance.

In the second chain of equivalence, the consensus of ABIM and IKRAM's demands are located. Offering an alternative hegemonic project, ABIM and IKRAM challenge ISMA's exclusionary framework. Their chain of equivalence emphasises pluralism, democratic and good governance, and social justice for all Malaysians, which reflect a more inclusive vision of Islam that accommodates Malaysia's pluralistic society. ABIM and IKRAM's project aims to construct a hegemonic bloc by linking Islamic values with broader, more universal principles such as justice, *Wasatiyyah*. This alternative seeks to appeal not just to the Malay-Muslim community but also to other ethnic and religious groups within Malaysia, thereby broadening the base of support for their vision of governance. Through these chains of equivalence, ABIM and IKRAM construct a hegemonic project and a sense of shared identity against a common antagonist. This common antagonist is extremism, which manifests itself through hatred and intolerance particularly towards non-Malay and non-Muslim populace and rigid religious interpretation, according to these movements. This antagonism, thus, counter ISMA's hegemonic project which is built upon an exclusive nationalist-religious framework that prioritises Malay-Muslim supremacy.

ABIM and IKRAM hegemonic projects needs to be analysed in terms of the internal consistency of their hegemonic projects because internal consistency is vital for a hegemonic project (Jessop, 1991). While ABIM and IKRAM present their hegemonic projects as inclusive alternatives to ISMA's exclusivist framework by promoting

wasatiyyah concept, a closer analysis reveals that their configuration remains vague, particularly regarding the status of non-Muslims within the social hierarchy of Malaysian society. This ambiguity can undermine their ideological coherence and weaken their hegemonic projects because while they reject ISMA's overtly ethno-religious exclusivism, they do not explicitly advocate for equal citizenship in a secular sense neither. Instead, by applying frame extension, they strategically expand the meanings of *wasatiyyah*, beyond their traditional Islamic frameworks to resonate with broader, non-Muslim audiences. They frame this concept not just rooted in Islamic moderation, but as a universal principle of balance and justice that transcends religious boundaries. In doing so, they present their hegemonic project as moral and ethical systems capable of addressing the needs of a plural society.

Nevertheless, this framework still subtly privileges Islam and Muslims over other religious and ethnic identities. They do not rigidly defined Islam's moral authority and Muslims positions in the social hierarchy in comparing with ISMA's hegemonic project, instead they avoid explicit discussions in this regard. This ambiguity reveals a dual strategy: on the one hand, they present a more inclusive vision to counter ISMA's exclusivism and appeal to non-Muslims; on the other hand, they still maintain Islam's foundational role in shaping the social and moral order. This duality reveals the challenge ABIM and IKRAM face in balancing inclusivity with religious primacy. This is a delicate act that ultimately tests the internal consistency and long-term viability of their hegemonic projects.

7.6 Conclusion

The chapter examines competition among three Islamic movements in Malaysia—ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM—across four main dimensions, which are resources, legitimacy, influence, and hegemonic projects. In the first competition strategy, which is

competition over resources, the findings shown that human capital has a crucial role for several reasons, including the sustainability of the movements, ensuring legitimacy and credibility, exerting political influence, and facilitating networking opportunities. There is intense competition for human capital among ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA because they target the same demographic—Muslim middle and upper-middle-class Malaysians, particularly university students.

Regarding material resources, human capital is also essential, as it provides a substantial amount of the movements' budgets through donations. Besides, all three movements have associated organisations and institutions, such as private schools, hospitals, and foundations, that provide financial resources to the movements. The movements also compete directly and indirectly over material resources, as seen in IKRAM's newly established institutions following ISMA's take-over of the previous institutions' control.

The second strategy is the competition over legitimacy. The data revealed that the Islamic movements compete over their public images by creating a positive public perception and gaining the *ulama's* endorsement. In this competition, each movement developed different strategies, such as organising campaigns on issues that resonate with Malaysians, engaging in community service, and aligning themselves with national values and Islamic principles.

The third strategy examined the competition over influence by focusing on access to the media and their grassroots communication. The contestation for influence is not solely about gaining followers, but rather about positioning their interpretations of Islam and national identity as the dominant discourse, ultimately shaping the direction of Malaysia's political and social future.

The final strategy of competition discussed in this chapter is the hegemonic projects. The two hegemonic projects, namely ABIM and IKRAM's pluralist Malaysia versus ISMA's Malay-Muslim dominant Malaysia were compared. The comparison was drawn on their identification processes, core framing tasks, and collaboration and consensus-building efforts. It is found that by constructing chains of equivalence, they, particularly ABIM and IKRAM, integrate discursive and non-discursive elements into their hegemonic projects. This integration enables movements to articulate their demands and fix the meanings in their discourses, thereby solidifying their ideological positions.

These strategies ultimately show that the hegemonic competition between ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA is complex web of resource mobilisation, legitimacy, influence and ideological contestations, where discourse serves as a fundamental site of struggle. Their actions reveal not only their internal priorities but also their engagement in broader struggles to fix meaning and establish their discourses as hegemonic. Through their respective hegemonic projects, these movements not only seek to define the future of Islamic governance in Malaysia but also to challenge and contest alternative visions, thereby contributing to the ongoing evolution of Malaysia's religious and political dynamics.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

This chapter provides the concluding remarks of the study. It begins with a summary of the research, followed by a discussion of the study's contributions to the existing literature. The next section outlines the implications for the Islamic movements of ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM. Finally, I present recommendations for future studies.

8.1 Summary of the Study

This study focused on the competition between Islamic movements in Malaysia. Islam has a major role in Malaysia's social and political life by leading an important part of a 40-year Islamisation process that reshaped both individuals and the Malaysian state. Although Malaysia was once a secular country, this transformation has redefined political discourse. Since the 1970s, Islamic movements have been challenging established political terms and introducing alternative interpretations of Islam and political action.

By focusing on the three major and influential Islamic movements in Malaysia, which are ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM, this study shifted the focus from the interactions between the state and social movements to the competition between Islamic movements, exploring how these movements use discourse and framing to contest their vision of Islam, thereby influencing Malaysian political elites and the broader political landscape. These movements, while not directly engaging in politics or holding hegemonic power in the Gramscian sense, have played a significant role in shaping social and political identities, constructing new discourses, and participating in hegemonic struggles over cultural and ideological dominance. Drawing on David Snow and Robert Benford's frame theory and the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the research aimed to unravel the complexities of these Islamic movements and their impact on society, highlighting the competition for influence and hegemony within the context of Malaysia.

Political Islam is increasingly complex and dynamic in Malaysia. The fierce competition between Malay-majority political parties extends beyond the political arena to civil society, where Islamic movements with differing political ideological approaches—ranging from nationalist to pluralist—contest for hegemony. These movements, historically influential in transforming Malaysia from a secular to an Islamic state, continue to engage in a hegemonic struggle, competing over issues such as inter-religious relations, minority rights, and the role of religion in public life. By criticising the narrow focus of political Islam studies in Malaysia, which often overlook the role of these social movements in shaping political discourse and influencing elites, this study, therefore, aimed to examine the competing discourses, constructed identities, and strategies of ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA, to understand how they articulate distinct visions of Islam, challenge *others*, and seek to redefine political Islam in Malaysia. Through this investigation, the research seeks to uncover the mechanisms by which these movements influence public perception and policy, contributing to a broader understanding of the role of political Islam in Malaysia's socio-political landscape.

From a philosophical standpoint, this study adopts a social constructivist perspective rather than the traditional structuralist approach, which locates the state as the central distributor of resources and power while social movements remain in the periphery. This approach views social movements as mere reactions to exclusion from the state. The social constructivist approach, on the other hand, emphasises the cultural aspects and agency of social movements. From this standpoint, social movements are not just responses to dominant power structures but are active producers of new meanings, identities, and collective actions. They are seen as political actors capable of resisting, transforming, and challenging the state, as well as competing groups and forming alliances. This perspective aligns with the research objectives of the study, which

recognises the dynamic role of social movements in shaping political and social landscapes.

In this study, frame and discourse theory were utilised as a theoretical framework to examine the competition between ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA. By combining these two theories, this study examined the dynamics of competition between these movements by focusing on how they construct their identities, interpret social realities, and engage in hegemonic struggles. In this regard, frame theory provides a necessary framework for a systematic analysis, which discourse theory lacks to offer. In the meantime, discourse theory concepts offer a rich conceptual framework to analyse the historical and political construction of discourses and the role of power in shaping social realities. Thus, this integrated framework effectively worked to understand how ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA shape and reshape the political and social landscape in Malaysia.

Qualitative methodology, primarily using semi-structured interviews and textual and audio-visual documents published by ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA, was the main data source for this study. A total of 36 interviews were conducted with scholars, experts, and representatives of selected organisations, with purposive and snowball sampling techniques guiding informant selection. The informants included 20 activists from ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM, as well as 16 experts, NGO representatives, former movement members, journalists, and politicians. In addition to interviews, the study utilised documents as main data sources, including media statements, social media posts, articles, columns, archival materials, and other publicly available documents. 45 documents published between 2014 and 2024 were analysed to capture the most recent ideological stances of the Islamic movements. The data was analysed systematically, beginning with the transcription of interviews. Once transcribed, the interview data were imported into

ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software to facilitate a systematic and cohesive coding process.

The first objective of this study was to explore how ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA articulate their identities and define their competitors in the Malaysian civil society landscape. Frame and discourse theory is applied to examine their identity construction process. While frame theory provided the framework with the concept of identity fields, which refers to antagonists, protagonists, and audiences, discourse theory offered the concepts of antagonism and agonism for analysis.

The findings suggested that all cases, namely ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA, employ specific articulatory practices to construct and communicate their identity. Therefore, the main answer to this objective is the role of differentiation in competition. Each of the three movements has articulated distinct identities to differentiate themselves from one another by articulating their discursive elements. In this regard, ABIM's identity centres around the concept of "*Manhaj Malizi*," which combines global Islamic principles with local, traditional Malaysian-Islamic thought and practices. IKRAM, drawing on its affinity with the MB, established an image based on a pluralist Islamic ideology that encourages dialogue with diverse social groups. In contrast, ISMA merges Islamist and ethno-nationalist ideologies, intertwining Malay and Muslim identities, and positions itself as a defender of Malay-Muslim rights.

As the data analysis shows, the identity construction of these movements is fluid, responding to internal dynamics and external pressures. The split between ISMA and IKRAM, which were once united under the JIM banner, illustrates how identities can diverge, particularly in their political expressions. This divergence highlights the evolving nature of social and political identities within Islamic movements in Malaysia. The findings also emphasise that these constructed identities involve not only self-redefinition

but also the (re)construction and (re)negotiation of antagonisms. Furthermore, it was found that these identities serve as an ideological foundation that legitimises the movements' positions within the Malaysian Islamic landscape and provides a framework for articulating a cohesive discourse aimed at hegemonic formation. The continuous renegotiation of identities in response to changing circumstances is particularly significant, demonstrating these movements' adaptive nature.

The second objective of this study is to analyse how ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA utilise discursive frames—specifically diagnosis, prognosis, and motivational frames—to construct and communicate realities that reflect and reinforce their identity and ideological objectives. As discourse theory claims, meaning is not fixed or inherent but is constantly negotiated within a discourse (Torring, 1999). This means that the meanings in the actions or speech need to be established and understood within a specific discursive context, in which they are continuously shaped and reshaped through interaction and communication. Frame theory has a similar understanding; framing tasks involve creating a coherent narrative that becomes meaningful by linking the movement's values, goals, and actions (Gamson, 1992). By employing the core framing tasks of frame theory—diagnosis, prognosis, and motivational framing—this study sought to uncover how ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA strategically construct and communicate their realities.

The data analysis indicated that ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM have diverse and evolving discursive strategies that are connected to their identification processes. On the one hand, the core frames of ABIM and IKRAM revealed that both movements have shifted from their earlier anti-colonial and anti-Western stances to focus on national unity and countering extremism. ABIM promotes an inclusive national identity through the concept of Cosmopolitan Islam and *Bangsa Malaysia*, advocating for unity beyond ethnic and religious boundaries. IKRAM's vision, articulated through *Negara Rahmah*, emphasises

ethical governance and social justice, aiming to foster national cohesion by appealing to both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences.

On the other hand, ISMA's core framing tasks strongly emphasise the Malay agenda and the defence of Malay-Muslim rights, portraying the liberal-democratic system as incompatible with Islamic principles. ISMA advocates for the prioritisation of Malay-Muslim leadership and the establishment of an Islamic state aligned with their interpretation of *Shari'a*, using polarising rhetoric to challenge the current political order.

The findings also suggest a close relationship between identity fields and core framing tasks. ABIM and IKRAM, considering non-Malays as part of their audience, articulate their prognosis frames to resonate with non-Malay communities. On the other hand, ISMA's discourse views non-Malays as antagonists, targeting them in its diagnosis frames while excluding them from its prognosis. In conclusion, the discursive frames of these movements illustrate the dynamic interplay between ideology, identity, and political strategy in Malaysia's Islamic *dakwah* movements.

The third objective of this study was to investigate the discursive and non-discursive competition modes employed by ABIM, IKRAM, and ISMA in their pursuit of hegemony within the political Islamic sphere. Four main dimensions, which are resources, legitimacy, influence, and hegemonic projects, have been found as the competition modes. These modes have shown that non-discursive competition, such as resources, can be as significant as discursive competition, which provides social movements' legitimacy or increase their influence. As the findings indicated, the Islamic movements have invested a great deal of time and energy to increase their human capital, on which their financial capital is directly and indirectly dependent.

Secondly, the external endorsements, by which their legitimacy is highly affected, are another non-discursive competition site for Islamic movements. The support and validation from respected figures, in the case of these Islamic movements, these figures are mostly religious authorities, such as *ulama*, or institutions, enhance their credibility and public perception. This form of non-discursive competition, therefore, directly affects their ability to maintain and project legitimacy. The movements strategically seek endorsements to strengthen their position and counteract negative portrayals, reflecting the interplay between non-discursive and discursive elements.

Hegemonic projects, on the other hand, constitute the convergence of both discursive and non-discursive strategies. These projects illustrate how ABIM and IKRAM integrate their efforts to build consensus and collaborate strategically to challenge a common adversary, which is ISMA's political ideology. Reaching a consensus on key issues and framing enables these movements to establish a united front so that they can enhance their collective influence and credibility. Consensus-building, particularly over the meanings, constitutes a discursive strategy that fixes the meanings within their discourses and solidifies the ideological framework within which these movements operate.

At the same time, hegemonic projects leverage non-discursive strategies, such as forming strategic partnerships and mobilising resources, to strengthen their position. Cooperating with other groups, for example, by sharing resources and supporting each other to increase legitimacy against a common antagonist, is a key non-discursive tactic that increases their public reach and public approval (Van Dyke & Amos, 2017). Thus, by integrating these discursive and non-discursive elements, hegemonic projects facilitate movements to articulate their demands and fix the meanings in their respective discourses so that they can reinforce their ideological stance. In this way, the shared ideological

frameworks provide movements the opportunity to consolidate power and extend their influence across a wider political terrain.

8.2 Contributions of the Study

This study makes key contributions to both the theoretical and contextual understanding of Islamic movements in Malaysia. Theoretically, it extends discourse theory and frame theory by applying these frameworks to the analysis of competing Islamic movements. In particular, the study expands the concept of antagonism within frame theory by incorporating the concept of agonism from discourse theory, offering a more nuanced understanding of ideological and discursive conflicts between ABIM, ISMA, and IKRAM. Through the analysis of hegemonic projects, and the concepts of logic of equivalence and logic of difference, this research demonstrates that a single discourse can structure competition among social movements. This study addresses gaps in social movement research, particularly concerning the under-theorised nature of opposing or counter-movements and offers new perspectives on inter-movement relations and the role of power.

Contextually, this study contributes to the literature by highlighting the complexities in their identities and ideological diversity within these movements. It challenges conventional analyses that view Islamic movements as monolithic entities and instead presents a detailed examination of their varied goals, strategies, and political ideals. For social movements, the process of identification is crucial, as they carefully and strategically distinguish themselves from other movements. However, this study reveals that these constructed identities—particularly the distinctions between *self* and *other*—are not static but are fluid and continuously re-negotiated in response to both internal dynamics and external pressures. Besides, these identity constructions provide an ideological foundation for the movements. Additionally, the study highlights the strategic

use of emotions within framing processes, a dimension often overlooked in the literature. By focusing on the Malaysian context, this research fills a critical gap, offering a non-Western, non-MENA, multiple case Islamic movements study that provides broader insights into the dynamics of Islamic movements in diverse cultural and historical settings.

8.3 Implications for the Islamic Movements

The findings of this study provide some implications for ABIM, IKRAM and ISMA. As revealed in the findings, ABIM prefers to remain a social movement rather than transforming into a political party organisation. However, this preference is complicated due to ABIM's close relationship with Anwar Ibrahim, the current prime minister of Malaysia. His position challenges ABIM's ability to construct a distinct identity separate from him and his party. Following Anwar's premiership, the appointments of several ABIM members to various positions within the civil service, and ABIM's non-reactionary stance on widely controversial issues—such as the royal pardon granted to former Prime Minister Najib Razak, who was prosecuted for embezzlement—further reinforce the perception that ABIM is synonymous with Anwar Ibrahim.

This dynamic could lead to mixed outcomes for ABIM. On one hand, ABIM's proximity to political power has allowed ABIM to gain significant advantage in the competition between IKRAM and ISMA, enabling it to use considerable influence in both political and social realms. This relationship has also enhanced its legitimacy within the field of Islamic movements, boosting membership and thereby increasing financial and human resources. On the other hand, as the former president of ABIM indicated, the movement's future is now highly dependent on Anwar Ibrahim and his government's performance. Moving forward, ABIM must carefully navigate this dependency to preserve its identity as a social movement. ABIM may need to articulate a more

independent vision and a critical stance when it is necessary towards the Anwar's government to maintain its relevance and legitimacy within the broader landscape of Islamic movements.

In the case of ISMA, both the findings and personal observations as a researcher indicate that, compared to ABIM and IKRAM, ISMA exhibits the most structured, internally consistent discourse. It effectively utilises core framing tasks and employs a broad repertoire of contention, including protests, rallies, and petition campaigns, alongside frequent mobilisations. Besides, ISMA's discourse is deeply rooted in historical grievances, and it frequently employs emotionally charged frames, particularly those invoking fear, anger, or insecurity. These frames strongly resonate with its audience, amplifying ISMA's influence. Nevertheless, there are also notable negative consequences. ISMA's discourse, in which ethnocentric elements are widely utilised, weakens its ability to connect with diverse social groups in Malaysia. This limitation risks isolating ISMA within Malay-Muslim circles, diminishing its reach and influence among non-Malay Muslim communities.

Furthermore, since 2023, ISMA's affiliate, the *Aman Palestin* Foundation, has faced legal prosecution for serious allegations of embezzlement (Samman, 2011). Initially, ISMA responded by denying the relationship between *Aman Palestin* and ISMA connection (*see*, Muhammad 'Izzat Husman, 2024). Following the accusation on Abdullah Zaik—who led both the foundation and ISMA—the movement quickly erased all references to him from its official website and social media platforms, as my fieldwork observations showed. Nevertheless, the gravity of the charges and the evidence presented could severely damage ISMA's credibility and legitimacy in the Islamic movements field.

The data also suggests important findings for IKRAM that need to be noted. IKRAM's political ideology reflects a transitional phase from its initial alignment with the MB

towards adopting a more traditional Islamic view parallel to ABIM's, which the IKRAM informants confirmed. This ideological shift has implications for IKRAM in terms of the movement's need to differentiate itself to be distinctive as a social movement. First, IKRAM informants strongly emphasised their association with the MB, which is a significant component of their identity. Nevertheless, the departure from the MB's approach to a more traditional Islamic view creates ambiguity, even inconsistency, in IKRAM's ideological stance. Thus, this transition in its ideological framework can cause strategic challenges in redefining IKRAM's role and objectives.

Second, this ambiguity and lack of clear direction in IKRAM's goals and objectives not only impact its political stance but also create significant challenges in its core framing tasks and identity coherence. In this regard, the analysis of IKRAM's documents reveals several critical issues that hinder the movement's ability to construct a cohesive and effective narrative. One of the major issues identified in IKRAM's core framing tasks is the disconnect between its diagnosis and prognosis frames. The diagnosis frames need to inform and support the prognosis frames to show the problems that need solutions. However, the diagnosis frames are often missing or underdeveloped in the movement's documents. This lack of continuity disrupts the narrative flow, making it difficult for followers and external audiences to understand why IKRAM's proposed solutions are needed. Additionally, the solutions offered as prognosis frames are often too vague, which makes it difficult to come up with concrete actions or policies, and the audience is not clear. It is difficult to say, for example, whether IKRAM's ten pillars of *Rahmah* are aimed at politicians, policy-makers, Malay-Muslims or all Malaysians.

Lastly, IKRAM's increasing involvement in politics, particularly since the GE15 election in 2022, marks a significant shift from its previously non-political stance. While IKRAM's active participation in election campaigns and open support for candidates

reflects the movement's evolving role within the Malaysian socio-political landscape, this shift also brings new challenges and potential drawbacks that could impact the movement's identity and welfare. As mentioned by one of the IKRAM informants, following IKRAM's decision to engage more directly in politics has cost IKRAM members, particularly those who valued the movement's earlier non-political stance. Additionally, although the movement campaigned for PKR and AMANAH candidates in the GE15 election, the IKRAM informants highlighted that IKRAM is non-partisan and, therefore, open to collaborating with other political parties in the future. This non-partisan stance without a formal association with a specific political party, IKRAM, adds more ambiguity to its political identity. This ambiguity can cause confusion among supporters and observers since the movement's goals and objectives may appear inconsistent or unclear. Besides, the unclear political alignment can also make it difficult for the movement to articulate a coherent and convincing political strategy.

8.4 Recommendations for Future Studies

For future studies, I suggest three recommendations. First, future studies could examine the dynamics of competition between Islamic movement by conducting ethnographic study, such as participant observation and in-depth interviews with not only the leaders but also ordinary members of these movements. Such a method was not feasible for my study due to significant limitations as a foreign researcher. My lack of fluency in the local language and limited familiarity with the cultural context would have severely undermined the quality of an ethnographic study. This approach can reveal how ideological frameworks are internalised, contested, or reinterpreted in daily practices. Besides, ethnography can capture the contradictions between the official discourses of movements and their implementation at grassroots levels. For example, while a movement might publicly advocate for inclusivity, ethnographic fieldwork might uncover exclusionary practices within its local chapters or among its members. Thus, providing a

holistic understanding of Islamic movements' influence and internal dynamics, this bottom-up perspective can complement the top-down analysis of competition between Islamic movements and their discourses.

Second, future studies could conduct comparative analysis across countries, or regions in order to examine the shared or divergent strategies Islamic movements employ in their competition with their opponents. These studies can provide deeper insights into the interplay between political Islam and civil society, offering a broader understanding of how these movements adapt and respond to their respective sociopolitical environments. This comparative approach could contribute to theorising Islamic activism in non-Western contexts and uncovering patterns of competition and cooperation that transcend national boundaries.

Lastly, future studies could investigate the competitive dynamics within different types of social movements such as feminist movements or labour movements to uncover how competition shapes their strategies, identities, and goals. For example, this study revealed that the Islamic movements in Malaysia have shared foundations—like religion or culture—but they have interpreted them differently to assert dominance or gain influence. In a similar vein, future studies could analyse and compare the internal competition dynamics. Such comparative research would contribute to a deeper theoretical understanding of intra-movement competition, emphasising the role of contextual factors, organisational structures, and ideological distinctions in shaping the trajectories of social movements across diverse fields.

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