FILM REVIEW

Mentega Terbang by Khairi Anwar. Malaysia: Anomalist Production and Meng Kheng Entertainment, 2021, 104 minutes.

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The independent Malaysian film *Mentega Terbang* (2021), directed by Khairi Anwar and co-produced by Anomalist Production and Meng Kheng Entertainment, serves as a powerful cinematic exploration of Malaysia's politico-religious dynamics. Inspired by a real-life story, the film reflects the social and cultural space once afforded to individuals in the "old Malaysia," before the increasingly restrictive climate that emerged in recent years, particularly in the aftermath of the 15th General Election (GE15). The film tells the story of Aisyah, a 15-year-old Muslim teenager confronting profound existential questions following the untimely death of her mother from terminal cancer. What sets *Mentega Terbang* apart is its bold and introspective exploration of Islam as a central theme. Through Aisyah's curious exploration of grief, faith and self-discovery, the film provides a reflective and touching narrative that portrays the fragility of human existence while showing the possibility for individual expressions of belief within a society often shaped by rigid communal norms. It reveals a Malaysia where, despite systemic constraints, individuals could find ways to explore their spiritualities.

Why would such a sensible film be banned under the Anwar-led unity government? The controversy surrounding *Mentega Terbang* unfolded in a series of escalating events that reflect the fraught dynamics of religion, politics and freedom of expression in Malaysia.

Released in early 2021, the film was only screened through selected private locations in Malaysia. Its public debut was in November 2021 for the Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival in Indonesia. The film gained wider public attention after its release on the Hong Kong-based streaming platform, Viu, on 19

January 2023 (The Malaysian Insight 2023). On 25 February 2023, conservative scriptwriter Zabidi Mohamed publicly criticised the film on Facebook, labelling it as "blasphemous to Islam." In subsequent posts, he accused the film of promoting apostasy among Malaysian Muslims (Freedom Film Network 2024). In response, the film's director, Khairi Anwar, issued a letter of demand, seeking the removal of these posts and a public apology for the defamatory statements (Leong 2023). This online controversy contributed to the heightened scrutiny and eventual banning of the film by Malaysia's Film Censorship Board in August 2023, citing its exploration of sensitive themes that allegedly conflicted with Islamic values (Danial 2024). This decision marked the beginning of the state's attempts to suppress the film and its message, framing it as a threat to religious harmony.

Following the ban, the situation escalated further when the film's director, Khairi Anwar, and producer, Tan Meng Kheng, were charged under Section 298 of the Penal Code (Arif 2024). This provision criminalises actions deemed to "wound religious feelings" – a broad and contentious legal tool often criticised for its potential misuse. The prosecution of the filmmakers signalled an intensification of efforts to enforce ideological conformity, transforming *Mentega Terbang* from a creative art into a flashpoint for broader sociopolitical tensions (Al Jazeera 2024).

It is worth mentioning that these repressive actions unfolded against a backdrop of political instability and heightened ethno-religious sensitivities. The Pakatan Harapan (PH) rose to power with promises to heal societal divisions and guide Malaysia towards a more inclusive and open future. However, the new government, led by Anwar Ibrahim, did not ascend to power as a standalone entity. It was compelled to forge a coalition with UMNO to secure a parliamentary majority. The unity government, led by Anwar Ibrahim, faced significant challenges in maintaining its fragile coalition. To secure loyalty and stability, the administration made concessions to UMNO elites, some of whom were allegedly implicated in high-profile corruption scandals. These compromises not only fuelled public discontent but also emboldened conservative factions within the coalition, allowing them to push for stricter enforcement of their agendas.

The ban and subsequent prosecution of *Mentega Terbang* epitomise this precarious balancing act. Rather than allowing space for critical dialogue and intellectual engagement, the unity government's actions have exacerbated polarisation, allowing conservative voices to dominate the public sphere. As a result, the film's philosophical exploration of faith and mortality has been overshadowed by its role in a larger ideological struggle, indicating the tension between creative freedom and political expediency in contemporary Malaysia.

The broader sociocultural anxieties reflected in the *Mentega Terbang* case are deeply rooted in Malaysia's historic negotiation of modernity and tradition. The ban on *Mentega Terbang* in Malaysia can be understood within the divisive doctrinal context that dominates Islamic discourse in the country, as framed by Ahmad Fauzi and Che Hamdan (2023). They categorise Malay-Muslim political ideologies into four key Islamic frameworks: Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah (ASWAJA) traditionalism, Salafi reformism, Salafi conservatism and neo-traditionalism. Among these, ASWAJA traditionalism forms the backbone of Islamic orthodoxy in Malaysia, emphasising classical teachings of *Tawhid* (theology), *Fiqh* (jurisprudence), and *Tasawwuf* (spirituality). UMNO, as the dominant party in Malaysian politics for much of its history, has leveraged ASWAJA traditionalism to assert its role as the protector of Malay-Muslim identity and as a proponent of a moderate yet orthodox interpretation of Islam (Ahmad Fauzi and Amran 2023). This traditionalist approach, institutionalised by entities such as the Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, JAKIM), has been cemented as the official narrative of Islam, shaping both public policy and cultural governance (Ahmad Fauzi and Mohd Haris Zuan 2018).

Over the years, the dominance of this perspective has been challenged by Salafi reformists, who prioritise scriptural purity and often reject traditionalist practices, and by Salafi conservatives, who take an even more rigid stance rooted in Wahhabi-inspired theology (Ahmad Fauzi and Che Hamdan 2023). Both groups, while doctrinally distinct, share a tendency to advocate for stricter enforcement of Islamic norms in public and private spheres. A case in point is PAS's evolving ideological position, which has been shaped by its political rivalry with UMNO over its Islamisation credentials. This competition has pushed PAS towards adopting a more conservative stance on religious matters. Through its grassroots networks and extensive infrastructure of Islamic schools, the conservative wing of PAS has cultivated a strong political base, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas where Malay-Muslim identity remains closely tied to conservative orthodoxy (Azmil 2018).

In contrast, neo-traditionalists, while a minority voice in Malaysia's public sphere, play a critical role in shaping a form of modernist Islam that seeks to bridge traditional frameworks with contemporary realities (Ahmad Fauzi and Che Hamdan 2023). This perspective seeks to balance traditional frameworks with the needs of the modern world by emphasising the reinterpretation of classical teachings to address contemporary issues such as democracy, human rights, economic justice and multicultural coexistence. People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR)

embodies aspects of neo-traditionalism, as it positions itself as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious party that seeks to incorporate traditional Islamic principles to align with its broader agenda of governance reform and social equity.

Zooming in to the state's role in mediating tensions between the conservatives and neo-traditionalists is pivotal. It is widely agreed among scholars that Malaysian governments have historically co-opted Islam as a tool of political control, leveraging both modernist and traditionalist discourses to consolidate power. In the post-GE15 context, however, this balance has become increasingly precarious. Conservative Islamism and neo-traditionalist Islam coexist uneasily, competing for dominance within the state's ideological apparatus.

The unity government under Anwar Ibrahim faces mounting pressure from ASWAJA traditionalist and Salafi conservatist factions, compelling it to lean further towards conservative rhetoric and policies to maintain political stability. As Ahmad Fauzi and Che Hamdan (2022) argue, PAS's electoral success in the GE15 exemplifies the enduring appeal of conservative Islam, which positions itself as the guardian of Malay-Muslim identity.

Mentega Terbang lies at the centre of this dialectic, with a protagonist whose spiritual journey challenges conservative dogmas while exploring meaning across diverse perspectives. The vilification of the film is thus not merely an act of cultural policing but a manifestation of the ideological struggle to define the boundaries of acceptable discourse within Malay-Muslim society.

Religion as a Mechanism of Control in Malaysia's Mediascape during and after GE15

The Centre for Independent Journalism report (2023) on social media monitoring during Malaysia's GE15 offers essential insights into the use of the 3R (race, religion, and royalty) framework as a mechanism of control within Malaysian political discourse (Masjaliza et al. 2023). The monitoring identified 24,484 posts focusing on religion, making it the second most prominent theme in the study, following race. The report underscores the strategic weaponisation of religion to heighten Malay-Muslim insecurities and consolidate conservative political power. Religious narratives were deployed in multifaceted ways, targeting political opponents, amplifying divisive issues, and exploiting societal anxieties about cultural and moral decline. Opponents were frequently labelled as anti-Islamic or excessively liberal, with claims that their policies and values posed a direct threat to Malay-Muslim identity and the sanctity of Islam. For instance, PAS's rhetoric often portrayed the Alliance of Hope (Pakatan Harapan, PH) coalition as

being aligned with secular or Western ideologies, allegedly undermining Islamic traditions.

Chan and Hew (2023) emphasise the role of political actors and influencers in spreading narratives that depict Malay-Muslims as being under threat from liberalism, multiculturalism and minority groups. Social media platforms such as TikTok and Facebook are identified as key tools for disseminating disinformation and emotionally charged narratives. These narratives are not only divisive but also instrumental in consolidating conservative political power, ultimately undermining pluralism and democratic discourse.

The aftermath of GE15 has left Malaysia's political landscape deeply polarised, ironically marked by the formation of a unity government under Anwar Ibrahim. While this coalition is unprecedented in its diversity, it remains fragile, caught between progressive ambitions and the necessity of appeasing conservative blocs. In this context, the reliance on 3R issues has intensified—not out of conviction, but out of necessity. Confronted with a fractured mandate and a tenuous grip on power, the administration is constrained by the need to placate reactionary forces both within the coalition and beyond. These dynamics undermine the government's capacity to advance progressive reforms, rendering it complicit in perpetuating the very narratives it professes to oppose.

The scapegoating of *Mentega Terbang* exemplifies this paradox. On one hand, the film serves as a proxy for broader anxieties surrounding the role of Islam in a rapidly modernising society. On the other hand, it becomes a convenient symbol for conservative groups, who perceive it as evidence of the creeping influence of secularism and liberalism. This narrative bolsters their calls for increased vigilance against perceived threats to religious and cultural purity. By framing the film as a danger to the faith, these conservative actors successfully mobilise segments of the electorate who equate the defence of Islam with safeguarding their core identity, whether ethnic or national. This discourse reveals a broader strategy of leveraging cultural products and artistic expressions as focal points for political and ideological conflicts. In this context, I propose an objective textual analysis using Tzvetan Todorov's narrative framework to examine the film's thematic depth. This approach aims to provide a fair and balanced evaluation grounded in an objective deconstruction of the film's language and narrative techniques.

Narrative Analysis of *Mentega Terbang* and Its Contextual Reading

Tzvetan Todorov's theory (1977) of narrative structure posits that stories generally follow a linear progression through five key stages: equilibrium, disruption,

recognition of disruption, resolution and the establishment of a new equilibrium. This framework highlights the dynamics of change and restoration in storytelling, providing a lens to understand how narratives are constructed to convey meaning, conflict, transformation and ideology. The thematic depth of *Mentega Terbang* emerges prominently when mapped against Todorov's narrative stages, Aisyah's individual struggle for understanding reflecting Malaysia's broader socioreligious conflicts. These disruptions in Aisyah's life serve as allegories for the cultural and religious shifts occurring in Malaysia, where modernity and pluralism increasingly challenge the dominance of conservative ideology.

At the beginning of the film, Aisyah's life reflects a harmonious coexistence of faith and familial bonds, grounded in the duality of her mother's devoutness and her father's liberal outlook. This initial balance symbolises the broader equilibrium in Malaysian society, where a blend of tradition and modernity exists but remains precarious. The mother represents a steadfast adherence to religious orthodoxy, while the father embodies a more inclusive, flexible interpretation of Islam.

Second, the death of Aisyah's mother serves as a pivotal narrative disruption, fracturing the stability of her life and propelling her into a journey of philosophical questioning. This disruption mirrors the broader politico-religious tensions in Malaysia, where the drive towards pluralistic engagement increasingly challenges entrenched conservative traditionalist religious norms and pre-existing ideological assumptions. Aisyah's search for meaning, expressed through her exploration of other religious philosophies, including reincarnation, reflects the intellectual and spiritual struggles faced by many young people navigating diverse ideological landscapes. If the same theme had been used to portray another demographic or cultural context, such as Kadazan or Chinese, it likely would not have provoked such intense controversy. The film's focus on a young Muslim girl grappling with questions of faith, in this context, has been weaponised by conservative factions, leading to an exaggerated moral panic. This reaction has escalated to the point where the entire state apparatus has been mobilised to suppress the narrative, effectively denying a young girl—both the character and, symbolically, the youth she represents—the right to explore life and doubt. This disproportionate response reflects deep-seated insecurities within Malaysia's politico-religious landscape and highlights the selective policing of narratives that challenge conservative orthodoxy.

Third, Aisyah's exploration of other religious philosophies, including reincarnation, puts her at odds with societal expectations and religious orthodoxy. Her search for answers about death, the afterlife, and the human condition reflects Malaysia's broader societal conflict. This pluralistic approach challenges traditionalist

defenders of conservative orthodoxy, creating tension with neo-traditionalist advocates for reform and inclusion. Aisyah's introspection is misinterpreted as subversive, echoing how modern ideological shifts are often resisted by conservative factions in Malaysia.

The fourth stage of Todorov's narrative model focuses on the struggles for resolution and reconciliation. Aisyah's journey, though incomplete, embodies her effort to reconcile her religious upbringing with the diverse perspectives she encounters. Her Indian friend, a boy her age, plays a significant role in offering emotional support during her grief while providing an alternative viewpoint on death. Through their interactions, Aisyah is introduced to different ways of understanding life and mortality, expanding her perspective beyond her own religious framework. In contrast, the character of a conservative uncle symbolises moral policing, reflecting the scrutiny and control exerted within a majoritarian political culture. Just as Aisyah's exploration of alternative ideas meets resistance, Malaysia's conservative institutions and communities often react defensively to the perceived erosion of Islamic values. The backlash against *Mentega Terbang* itself exemplifies this resistance, where artistic and intellectual inquiry is framed as an existential threat to the cultural equilibrium.

Lastly, the film offers a vision of a new equilibrium through its open-ended conclusion, where absolute certainty gives way to the courage to navigate ambiguity and complexity. This openness is not a weakness but a strength, reflecting the resilience required to embrace pluralism in a society marked by hypersensitivity to religious issues.

The main logic of the narrative lies in its representation of Aisyah's journey of coming to terms with her mother's premature passing, a loss that upends her sense of stability and sparks an intellectual curiosity about theological and philosophical matters. Rather than presenting a rejection of her faith, the narrative invites viewers to witness Aisyah's respectful exploration of various beliefs about life after death, reincarnation, and the human soul. These questions, though challenging, are posed in a manner that reflects the authentic concerns of a teenager seeking understanding rather than provocation.

The dialogue, restrained and thoughtful, emphasises discussion over dogma. Aisyah's conversations—with her father, whose liberal worldview subtly informs her inquiry, and with others of differing perspectives—are crafted to be introspective rather than antagonistic. The film avoids sensationalism, instead fostering an atmosphere where difficult topics are handled with care, sensitivity and intellectual honesty. These qualities elevate *Mentega Terbang* from mere

entertainment to a nuanced meditation on the universal human experiences of loss and the search for meaning.

The film *Mentega Terbang* can also be understood as a powerful coming-of-age narrative, with Aisyah's journey of self-discovery reflecting the universal challenges of adolescence by grappling with identity, loss and the complexities of belief systems. Aisyah's exploration of existential questions about death and the afterlife serves as a metaphorical passage from the certainties of childhood into the ambiguous realities of adulthood. In essence, the film is a portrayal of a teenager confronting mortality—not through rebellion or rejection, but through inquiry and reflection. It offers a respectful platform for dialogue, ultimately humanising a journey that many in society experience in silence.

The ending of Aisyah's journey suggests that equilibrium in a modern context is not about returning to traditional stability but about forging a new, adaptive balance that values coexistence and mutual understanding. This optimism underlines the film's potential to inspire society to rise above its divisions and imagine a future where complexity and diversity are celebrated as sources of strength.

Unfortunately, this coming-of-age story is particularly poignant in its Malaysian context, where religious and cultural expectations often weigh heavily on personal growth. Despite its serene and contemplative tone, *Mentega Terbang* has been thrust into the volatile terrain of Malaysia's 3R debates, where its thoughtful approach has been distorted into an ideological battleground. The orthodox-conservative perspective draws attention away from the critical questions the film seeks to raise—questions that are both universal and deeply human. Instead, the public discourse is dominated by reductive accusations and a moral bashing that seeks to delegitimise not just the film but the broader idea of open intellectual inquiry.

The *Mentega Terbang* episode is a microcosm of the broader dialectical struggle between the forces of conservatism and progress. The unity government's handling of this controversy highlights the structural constraints it faces in balancing competing demands while revealing the limits of its reformist agenda. From the ASWAJA traditionalist and Salafi conservative perspectives, the film's narrative likely conflicted with their understanding of Islamic teachings, framing it as a challenge to religious orthodoxy. Salafi reformists may similarly view such creative expressions as "deviant" or un-Islamic, while neo-traditionalists, though potentially more open to interpretive diversity, remain constrained by the dominant political and institutional pressures.

The question remains whether the unity government will continue to use such an independent film as scapegoats or finally confront the structural conditions that make them so politically expedient. *Mentega Terbang* should not be viewed as a political tool to assert a specific doctrinal position or as a threat to any Muslim community. Instead, it serves as a valuable cultural expression that provides young audiences with an opportunity to explore and understand the complexities of a multifaceted world, irrespective of their religious backgrounds. In its calm and deliberate narrative style, the film offers a powerful counterpoint to the divisive rhetoric that surrounds it, reminding us that even amidst conflict, there is space for dialogue, respect, and the shared human pursuit of truth. The film acts as a reminder, reflecting the struggles of navigating identity in a society shaped by diverse beliefs and traditions. Such narratives are crucial in helping young people build a deeper understanding of their world, enabling them to engage critically with differing perspectives while remaining grounded in their own values.

In this light, *Mentega Terbang* should be embraced as an educational and artistic medium that transcends doctrinal boundaries, contributing to the cultural and intellectual growth of society. It is not a vehicle for ideological conflict but a platform for storytelling that can enrich the collective understanding of our shared human experience.

Malaysia's multiculturalism is often celebrated as a cornerstone of its national identity, yet cases like this expose its fragility. The *Mentega Terbang* case is emblematic of a broader crisis of trust in the system's ability to protect and nurture a mature and multicultural society. By framing the filmmakers as provocateurs, the government distracts from its own inability or unwillingness to address deeper systemic challenges. What is worse is that when legal mechanisms like Section 298 are used to punish rather than protect, it sends a message that the state prioritises ideological conformity over the diversity of thought and belief. This not only alienates progressive voices but also undermines public confidence in the government's ability to lead with fairness and integrity.

This inability of the unity government to govern a complex, multifaceted and multicultural society demonstrates the film's central irony: a work that seeks to promote understanding and compassion has been co-opted as a political scapegoat, highlighting the disillusionment with the progressive faction that once held promise within the current administration.

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