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Themes and Issues in Research on Interfaith and Inter-Religious Dialogue in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia is a multi-cultural melting pot with a blend of multi-racial and multi-religious population. Although Islam is the official religion of the country, the people are guaranteed freedom to practice any religion in peace and harmony. Respect for every believer to practise their faiths is enshrined in the Federal Constitution. Despite major differences in their beliefs and faith, Malaysian somehow managed to live harmoniously to a certain extent. This paper will discuss the relationship among different religious groups in the country and examine the challenges in the implementation of interfaith dialogue in Malaysia. The discussion is presented in four parts. The first part gives the background of Malaysia's multi-ethnic society. The second part revisits the concept of inter-faith and inter-religious relationship, exploring briefly on the history and development in Malaysia. In view of the increasing religious disputes invoked by a string of controversies affecting the already tense religious tension in the country, there is an urgent need to relook on the relevance of interfaith and inter-religious dialogue in the plural society of Malaysia. Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye, Trustee of 1Malaysia Foundation emphasised that interfaith dialogue must continue to remain relevant in our multi-religious Malaysia, and genuine dialogue will lead to interfaith harmony. The third part highlights on the themes of the interfaith and inter-religious dialogue. It covers the issues related to the subject in discussion and examines the challenges in the application of the interfaith and inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia. The country needs credible interfaith mechanisms to enable different religions to interact intellectually and reinforce common values by discussing burning issues and perceivable obstacles to the promotion of peace and harmony through religious understanding and respect. The final chapter studies the way forward to address inter-religious discourse and its effect on national integration. It underscores the urgent need for a common platform that enables interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding. Points to be taken in mind when drafting programmes to promote inter-religious understanding and harmony include the importance of ensuring that theological differences do not undermine the national goals of building a cohesive society. The fourth part concludes the paper with recommendations for considerations that may help improved and stabilised interfaith and interreligious relations in Malaysia.

Key words: Themes, issues, research, interfaith, inter-religious dialogue, Malaysia

Introduction

It is known that every human society throughout the world and throughout history, the various religions and their theologies, ethics, and traditions influence everything in their life, shaping socio-economic and political ideas, attitudes and institutions. It is observed that religious teachings and traditions shape how people respond to each other in their daily social inter-course and interaction in the community at large (Lee, 2011).

The majority of us preserve and protect our own religious beliefs and traditions as generally they symbolize our essential identities, theologically, historically, culturally, socially, and even politically. Our religious faiths symbolize our dignity as persons and our very souls as communities and individuals. It thus goes without saying that in our multi-racial and multi-religious society, the only way for us to live in peace and harmony is for us to live in peaceful co-existence. It is important for us to recognize, understand, accept and respect each other regardless of our respective belief.

Malaysia is a secular federation comprising eleven states in the Peninsular, Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia and the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Labuan. Successive periods of European colonisation

entered the Malay Peninsula beginning with the Portuguese in 1511, followed by the Dutch (1641-1824) and finally the British from the nineteenth century up to Malayan Independence in 1957.

A Background Portrait of Malaysia (The Demographic Profile of Malaysia):

The demographics of Malaysia are represented by the multiple ethnic groups that exist in the country. Malaysia's population, as of April 2011 is estimated to be around 28,477,600 which put it in the top 50 most populated country in the world. Of the total of slightly more than 28.48 million people, 60.6% are Bumiputera, 22.8% are Chinese, 6.8% are Indians, 1.3% are others and 8.5% comprised of non-Malaysian citizens (Department of Statistics of Malaysia, 2011).

Religion is highly correlated with ethnicity and almost all of the major religions of the world have substantial representation in Malaysia. Data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia in 2006 reported that of the total of slightly more than 24 million people then, 60.4% are Muslims, 19.2% are Buddhists, 9.1% are Christians, 6.3% are Hindus and 5% are from other minority faiths such as Sikhism, Taoist, Confucianism, Bahaism and Paganism. For the purpose of this discussion, it is fair to make reference to the 2006 data to get a rough picture on the current population demographic according to religion in Malaysia.

In general, Malaysians can be classified into two main categories. The first category comprises of those with cultural affinities indigenous to the region and to one another, which are known as Bumiputera (lit. 'Sons of the soil'). The other is the non-Bumiputera group whose cultural affinities lie outside of the region. The Bumiputera groups can be broken into three broad categories i.e. the aborigines (Orang asli), Malays and Malay-related. Malays include those who have settled in the country (mainly in the Malay Peninsula) since the 19th century such as Javanese, the Banjarese, Boyanese, Bugis, Bajau and Minangkabau. The third or non-Malay Bumiputera category consists of ethnic groups found in East Malaysia; the natives of Sabah and Sarawak (which boast 30 indigenous groups in each state). The non-Bumiputera groups are mainly of the Chinese and Indians with smaller communities made of Punjabi, Malayalee minorities, Arabs, Sinhalese and Eurasians.

The 1957 Constitution of Independence of Malaya stated that Islam is the religion of the Federation. However the Article 11 (1) of the constitution guarantees all citizens the freedom to profess and practice his or her own faith (the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, 1998). Therefore, it can be ascertained that the people of Malaysia is an assortment of multi-religious people. Malaysia has a pluralistic nature of society comprises people of diverse races, ethnic, tribes, cultures and religions. Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution defines Malay as the one who professes the religion of Islam. Hence, a person from Malay ethnicity is automatically identified as a Muslim regardless of whether he is practising or not. The Chinese by tradition are Buddhist, although significant numbers are Christians. A small number of them follow traditional Chinese religions such as Taoism and Confucianism. Meanwhile, the Indians are primarily Hindus, with quite a number are Christians and Muslims. Also a small number are Sikhs and Bahais.

The above is a good illustration to indicate that communication between people of different religion is very vital in a multi-religious society like Malaysia. The issue of religious freedom and the position of Islam in Malaysia provides for a most pertinent and interesting reflection of the interaction between religion, politics and socio-economic factors in the modern world.

Religious Pluralism in Malaysia:

It is essential to understand Malaysia's pre and post-colonial history in order to comprehend the state of religious pluralism in Malaysia. It is learned from history that Malaysia has been the centre of trade and commerce since the 10th century when ancient Malay kingdoms were discovered in the northern peninsular region of Malaysia. Most of these kingdoms were under Hindu or Buddhist influence. It was noted that the region was highly coveted due to its geographical position situated in between the Chinese and Indian civilisations.

It is believed that Islam had arrived in Malaysia around the 14th century through Arab traders from the Middle East. It only became the dominant religion in the Southeast Asian region after the establishment of the Sultanate of Malacca in the 15th century when Malacca became the main trading port of Asia. It was noted in history that Parameswara, the first ruler of Malacca converted to Islam after his marriage to the princess from Pasai. This was the period where Islam spread to the majority of modern day Peninsular Malaysia which were territories under the sultanate. Despite being predominant religion then, Islam was not imposed upon the people and foreign traders. It was believed that most laypeople and traders alike embraced Islam because of the advantages which came with identifying oneself with the ruler's religion. This enables people with different religions to co-exist together. It is worth to note that this was one of the first recorded instances of ethnic and religious pluralism in Malaysia.

Alteration of the Shape of Religious Pluralism in Malaysia:

The fall of Malacca Sultanate led to the colonisation of Malacca and ultimately the rest of Peninsular and Borneo. The shape of ethnic and religious pluralism in Malaysia was altered during British occupation in the late eighteenth century. It was asserted that the British's policies during their rule in Malaysia gave a rise to the ethnicism and competing ethnicities currently inherited by the modern Malaysian nation-state. The imbalance of the ethnic composition caused an obvious problem to the socio-economic stability of the country which was further compounded by the 'divide and rule' policy of the British. It was learned that under colonialism, different ethnic groups were not allowed to intermingle with each other; instead they existed mainly within their own ethnic spheres. The 'divide and rule' policy meant that religion was not a contentious issue between these different ethnic groups. They were able to practise their religion freely without fearing any reprisal from other groups. The limited interaction between these different ethnic groups of different religions resulted in lack of knowledge of each other.

The Current State of Religious Interaction in Malaysia:

The rapid economic development of Malaysia during the late 20th century and early 21st century has propelled Malaysia to become one of the richest Southeast Asian countries. The establishment of strong middle-class, not just among Malays but also among non-Malays has created an educated and sophisticated society who can relate to and communicate with those who are not from their ethnic group. As a result, integrated neighbourhoods that are no longer confined to specific ethnic groups emerged in the cities. This has created a new generation of Malaysians who experience multi-culturalism on a daily basis. The state of religious pluralism is one that is intrinsically connected to the question of ethnicity. The issue of respect for each other's religion subsequently engenders a respect for one's ethnicity as well. Socio-economic and socio-political factors play a role as well in creating harmonious and peaceful multi-religious Malaysia. There is a need for influential intellectuals and organisations to play a role by informing and educating the public about the necessity of maintaining respect for each other's religion, thus avoiding any eruption of ethnic violence that has been experienced in Malaysia's history.

Concept of Interfaith and Inter-Religious Relationship: History and Development in Malaysia:

The term interfaith dialogue refers to cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions, spiritual or humanistic beliefs at both the individual and institutional level with the aim of deriving a common ground in belief through a concentration on similarities between faiths, understanding of values and commitment to the world. The American Heritage Dictionary defines interfaith as 'of, relating to, or involving persons of different religious faith' whilst dialogue is being defined as i) 'conversation between two or more people'; ii) 'an exchange of opinions on a particular subject; discussion'.

The basic intent of an interfaith dialogue is to promote understanding between different religions in the effort to increase acceptance of others, rather than to synthesize new beliefs. The commitment to engage in a healthy dialogue sets a good example for peaceful co-existence between the various religious communities in Malaysia. While some may argue that sitting down to talk may not immediately or even ultimately lead to concrete solutions for the various difficult and complex religious problems facing the country, it is worth considering the fact that it is a good start towards strengthening the trust among the various religious groups, which can only be a good thing.

It is noticed that current headlines worldwide are often filled with examples of religious intolerance, mostly with a violent twist. The most prevalent observation is the growing trend of Islamophobia during the 2000s which has been attributed by some commentators to the September 11 attack. They feel that many of the stereotypes and misinformation that contribute to the articulation of Islamophobia are rooted in a particular perception of Islam, such as the notion that Islam promotes terrorism (Miles and Brown, 2003).

Malaysia, being a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country has not been spared from the inter-religious tensions due to various reasons. Over the years, we had several wake up calls which inadvertently should have sounded the alarm on the need for an urgent intervention to address the animosity in our local inter-religion relations. Among them is the issue of the purported Malaysians' freedom of religion being questioned in a string of controversial cases like that of the late M. Moorthy's status of religion before his untimely death in 2005 and the apostasy case of Lina Joy in 2006 which provided another example concerning the freedom of religion of an individual. These controversies underline the issue of one's religious freedom in Malaysia, especially when it comes to Malays and Islam.

There was also the discontentment among the Indian communities in 2006 caused by the planned demolition of unregistered Hindu temples in Kuala Lumpur, in order to make space for development. Reports have noted that the demolitions were still rife after the incident especially in the state of Selangor. This can be

observed in the confrontational incident where cow's head trampled during a protest against the relocation of Hindu temples. In fact, cows are sacred animals in Hinduism.

Other examples include the reactions in Malaysia arising from the controversy over the usage of the word 'Allah' by Christians to refer to God in 2010 which saw protest demonstrations in Kuala Lumpur and even attacks on churches in different parts of the country. Also, several severed pigs' heads were found in mosque compounds in the Malaysia capital, Kuala Lumpur. The recent move by the Malaysian Home Ministry to withhold the release of 30,000 Malay language Bibles did not make the matter any better which had affected the already tense religion relations in the country. These events sparked a series of attacks on several places of worship in the country.

It was noted that after two main racial tensions in 1969 and 2001, most of the conflicts faced by Malaysians are usually religious in nature, especially in family matter. For the past twenty years, after the amendment of Article 121 (1A) of the Federal Constitution which provides for exclusive jurisdiction of the Syariah Court over Islamic law matters, conflict between jurisdiction of civil court and Syariah court is on the rise. This is apparent in cases where the parties involve a Muslim and a non-Muslim and conversion out of Islam. These cases sparked tension between the Muslims and non-Muslims in relation to which court has the power to adjudicate such matters. In the effort to resolve the issue, the government has conducted dialogues and but no effective measures from the government have been made.

The increasing religious disputes have led the Malaysian government to revive an interfaith committee. According to Prime Minister Dato' Sri Mohd Najib b. Tun Haji Abdul Razak, the interfaith committee could serve as a mechanism to resolve problems and issues related to religion through honest and frank discussions. If the process is sustained, it will mark a milestone in Malaysian efforts to advance inter-religious dialogue at the national level (Choong, 2011).

In reality, interfaith dialogue in Malaysia can be traced to the year 1956 when Persatuan Hidup Murni (The Pure Life Society), a Hindu charitable body, pursued the establishment of a global interfaith cooperation council, based in Malaysia. In the early stage, this council was known as World Council for Inter-Faith Cooperation. In 1963, it has developed and operated under the new name of Pertubuhan Antara Agama Malaysia (Interfaith Association of Malaysia) until 1986 when it was later known as Inter-Faith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF). It operates under the same name ever since. Members of INSaF come from various religious backgrounds, including Islam. They are largely professionals who share a common view of the universality of God and the shared humanity of all people. Interaction and interreligious understanding among members is fostered through religious dialogue and symbolic friendship acts such as gathering for Religious Harmony Day and Organ Donation Campaign. Majlis Penasihat Perpaduan Negara (National Unity Advisory Council) was established on 23rd February 1970. The National Unity Department is responsible for protecting and nurturing ethnic unity in the Malaysian society (Baharuddin, 2007). A number of strategies have been planned and executed to ensure racial and religious harmony is achieved in the society.

In 1983, non-Muslim religious leaders primarily of religious officials from the four main religions had come to a consensus to form Malaysian Consultative For Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS) which was also known as Majlis Perundingan Agama-Agama Malaysia (Consultative Council on Religion Malaysia). The chief role of the Council is to act as a consultative and liaison body. The Council has expressed concern about the Islamisation policy of the government as well as other human rights and social issues. The Council acts as a watchdog organisation monitoring enactments and policies that affect the religious life of minority religious groups in the country.

In April 2002, the Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) initiated an interfaith dialogue aimed at promoting better understanding and respect among the country's different religious groups. The interfaith dialogue included representatives from the Malaysian Islamic Development Department, the Malaysian Ulama Association, and the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS).

On 15th February 2003, the Malaysian Interfaith Network (MIN) was founded through the efforts of Dato' Dr. Anwar Fazal, who was a key player in developing global codes and guidelines on civil society and human rights. He gathered organisations from all religious faiths which include about 30 participating organisations ranging from the MCCBCHS, Sisters in Islam, the Council of Churches of Malaysia and etc. MIN was founded with the aim of promoting religions dialogue among faith organisations in Malaysia as well as trying to foster understanding on common issues of concern amongst its participants.

The 'Taiping Peace Initiative', a programme based in the town of Taiping (which means 'everlasting peace' in Malaysia) was initiated by Dato' Dr. Anwar Faizal of the Taiping Peace and by Mr. Peter Schier, representative of the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation which had sponsored the Taiping event. It was an initiative to promote the triple culture of inner peace, peace with other people and peace with the environment. The over 30 Taiping Roundtable participants informed each other about the many ongoing altruistic social activities of the various faith and interfaith organizations, defined common values and common concerns they share and set up six action groups to address the most urgent concerns.

The Taiping meeting discussed and identified the following key common values: integrity and accountability, service, love, environment protection, compassion, respect, justice, peace, unity of religions, gender equality and freedom moderation. The Taiping meeting also identified the key common concerns as: loss of family values, extremism, lack of multi-faith education, environmental degradation, lack of tolerance or intolerance, infringement of human rights, prejudice and ignorance, lack of spirituality and dearth of good governance. However, despite all of the efforts, MIN was claimed to have kept a low profile and has not been active in promoting inter-religious dialogue.

On 14th December 2004, the government established the Select Committee on National Service and Unity to discuss issues pertaining to unity between the races and national integration. This committee also sits to analyze and recommends amendment or change on the existing development policy. This committee is comprised of 11 members from various races and political parties headed by the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in charge of national unity, Datuk Maximus Ongkili (Baharuddin, 2007).

In early 2005, a major controversy emerged due to a proposed Inter-Faith Commission put forward by various individuals, some of which included academics and lawyers from the Bar Council. The steering committee behind the proposal for a draft bill for the commission organised a national conference that drew nearly 200 people from all religious backgrounds. The framework for a commission that could advise the relevant parties on the many interfaith issues that arise in pluralistic Malaysia such as conversion from Islam to another faith, which is deemed as apostasy in Malaysia, was brought up for consideration. The conference in return received prime coverage in the local newspapers. Due to the controversy surrounding it, the draft bill was put on hold by former Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

In 2007, the Council of Churches of Malaysia expressed shock when the Malaysia government had cancelled an international interfaith conference which was scheduled to take place in mid-May that year. The seminar was seen as an opportunity to discuss issues of mutual interest such as the spiralling hatred among communities and ways to promote inter-religious understanding and peace. It draws together senior scholars in either a Christian or a Muslim host country annually. Founded, supported and organized by the Anglican Church, the seminar is sixth in an annual series under the theme, 'Humanity in Context: Christian and Muslim Perspectives'. The government told the organisers one week ahead of its scheduled beginning that it 'cannot support the conference because it was not opportune' to hold the seminar in Malaysia that year.

The Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS) organized an inter-religious dialogue to facilitate discussion of issues confronting different religions in Malaysia. The forum was convened to host 30 students from National University of Singapore and University of Malaya as part of their Inter-religious Study Tour (in Malaysia and Turkey), in particular to discuss issues and challenges faced in Malaysia with regards to religion and interfaith interactions. Religious leaders, as well as students interested in inter-religious issues were brought together for the roundtable dialogue.

There were several common themes, which were touched on by a number of the speakers which include the idea of respect, in which members of different religions must learn to respect both the similarities and differences between religions in order to maintain an open and constructive dialogue between religions. Next, was the notion that there is a need to avoid the politicization of religion and focus on true understanding of other religions in order to dispel misinformation. The most significant and common issue brought up was the need for members of all faiths to treat others regardless of faith, as they too would like to be treated. The promotion of inter-religious public service projects through which members of different religions can interact while working toward a common goal was seen as important in order to achieve the common ideas. It was suggested that there is a need for continuation and promotion of inter-religious dialogue as a means to ease inter-religious tension and make progress towards mutual understanding.

The main themes of the session revolved around the interplay of elements of government and religion, and how this interaction plays out differently when comparing countries such as Singapore and Malaysia. The discussion covered role of Sharia and civil courts, the influence of changes in Middle Eastern Islam on Islam in other countries, the role of the state versus federal governments in determining the role of Islam, the debate between Malaysia as a 'secular' vs. an 'Islamic' state, how the recent elections in Malaysia have affected the inter-religious dynamics in Malaysian society, and perhaps most importantly how religion can be used both in Malaysia and around the world to promote unity rather than division. The inter-religious dialogue however did not solve any of the inter-religious problems that face Malaysia. Nevertheless, it served as a model for the way in which leaders and members of different religions can come together to discuss their similarities and differences in a constructive manner. Inter-religious harmony can only ever be achieved through dialogue and a position of mutual respect (CPPS, 2008).

Recent Development:

In 2010, the Interfaith Relations Working Committee was established under the purview of National Unity and Integration Department. Upon approval from the Cabinet, it was renamed as Committee to Promote Inter-

Religious Understanding and Harmony. It comprises representation from the relevant bodies including the Department of Islamic Development, Institute of Islamic Understanding and the Malaysian Consultative Council on Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism. The committee was a framework for managing religious and cultural polarities. The idea was to involve religious leaders, leaders of NGOs (non-governmental organisations) as well as the relevant government departments like JAKIM and the Unity Department. The involvement of any active politicians was prohibited.

One of the committee's roles was to provide linkages between federal government agencies, state departments and religious leaders. The committee was to provide the mechanism for resolving administrative issues on religious matters, not only by facilitating discussions among the parties involved but also through studies of existing policies and regulations. The committee's recommendations would be forwarded to the Cabinet and it would be up to it whether to accept them. The highlight was on the facilitation of dialogues with the different stakeholders. This is important to ensure things are done properly while observing the sensitivities of all religions.

Recently, the Malaysian government has revived an interfaith committee which, according to Prime Minister Dato' Sri Mohd Najib b. Tun Haji Abdul Razak, could serve as a mechanism to resolve problems and issues (related to religion) through 'honest and frank discussions'. The committee was actually formed almost a year ago, in April 2010. However, the committee was stillborn since it was roundly attacked even before it could sit down to meet. A comment made by Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin b. Yassin that the committee only consisted of 'small-fry' and it would not have any influence had caused the non-Muslim members of the committee to boycott it. Following that, the Perak Fatwa Committee objected to the panel, citing that all other religions could not be placed on equal footing with Islam. Later, PERKASA, the Malay right wing NGO opposed the appointment of Tan Sri Dr. Koh Tsu Koon, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, as the minister in charge of the committee. PERKASA insisted that it had to come under the guidance of Dato' Seri Jamil Khir Baharom, the Islamic Affairs Minister in the Prime Minister's Department.

Finally, the name of the committee 'Special Committee to Promote Inter-Religious Harmony and Understanding (SCPIRHU)' was objected by the Council of Muftis citing the term 'Inter-Religious' would cause confusion among Malaysian Muslims. Though the April 2010 inter-faith committee did not take off, efforts were made to revive it later in the year. On 14th February 2011, thirty-five new members were appointed and made public by Prime Minister Dato' Sri Mohd Najib b. Tun Haji Abdul Razak when Malaysia joined other countries to celebrate World Interfaith Harmony Week for the first time. He has clearly expressed support for the committee and promised allocations to it so that it could perform its tasks. This will mark a milestone in Malaysian efforts to advance inter-religious dialogue at the national level (Choong, 2011).

On 14th June 2011, Prime Minister Dato' Sri Mohd Najib b. Tun Haji Abdul Razak said that dialogues still rank as the most effective way to resolve differences among many races and religions in Malaysia. He mentioned that these dialogues should be carried out sincerely and with maturity. 'In the context of relations among religions, if dialogues are supported and led by religious leaders, they bring forth positive impacts that benefit all Malaysians,' he said when opening the 54th National Majlis Tilawah Al-Quran at the newly built State Islamic Council Hall in Kuching. Dato' Sri Mohd Najib b. Tun Haji Abdul Razak said the government was always sensitive to all races and would continue to monitor issues deemed sensitive to religions. He reminded Muslims that the Quran teaches about unity and harmony. Tolerance and acceptance of all races must be strengthened, he added. Touching on sensitive issues pertaining to race and religion should be avoided. He said the Government had always placed people's needs, including their religious needs, as the foundation of its struggles. The Government, he said, had fully recognised the role of religion in spearheading Vision 2020.

Themes and Challenges in Application of Interfaith and Inter-Religious Dialogue in Malaysia:

In every interfaith dialogue conducted depending on issues discussed, there bound to be theme to underline the scope or the end goal of the whole activity. The common themes which should be highlighted in interfaith and inter-religious dialogues include:

Unity:

Although Malaysian exists in diverse backgrounds, there is a unique unity in its diversity. Indeed, the ethnic Malays, Chinese, Indians as well as the numerous indigenous people form a fascinating synergy of a multi-racial and multi-religion population who greatly value peace and prosperity. Each race is able to maintain its individuality in terms of traditions and community structures, without disrupting the social harmony. The sight of various communities living together harmoniously, exchanging and sharing, among other things, knowledge, with one another, is common. Men, women and children of different races often get together for conversation, companionship and friendly competitive sports.

One of the most interesting forms of cultural and racial interaction among Malaysians is the 'open house' policy during religious festivals. All communities will welcome their friends and neighbours of different ethnic backgrounds, effectively breaking down cultural and racial barriers, thus cultivating greater understanding amongst all races. The tradition of tolerance practised by the people of Malaysia has resulted in great progress for the country.

Instead of harping on our differences, we should bring everyone together on the basis of shared values, the good teachings of all religions, and joint efforts to resolve problems and challenges common to all people regardless of religion, race, or culture. Issues such as family disintegration, moral degradation, drug abuse, poverty, terrorism, protection of the environment and human rights violations involve people from all religions. Thus, it is only right that we concentrate on ways to address these problems together for the benefit of the country.

Tolerance:

Racial prejudice and religious bigotry have always been with us. We need to acknowledge and address inter-racial, cultural and religious issues. Often we find it hard to talk about these topics in a cross-cultural environment for fear of our emotions. Some of us would rather deny that these things exist, preferring to go into self-denial than grapple with this insidious moral and social disease. The problem, unless we admit it, can grow into point of no return.

It is vital that schools encourage students of one race to make an effort to study and understand the other races, their cultures, beliefs and religions. For example, an Indian must understand all about their Malay and Chinese fellow Malaysians and vice versa. The Muslims, Buddhists and Christians must understand the gist of other religions practised by their fellow Malaysians. For instance, a Buddhist must understand what the Christians and Muslims believe in. There should be books about all the major religions in all schools and households while recognizing and respecting the role of Islam in the country. It is important that all religious groups accept one another to develop a national race.

Religious Sensitivities:

In drafting the issues to be brought up during any interfaith dialogues, the organisers have to be careful in choosing suitable topics so as to not touch on matters that are sensitive to any particular religion. It is also important to avoid political influence in a dialogue because it may steer the discussion away from the main objective due to it being used for political gains of a respective party.

Furthermore, the issues discussed in an interfaith dialogue should not be of authoritative nature. Everyone should be given a fair chance to ask questions and put forward their views. Other participants need to respect each other's views even though one tends to disagree with the motion. It would be best to concentrate on general issues involving all communities rather than theological discourse. Issues that are acceptable to all which can strengthen racial integration are more constructive in nature. People should look for solutions to the various problems surrounding their communities, not causing more harm to the relationship among fellow countrymen.

Challenges:

The first challenge in the application of an interfaith dialogue is to convince key individuals and religious organisations within the government establishment, not forgetting Muslim groups outside the government community, that interfaith dialogue is a good idea. It is important to realize this as the Muslim community in Malaysia is the key player in any inter-faith dialogue. Some religious groups do think that if they participate in an inter-faith dialogue, they are giving way to other religions. There are also those who think that because Islam is the official religion, there is no need to initiate dialogue and explain why certain things are so.

Commonly, early interfaith encounters tended to take the format of religious competitions in which each religion attempted to explain why it was superior to the others, portraying other religions according to their purported errors when compared to one's own. In these cases, each participant focused on presenting their own arguments, rather than listening to what others had to say. This is a very unhealthy way to go about as dialogue by itself should not be a one way track in order to promote mutual understanding toward the goal of peaceful coexistence and cooperation. The right goal should be to correct stereotypes and misinformation and to find ways to work together to solve problems of mutual concern, including social, political, economic, and environmental issues.

The history of inter-faith dialogue shows that the concept has never been well-received by the Muslim community. Thus, the willingness of all participants in the committee to be genuinely engaged in constructive dialogue and to find a common ground in resolving issues on such contentious matters as religious conversion and custodial rights will be a significant challenge they will face. Currently, inter-religious dialogues only

concentrate at high-level. It is of equal importance to focus on the subsequent work at ensuring that interactions at this level and all other dialogues of this nature flow to the people at the grassroots level. The dialogues should be people-centred, and people-oriented rather than state-centric. At times, the dialogues are clouded with political or academic language and terms which becomes too vague or twisted. It is essential to translate the ideas and thoughts into practical measures and ways for the masses to understand and appreciate.

The second major challenge is to prevent any serious politicisation of the interfaith dialogue. This will be difficult to achieve even if there are no politicians in the current committee. The reality is that religion, especially the official religion of Malaysia, Islam, is deeply embedded in politics in Malaysia. Moreover, religious and political discourse in Malaysia is often intertwined. This is due to the fact that religion tends to be used as a political tool by interested parties under the race politics platform, time and time again, something which makes dialogue tense and regressive. The government also has a stand that issues of race and religion should never be questioned nor discussed as they are both 'sensitive' to the Malays. Hence, real issues of race and religion are lost to discussion - either being swept under the carpet or solved unjustly.

The current dialogue structure adopts the method of holding the discussions in closed door sessions. The problem arises when it is time to announce its findings and conclusions where eventually they will become subject to public debate. It will be a major challenge for the government to manage the issue as things could easily be taken overboard.

Speaking at a panel session at the 14th Malaysian Law Conference in Kuala Lumpur, former Bar Council president Yeo Yang Poh mentioned that in the current dialogues, listening skills among participants are very poor. They want to put forward their views very strongly, but they are very slow and very impatient with listening with humility and compassion to views with which one strongly disagrees. He continued to argue that Inter-faith dialogue participants often overlooked the fact that some matters pertaining to the faiths may not have been sufficiently articulated in the desired intellectual and logical terms. Although faith is something that is intellectual and logical, most people fail to understand that it could be emotional and very difficult to pin logic to it. In this regard, participants to a dialogue must agree not to ridicule another's view, no matter how objectionable. The pure force of logic in dialogue, which ignores psychological and emotive factors, produces a suffocating and undesirable effect and drives the less learned, the less eloquent, or the less logical to argue through the use of force.

Way Forward and Points to Consider when Dealing with Interfaith and Inter-Religious Dialogues in Malaysia:

The first step towards realizing inter-religious tolerance should come from the political, religious and community leaders of the country. The involvements should include religion leaders, cabinet ministers, political party leaders and community leaders at all levels. It is important for them to show the people the right path to integration and religious tolerant. It has to be acknowledged that the differences in the peoples' faiths are there and cannot be ignored. The government's firm role in providing stability is commended, but their flexibility in accommodating diversity in the peoples' beliefs is expected. The government needs to provide a platform to give the groups the opportunity to sit together to exchange views and to discuss issues so as to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding and misinterpretation. The purpose is to shift away from past patterns of religious competition and superiority claims in favor of building and expanding relationships that can lead to interfaith cooperation.

People need to be tolerant to accommodate diversity. Tolerance does not mean ignoring the differences but rather it is the willingness and readiness to accept the differences and acknowledge the rights of others to be different (Wilmot, 1997). Tolerance is not an end but a means where it is minimal essential quality of social relations that eschew violence and coercion. Without tolerance, peace is not possible. People have been created to be different in terms of their races, cultures, languages and religions by the Almighty not for them to despise one another but rather for them to strive to know each other. The challenge is for them to communicate with each other. It is worth to note that inter-faith dialogues and discussions would be best carried out in a manner where everyone was comfortable, rather than make it an official rigid structure where everyone felt pressured to have their own position stated clearly.

Religious groups need to agree that moderation is the way forward in a multi-religious country like Malaysia and work together to promote peace and harmony. Malaysian Consultative Council on Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism president Rev Dr Thomas Philips said people should empathise with each other before making any comments about another person's faith. He mentioned that even if we disagree, we should learn to respect other people's religious beliefs and acknowledge the fact that we are all different. Prime Minister Dato' Sri Mohd Najib b. Tun Haji Abdul Razak said extremism in any faith would leave a negative impact on the community. Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs (ACCIN) council member Sabariah Abdullah said a Muslim should be a moderate person. We need to behave in moderation while not compromising our Islamic principles whilst respecting other religions.

According to the December 2005 Muslim Identities Public Opinion Survey, Peninsular Malaysia by Associate Prof. Dr. Patricia Martinez of University Malaya's Asia-Europe Institute, where the poll asked Muslims which identity they would choose if they could only choose one, 73% chose Muslim, 14% chose Malaysian, and 13% chose Malay. The public opinion polled 1,029 randomly-selected Malaysian Muslims across the peninsula between December 15 and 18 in 2005. This seemed to correlate with the study titled 'National Identity: A Subset of Social Identity?' conducted on 217 Malaysian students in 2008 by Malini Ratnasingam, a senior lecturer in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Malaya. It concluded that a high value of importance given to religion supersedes that to citizenship. When students were asked to generate their self-descriptors, it can be seen from the most frequently generated social categories that religion was given a higher category than citizenship. Martinez said that if over 70% of more than half of Malaysians identify themselves primarily as Muslims, then national unity policies and programmes, which largely focus on bridging the racial and ethnic gap, do not sufficiently address the fundamental element of religiosity. The relationship between social identity and behaviour is mediated by identity commitment such that commitment impacts salience which in turn impacts role performance. This means that the greater the commitment to a particular social identity, the greater the salience of that identity and therefore the stronger the motivation to perform behaviours consistent with that social identity. Construction of social identity among the Muslim and non-Muslim citizens of Malaysia would have significant impact on intergroup interactions and inter-religious relationships. In view of this, programmes to foster positive ethnic relations need to find a balance between emphasising more general social categories such as nationality as compared to the more specific categories of religion and ethnicity. For the goal of national unity, there must exist some agreement on creating conducive public environments that can truly foster crosscutting categorisations and at the same time providing avenues allowing individuals to express their unique aspects of social identity.

Conclusion:

Malaysians of all creed and colour have a common goal to live together as citizens of a great nation where religious harmony underpins political stability and economic prosperity. One cannot imagine living next to each other but the air that we breathe is filled with animosity and hatred. Malaysia continues to face great challenge in promoting religious tolerance and maintaining religious harmony. This is a constant and permanent challenge which we must all overcome together. A more effective strategy to promote positive race relations is to focus on promoting peaceful cooperation and coexistence reflecting values that are fundamental to all religions.

While it is acknowledged that interfaith and inter-religious dialogues are still a good medium to resolve problems and issues related to religion in Malaysia, it is important to ensure that the objective and the structure of the dialogue are designed to benefit all participants. Details such as composition of participants, expectation from the dialogue and how the dialogue should be conducted are vital in ensuring the success of the dialogue in meeting its intended goals. The issues being chosen to be discussed should concentrate on common values with attention given to increasing mutual awareness, understanding and respect. There must be the rejection of ideologies or social or political constructs that place one group as being superior or better than another. We should discard our differences and put ample effort to learn about each other to foster national unity. Malaysia has been independent for more than half a century, thus it is important for Malaysian to take stock and assume responsibility for ensuring that goodwill prevails across religious groups.

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