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#### Highlights

- Fresh perspective by a young Muslim scholar on the rise of political Islam in Malaysia
- Examines the historical influence of Islamic theologians and scholars on political institutions in the country
- Provides a critical understanding of state control over religious matters

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# Islamic Statehood and *Maqasid al-Shariah* in Malaysia

## A Zero-Sum Game?

Kim Beng Phar

Debates on the establishment of an Islamic state in Malaysia generally occur across partisan divides, promoting a reductionist version of Islam as a force to punish and police Muslims' day-to-day behavior. The process takes place without regard for the essential concept of Islamic jurisprudence, *maqasid al-Shariah*, which can be literally translated as "the objectives of Islamic law." Islamic jurisprudence, the author explains, is dynamic, subject to constant interpretation that allows the issue of Islamic statehood to be debated along ethical, political, and even circumstantial lines.

Kim Beng Phar analyzes the polarized structure of Islamic institutions in Malaysia, "where each party tries to out-Islamize the other with bold Islamic plans, symbols, and rhetoric, which in turn lend themselves to callous application." He argues that it is important for those in power to understand the broad outlines of the objectives of *shariah* before trying to move on to specifics.

#### About the Author

KIM BENG PHAR is a visiting scholar in "soft power" and Asian regionalism at the Organization of Asian Studies at Waseda University in Tokyo. He has served as head teaching fellow at Harvard University and the University of Hong Kong, where he taught courses on Asian international relations, Chinese history, and conflict studies.

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