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ABSTRACT

“De-provincializing the Syariah:
Muslim Activists and Legal Reforms in Malaysia”

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This paper examines the active roles played by Muslim activists in agitating for the expansion of the functions of syariah (Muslim legal and ethical code) within a given country's constitution and in society at large. Using the Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) - the largest Muslim youth movement in Malaysia – as an illustrative case study, the paper examines a process which I term as “deprovincializing the syariah” by Muslim activists, which connotes an endeavour to reformulate and reassert the position of the syariah to cover all aspects of the country's laws. Building upon recent works on Islamic activism and drawing from various strands of social movement theory, this essay attempts to conceptualize and explain the various tactics which Muslim movements such as ABIM had adopted to make the case for the syariah to wield a wider influence in the public domain. Among the tactics which will be discussed are institutional subversion, ideological collaboration, dramatic contention and discursive persuasion, all of which have been utilized by Muslim activists since the advent of global Islamic resurgence in the 1970s.