Radicalizing liberalism: the ideological inversions of Islamic liberalism and moderation in Malaysian politics

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The emergence of Islamic liberalism in Southeast Asia over the last two decades has been characterized by its highly uneven reception across and within national contexts. In Malaysia, liberalism is a thoroughly negative category in political and religious discourse. In part the mobilization of anti-liberal reaction is the product of two important trends in Malaysian politics: the proliferation and growing power of Malaysia’s Islamic bureaucracy and the increased public activism of a broad array of Islamic NGO’s. These two trends reinforce each other in generating the controversies over Islamic practice or religious diversity that have punctuated Malaysia politics over the last ten years. In spite of these recurring controversies, Malaysia maintains an international reputation among North Atlantic governments as a “moderate Muslim” nation. Prime Minister Najib Razak’s efforts to craft a state Islamic ideology of moderation (wasatiyyah) is viewed by the Malaysian state, however, precisely as a bulwark against the further spread of liberalism within domestic politics. This seminar will examine such ideological inversions at work in Malaysian politics located in the concepts of Islamic liberalism and moderation.

Dr Carlo Bonura is a comparative political theorist in the Department of Politics and International Studies at SOAS, the University of London. His current research is on contemporary Islamic political thought and debates over Islamic liberalism in Southeast Asia. His publications have also focused on Thai politics, particularly the on-going conflict in southern Thailand, and the politics of culture in Southeast Asia.

All are welcome

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