Southeast Asia may be divided into two parts; a) the Muslim majority countries of Indonesia (230 million), Malaysia (23 million) and Brunei Darussalam (360,000), and b) the Muslim minority countries of Thailand, the Philippines, Cambodia, Singapore, Myanmar, Vietnam and Laos in a multi-religious region in which Hinduism, Buddhism and animism had been the dominant religions or belief systems of the populace prior to the advent of Islam. Muslim communities of this region have lived for centuries with neighbours consisting of Catholics, Protestants, Confucianists, Taoists, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, animists and ancestor worshippers. This multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic background is an important factor in conditioning the religio-political thought and behaviour of the Muslims in different nation states of Southeast Asia. The different political systems and the way each state treats Islam and Muslims constitute another factor which determines the differing responses of Muslims as a religio-political force.

It can be said that the Muslim community in the Malay-Indonesian world has gone through six major periods in the long process of Islamization:

1. The period of initial conversion to Islam signifying a radical change in belief system from polytheism to Islamic monotheism.
2. The period of living in independent Muslim sultanates which combined Islamic beliefs and practices with pre-Islamic Malay customs (adat) and values, thus allowing for a degree of syncreticism and eclecticism at the level of folk religion in several areas.

3. The advent of puritanical and reformist movements aimed at purifying the beliefs and practices from unIslamic eccentrications, superstitions and deviant mysticism.

4. The struggle against European imperialism: the Dutch in Indonesia, the British in Malaysia, the Spaniards in Mindanao, which drew upon and intensified the consciousness of jiha>d as religiously motivated armed resistance against the foreign disbeliever (ka>fir).

5. The post-independence period which saw the ideological and political struggle between reformist-oriented Muslims and the secular-oriented political forces, systems and elites. It was in this period that the idea of “Islamic state” was first mooted in opposition to the nationalists’ preference for a political system and government in which religion did not play a major or determinant role. In the seventies, the notion of Islam “as a comprehensive and complete way of life” and not just “a religion” in the Western sense of the word was widely advocated by the reformist Muslim intellectuals and Islamic youth movements in response to the secularizing tendencies of the Westernized ruling elites who were bringing out changes in the name of modernization and national development. Da’wah (Invitation to Islam) then became the new metaphor of Islamic reformist activism and struggle.
6. The Islamic resurgence of post-1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Islamist movements, political parties and youth organizations in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines received a new lease of life and a new optimism permeated the Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. Shi'i religious and political thought also crept in during this resurgent period and gained a foothold among some urban intellectuals in Indonesia.

During the post-independence period, the Muslim communities living in what is known today as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines were introduced for the first time to the idea and institutions of parliamentary democracy, popular elections, political parties, government vs. opposition system, majority rule, equal citizenship and the supreme authority of the state constitution. Politics became the new obsession which radically transformed the culture and society of the Muslim Indonesians, the Muslim Malaysians, the Muslims of Thailand, the Muslim Singaporeans, and the Muslims of Mindanao (in southern Philippines) known as the Moros.

For the most part, the nationalist forces managed to contain, control or partially accommodated the politically oriented Islamic struggle throughout Muslim Southeast Asia. For example, the dictatorial rule of President Sukarno and President Suharto, backed by the armed forces and secular nationalists, succeeded in marginalizing the challenge of holistic Islamic ethos under the name, first, of Guided Democracy and then Pancasila Democracy. The collapse of Suharto’s New Order regime in 1998 heralded a new phase in Indonesian politics in which popular democracy was reinstated and Islam reappeared as a religio-political force.
Meanwhile Christian-Muslim tension increased as militancy and fanaticism on both sides led to bloody inter-religious conflicts in the Moluccus islands in 1999-2000. The long-standing demands of the religious Achenese people for a full implementation of the Shari‘ah in the state of Acheh regained momentum and this prompted the central government in Jakarta to grant more concessions to them while maintaining a firm military control of the province. The general elections scheduled for 2004 would reveal to what extent Indonesian politics and masses are willing to accept a wider role of Islam in government, society and culture. The devastating bombing of a night-club in Bali on October 12, 2002 was the most shocking and tragic event in post-Suharto Indonesia. The unprecedented terrorist act was a wake-up call to Southeast Asian governments regarding the threat of Muslim radicalism and extremism.

In Malaysia, the political system is based on the model of Westminster’s parliamentary democracy in which Islam, unlike in Indonesia, is the undisputed religion of the state. This official position and dominant status of Islam in Malaysia has given the government a big role to play in promoting the religious, social, economic, educational, cultural, legal and international functions of Islam although the Muslims constitute slightly more than half of the population as compared to the overwhelming majority of Muslims in neighbouring Indonesia. The Malaysian system also allows an Islamist opposition party, since Independence, to openly declare its goal of an “Islamic state”, campaign for it vigorously before every national elections and finally managed to secure victory in two predominantly Malay states of Kelantan and Trengganu. While parliamentary democracy and non-interference of the armed forces in politics – unlike in Indonesia -- have provided
ample space and opportunity for holistic Islamic perspectives to develop in Malaysia, party politics, based on the British system of opposition versus government has severely damaged traditional Muslim unity and has spawned a political culture of hate, hostility and spite within the Muslim community. The struggle on both sides of the political divide to assert political supremacy by championing religious symbols and confrontational political discourse – unmindful of the dictates of Islamic ethics of disagreement – only helped to sharpen the differences and widened the gap among the Muslim Malays. Non-Muslim political and cultural forces were, of course, quick to exploit the intra-Muslim conflicts to their own advantage. As the Muslim opposition party continues to demand that the government implement Islamic laws completely in Malaysia to include the Islamic criminal law (known as *hudud*) for Muslims, Muslim leaders in the government reiterate their belief in the strategy of gradualistic and evolutionary approach as Malaysia is a highly plural and multireligious country. Besides, the non-Muslim population prefers the status quo to remain.

The success in institutionalising the Islamic banking system and Islamic insurance; the establishment of good quality Islamic schools, colleges and universities; the great increase in the number of committed and successful Muslim professionals in all sectors of the economy; and the Muslim Malay ability to manage a complex multi-ethnic and multi-religious society as well as a modern state in peace and harmony for the last three decades testify to the practical wisdom of the gradualist, tolerant and moderate Islamic approach which has become the mainstream tradition and hallmark of Malaysia. The Malay leadership’s blending of
tradition and modernity is being hailed as a model by many international Muslim observers and writers.

The government of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad has done a lot to promote the educational, economic and religious institutions of Muslim in the country. In recent years the government’s approach in Islamic development focussed on Islam as a comprehensive civilisational programme ("Isla>m h}ad}a>ri>") to promote the social, economic, educational and technological progress of the Muslim community as aspects of fard} kifa>yah or social obligations necessary for the collective wellbeing of the Muslim society without necessarily proclaiming them as “Islamic” programmes. Eradication of poverty, scientific and technological advancement and economic wellbeing of Muslims are given top priority. The Muslim opposition party regards the above programmes of the government as inadequate and restricted. It demands a totalistic islamisation of the state. As the political division continues, the two sides become more antagonistic and both are confident of making major inroads into each other’s political constituencies come the next general elections in 2004. Unlike the Indonesian scenario in which radical differences tend to lead to violence and bloodshed, the Muslims in Malaysia believe in the democratic election process of gaining power through the ballot box and not the bullet. Nevertheless the opposition parties complain of the lack of opportunities for their points of view to be heard in the electronic or mainstream print media. At any rate, any one promoting or using violence as a means of gaining political power or influence can be arrested under the Internal Security Act. In this way religious extremism or political radicalism is reduced to a minimum or kept under control.
The third and last Muslim-majority country in Southeast Asia is the small but rich kingdom of Brunei Darussalam which practices the only system of absolute Muslim-Malay hereditary monarchy in the Asia-Pacific region. With less than half a million population, Brunei’s overwhelmingly Muslim-Malay society subscribes to the unique hybrid ideology of Malay-Islam-Monarchy. Staunchly Sunni and religiously conservative, Brunei has been politically stable, thanks to the generosity of the royalty and the benign, people-friendly nature of the current Sultan. A gradual and cautious Islamization of society and culture accompanies the enviable economic prosperity of the country, thanks to her rich petroleum resources. However, realizing that the oil and gas reserves would seriously diminish in the coming decades, Brunei is now embarking on diversification of her economy and promoting higher education for the new Muslim leaders of the future.

The Muslim minority communities living in Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam, are not as fortunate as their counterparts in the Muslim-majority countries. Naturally, they face greater political and economic uncertainties in addition to the problem of wanting to preserve their minority Islamic identity in a non-Muslim majority nation state each with its own political, economic and cultural agenda. However, they do not experience much difficulty in maintaining their religious obligations of daily prayer, fasting or hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca.

In the case of the avowedly secular state of Singapore, the Muslim community has learned to be self-reliant and live, willy nilly, as Singaporean Muslims in a political system which is extremely wary of religious revivalism and particularly concerned about Islamic fundamentalist tendencies. The Singapore
government has decided in the last few years to take a critical look at the private Islamic religious school (madrasah) which the Muslims have been maintaining for several decades on the grounds that the products of such schools would be misfits in a highly competitive, industrial and secular society of the island republic. Reform of the religious school curriculum is a challenge the Muslims have to face in addition to the on-going challenge of economic survival in the rat-race of the highly industrialised and competitive Singaporean economy. The recent arrest of several Muslims in Singapore alleged to be members of a subversive Southeast Asian organization called Jamaah Islamiah (J.I.) has raised the spectre of potential Muslim terrorism on the island.

The Muslims of Thailand are divided into two parts, that of the north and in Bangkok and that of the southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Satun. Muslims of these four provinces are ethnically Malays who have been struggling to free themselves from Thai political control for decades as the four provinces were originally part of the Malay states of British Malaya. Having failed to achieve their objective of independence or secession from Thai sovereignty, they have generally resigned to the fact that they are citizens of Thailand and as such have to learn to live as part of the larger Thai Buddhist society. Their northern neighbours in Bangkok and beyond, being immigrants from many different countries and of diverse ethnic origins have no problems adjusting to the realities of Thai economy, politics or culture as long as their religious identity and religious life are tolerated by the majority. In the last decade more Muslim elites and intellectuals have decided to take advantage of the democratic reforms of Thailand by joining the mainstream of Thai politics, thereby contributing to the progress and betterment of the economic
and political situations of the Muslims. Violence is frowned upon by Muslim leaders and peaceful co-existence is accepted as the way of the future. An Islamic bank is now in the process of being established.

This is also the position accepted by the neighbouring Muslims of Cambodia who experienced the cruelties and brutalities of the former Khmer Rouge communist regime. Around seventy thousand Muslims were killed or massacred during the height of the regime’s power and the return of peace and democracy during the last decade saw the Muslims living in abject poverty, misery and disease. Cooperating with the government of Hun Sen, the Muslim leaders are embarking on the uphill task of rehabilitation of the Muslim community by building schools, mosques and clinics. Living in precarious economic and political conditions, the Muslims of Cambodia are indeed a pathetic lot. The ethnically diverse Muslim minorities in the northern country of Myanmar have also been facing a host of problems, but living under an aggressive military junta that is inhospitable to the Muslims or to democratic freedom poses a serious challenge to the future of the community. For decades the Rohingya Muslim separatist movement has been fighting the regime without success. Many Muslim professionals have either fled or migrated to other countries in Southeast Asia.

In the Philippines the plight of Muslims for the last few centuries has constituted a bitter record of armed conflicts, tension, hostile relationships and uneasy truce between the Muslims in the southern Philippine islands of Mindanao, Sulu, Basilan and Tawi-Tawi and the central governments beginning with the Spanish, the American and finally the Filipino. The Americans used to call this problem “the Moro headache” and the fight against the Muslims was called “The
Moro War*. The Moros who were converted to Islam in the 14th and 15th centuries are the original inhabitants of those southern islands until the crusading Spanish naval forces came to control the Philippines. The policy of assimilation and Christian migration from the north to Mindanao eventually turned the Muslim communities into minorities with the exception of four provinces. Forced by the circumstances to accept the *fait accompli* of Christian majority settlement and military superiority of the Filipino government, the Moros fought and struggled to regain their independence.

The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) led by Nur Misuari, embarked upon a long and bitter military struggle after the failure of the negotiations and peace treaties. After two decades of bloodshed and political instability, Nur Misuari decided to end the military struggle to accept the post of governor of a reduced autonomous region of Muslim Mindanao. He and the MNLF unfortunately failed to meet the expectations of the Muslim communities as well as the government of President Arroya and finally found himself arrested in 2002 by the government on charges of treason.

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a rival organization led by a former comrade of Nur Misuari, Hashim Salamat, entered into peaceful negotiations with Manila on its own terms with the hope of achieving better results than MNLF. It too failed to achieve expected results while the Philippine army stepped up military operations in Muslim dominated areas with the active reinforcement of United States armed forces. The fanatical and notoriously militant group known as Abu Sayyaf which indulged in murder and kidnappings of Christian civilians seemed to be the target of joint Filipino-American operations but as events unfolded, clashes
with the MILF forces also happened. This led to renewed tension between the MILF and the current government. With Malaysia willing to play the role of the middle man, negotiations between the Philippines government of President Arroyo and the MILF are being planned. While some Muslim leaders and intellectuals seek a peaceful and non-violent solution to their crisis, others do not find much hope other than complete autonomy of the Muslim territories.

As a major religion with about 230 million adherents in Southeast Asia, Islam will remain as a vital socioreligious, sociocultural and political force that contributes directly or indirectly to the stability or otherwise of the region as well as the country in which the Muslim community lives. The potential of Islam becoming a civilizing force for peace, stability, progress, harmony and prosperity for Southeast Asia in the 21st century is being nurtured in Indonesia and Malaysia, albeit in their own ways, in the crucible of democracy, cultural pluralism and religious tolerance. Both Indonesian and Malaysian Muslim communities cherish the values of Islamic moderation and abhor religious extremism. Both have been evolving educational systems which accommodate religious values, reason, science, humanities and social sciences. Both favour modernization tampered and guided by religious values, tradition and ethics. Both believe in giving equal opportunities for men and women. Women’s organizations and movements have, for a long time, played prominent roles in nation-building and international affairs. Both do not want to be controlled or dictated by the superpowers yet are committed to maintaining lasting peaceful relations with Western countries as well as their neighbours in ASEAN and Asia-Pacific regions.
ASEAN governments are united in their stand against terrorism and religious extremism. They have agreed to cooperate very closely in their efforts to combat terrorist acts. The October 2003 ASEAN Summit in Bali endorsed their desire to form an ASEAN security community which would make it extremely difficult for terrorists to operate in the region. The arrest of several Jamaah Islamiyah leaders in the last several months, including the latest arrest of Hambali, believed to be the mastermind of several terrorist acts in Indonesia, Philippines and Malaysia, shows the capability of the security forces of ASEAN countries to check the menace of Muslim radicals.¹

The Malaysian authorities have arrested in the year 2000 members of the militant al-Maunah group which intended to create havoc in the country and the suspected members of the so-called “Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia” even before September 11, 2001, on the grounds that they were suspected of being involved in activities which could threaten national security. They are still being detained under the Internal Security Act.²

The criminal acts of the Abu Sayyaf group in southern Philippines are indeed alarming for both the governments and peoples in Southeast Asia. It remains a security threat, no doubt, but the Malaysian and Philippines security forces are capable of isolating this menace and minimizing its impact on the security of the


region. Unfortunately, it is the terrorist acts of these misguided radicals which are being highlighted and focused by the Western media. ³

The Western media has never focused or highlighted, for example, the following achievements of the Muslim community in Malaysia:

1. The Malaysian success in maintaining parliamentary democracy since 1955 in a potentially disruptive multiracial society;
2. The successful but Islamically unprecedented Malaysian formula of sharing political power among the different ethnic groups and religious communities;
3. The progressive role of Muslim women in Malaysian society, economy and politics;
4. The attempt to develop a more holistic educational system to do away with the dichotomy of secular versus religious education;
5. The Malaysian Muslim leaders’ success in introducing Islamic banking and financial institutions which are now being appreciated even by non-Muslims and emulated in neighbouring countries;
6. The Muslim tolerance of other religions, whereby in one predominantly Muslim state the Buddhists have built the third largest statues of the sitting Buddha and sleeping Buddha in Southeast Asia;
7. The Malay political leaders tolerance of Chinese and Indian cultures by allowing, since Independence in 1957, the Chinese and Indian communities to have their own vernacular schools funded by government funds but teaching in their own languages although Malay is the official language of the country;

8. The IMF leader’s admission that Dr. Mahathir Mohamad’s currency control and unorthodox economic policies to save the Malaysian economy from further devastation following the attacks of predatory international currency traders in 1998 was, in retrospect, a correct move;

9. The emergence of a new breed Malay businessmen and Malay elite’s efficient, ethical and sound management of the national oil industry (Petronas) which is now engaged in overseas projects, the national car project (Proton), all the public institutions of higher learning and the hajj administration which is praised by Muslim world leaders, including the Saudis, as the best model in the world which should be emulated by other Muslim countries;

10. The Malay people’s spiritual preponderance and outlook towards life make them strive to achieve a harmonious balance between religious piety and material wellbeing, while maintaining peaceful relationship with their non-Muslim fellow citizens, and willing to make political sacrifices for the sake of national unity and stability.

11. Dr. Mahathir’s establishment of the Multimedia Super Corridor and projects to promote I.C.T. in the country which put Malaysia ahead of many Muslim countries. Many Muslim countries are now seeking Malaysia’s expertise on I.C.T. to help develop similar projects at home.

It is worth mentioning that more and more international Muslim leaders and observers who have visited Malaysia more than once or stayed in the country for some time are highly impressed with the Islamic situation in Malaysia and appreciative of the Malaysian model of inter-religious tolerance, democratic political system, sound administration, integration of the Orient and the Occident, a peaceful
multi-religious atmosphere, an independent foreign policy and a tolerant civilised culture, when they compare it with some Muslim countries in South Asia, Africa or the Middle East. There are weaknesses and shortcomings in some domains, as is true of all countries, but on the whole Islam of the Malay-Indonesian world represents a living tradition of religious moderation and an equilibrium between material sufficiency and spiritual consciousness. It is not a coincidence, perhaps, that the most common and popular prayer of Muslim throughout Southeast Asia is “O our Lord, grant us goodness in this world and goodness in the hereafter and protect us from the torment of the Inferno”. (Q. S{u>rah al-Baqarah, verse no. 201)

Islam in Southeast Asia has a great potential to contribute to inter-religious harmony and world peace, but for the majority of Muslims in the region, poverty will still be a major problem, particularly in Indonesia, Mindanao and Cambodia. The forces of exploitative and unfair globalisation, of Western hegemony, of aggressive Christian fundamentalism and of a paranoid Western media pushing their agenda in Southeast Asia may make it more difficult for the positive Islamic potential to flourish.\footnote{Examples of the fundamentalist Christian threat to religious harmony between Muslims and Christians are “Should Christians Convert Muslims?” \textit{Time Magazine} June 30, 2003; Jerry Falwell, a leader of the Southern Baptist Convention said in a US television interview that Mohammed was “a terrorist”. \textit{BBC News}, 7 October 2002; Dr. Jerry Vines, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Fla., declared that Muhammad was a “demon-possessed pedophile” and that Islam teaches the destruction of all non-Muslims; “Bush and God: How faith changed his life and shapes his agenda”, \textit{Newsweek}, March 10, 2003; “Zion’s Christian Soldiers” \textit{CBS News.com}, June 9, 2003 which describes the Fundamentalist Christian Evangelicals and the American Christian Zionists as the strongest supporters of Jewish settlements on the West Bank.} It is crucial for the sake of world peace that both sides of the inter-civilisational encounter realise that a just and stable world order requires utmost restraint on the extremist impulses and vision of world dominance. It also requires mutual respect and tolerance for religious rights and differences, for national
sovereignties, -- however small or weak the nations – are curbing the desire to divide and rule, and restoring the unbiased role of the United Nations in resolving international disputes.