The Political and Economic Contributions of the Muslim Middle Class in Malaysia

Wan Kamal Mujani, Wan Mohd Hirwani Wan Hussain, Noor Inayah Ya’akub, Allawati Kasri and Ermy Azziaty Rozali

Institute of West Asian Studies (IKRAB), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia
Graduate School of Business, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia
Faculty of Economy and Management, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia
Department of Arabic Studies and Islamic Civilization, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

ABSTRACT

In the context of Malaysia, the Muslim middle class consist of Malays, Chinese and Indians. Each of these three groups contributed hugely towards the development of the country, in the fields of economy, politics and social. Even so, studies on their contribution are still limited and are not highlighted by researchers in Malaysia. Therefore, this study has been carried out to discuss the Muslim middle class in Malaysia, focusing on their contribution to the fields of economy and politics. Their contribution in the economic sector can be seen through their active involvement in various kinds of businesses and industries. The involvement of these three groups especially in the professional field, management and administration has been very helpful to the country in enhancing its rate of employment and reducing the rate of unemployment. Furthermore, these large groups of people have a high purchasing power and are capable of giving a big leap towards consumerism culture in Malaysia. Indirectly, this is greatly contributing towards the development and advancement of the country, through the increasing demand for certain products and services. Their contribution in politics can be observed through their involvement in the main political parties in Malaysia, such as the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), the Congress of Indian Muslims Malaysia (KIMMA), and also other non-government bodies.

Key words: Contribution, Muslim middle class, Malay, Chinese, Indian, Malaysia, economy and politics

Introduction

A developed country is a country that has a large component of middle-class people. Therefore, various efforts have been put forward by governments all over the world to accelerate and enhance the growth of this group. In Malaysia, the number of middle-class people is larger compared to other ASEAN countries, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. However, this number is relatively small if compared to industrial countries like Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea. The importance of this group’s contribution is not doubted, whether in the field of economy, politics and social. Malaysia, known for its multiethnicity, has generated a community of middle-class Muslims comprising of Malays, Chinese and Indians. The history of their presence must be studied to identify how much they have contributed towards the development of the nation. Therefore, this article will discuss these three groups with a focus on their contribution to economy and politics.

The Concept of Middle-Class in Malaysia:

Based on the Kamus Dewan 4th Edition (1997), ‘middle-class’ or ‘intermediate class’ is defined as a group in the community between the upper-class and the lower-class groups. The study of middle-class in Malaysia generally can be divided into two stages. The first stage is a specific study on the administrator group comprising its history, growth, social status and also its roles and contribution during colonial times. This includes discussion of its roles and mentality after independence in 1957, and also the changes in the social structure of...
the Malaysian community as a consequence of industrial and economic development of the country which led to the social transformation and growth of the middle-class, especially the ‘new middle-class’. Besides that, this stage of study also focuses on the role of the government in the formation of the middle-class, its growth and expansion, its ethnic position, class consciousness, politics and culture. Also included at this stage are the effects of national integration and democracy on the middle-class and discussions of the concept and theory of class. (Embong, 1999).

Early discussions on the middle-class in Malaysia were done by researchers such as Syed Husin Ali, Nordin Selat and Jomo K. Sundram. Syed Husin Ali (1964; 1984) in his research on the rural community categorized the classes based on their economic status or power. The British arrival in Malaya brought a big influence and changes in the society whether in terms of economy, politics, or even in social aspects. The influence of education, administration and economic change accepted by the rural community had changed their social structure as they were seen to begin getting involved in other occupations not restricted to the agricultural sector. This has ushered the appearance of a new type of class known as the ‘middle-class’. It consists of teachers, clerks, religious leaders, headmen and village chiefs. This class was seen as a group of people who had higher status and better economic position compared to other rural people. Besides that, he has also listed six main factors that affect one’s position in the social structure of the community, namely; personality, religion, education, responsibility in the community, occupation and economic position. Syed Husin Ali’s research also showed that the middle-class is formed from three major fields, which are administration and management, professional work and business. The field of management mainly involved the Malays, but non-Malays were also involved in this field especially in technical, medical and educational services. In terms of professional work, most of the people involved were non-Malays. The field of business was also dominated by non-Malays, but the government devised numerous policies in order to increase the involvement of the Malays in this field. He also stated that most of the middle-class people shared the same lifestyle, and those working in the administrative, professional and also business fields had guidance and support from government political parties, whether at city or district level.

Studies on the middle-class in Malaysia was then continued by Nordin Selat (1978), focusing on the presence of middle-class administrators and development of their lifestyle. Similar to Syed Husin Ali, Nordin Selat also related the presence of this group with the success of the British in taking over the states in Malaya, after the Industrial Revolution in Europe. According to his studies, the British officers who had governed Malaya at that time comprised of middle-class Europeans and they had an influence on the lifestyle of local middle-class administrators. Because of that, the local middle-class administrators had a rather different lifestyle compared to other Malays. For instance, this group of people preferred spending their spare time reading English magazines such as Times, Far Eastern Economic Review and Reader’s Digest. They also spent their time travelling overseas and played elite games such as golf and tennis. This group of people, which was assigned to help in administrative affairs were born from an education system introduced by the British, through the Kuala Kangsar Malay College (MCKK). His studies in 1978 also showed that there were two indicators that could be used to explain the middle-class, which are objective indicators and subjective indicators. Objective indicators consisted of academic qualification, career, salary and place of residence, while subjective indicators consisted of lifestyle and attitude in some matters.

Jomo K. Sundram (1977) uses a historical approach to analyse and explain class formation in Peninsular Malaysia during the colonial period and after independence. According to him, class is determined by the relationship in social production. The class struggle and conflict in the production process have to be considered to understand social class formation in Malaysia. Class is not only defined based on the economic aspect, but on politics and ideological aspects as well. He also said that two social classes had emerged before the coming of Western powers, i.e., the ruling class and ruled class. In between these two classes is formed a class that is known as ‘middle-class’, comprising of administration and management groups, professional workers, and technical workers. Jomo referred to this group as the new petit bourgeois that newly appeared in the middle of society at that time. This small bourgeois group known as the administrocrat appeared as the ruling group and intermediary between foreign and local capitalists, the upper level of the farming community, rural small bourgeois, and working class.

Therefore, it can be stated that early researchers concerning class in Malaysia placed less emphasis on the explanation about theories and concept of middle-class, but emphasised more on the early history of its formation and factors which drive its development. The theory concerning middle-class in Malaysia is also discussed by Johan Saravanamuttu. He is inclined to the middle-class concept developed by Giddens while discussing the issue of middle-class in Malaysia. According to Saravanamuttu (1989), middle-class consists of non-labour and non-farmer workers. They possess qualification, skills, and technical efficiency, and are also placed in middle-class position based on marketability. From this understanding, he then categorized middle-class based on seven types of occupation, which are professional, technical, administrative and managerial, clerical, sales, and several other services. He stated that the development of middle-class in Malaysia happened very significantly, while the percentages of farming and labour class are still the same and may be experiencing a
The Contribution of Muslim Middle-Class in Malaysia:

In the Malaysian context, the main Muslim middle-class consists of Malay, Chinese, and Indian. These group of people have given a big contribution to Malaysian development, especially in economics and politics. Professional, and management and administration sectors are among two important working sectors in Malaysia that contribute to national income. Therefore, in this part, the writers will only discuss middle-class Muslim position in both sectors, because their involvement in these working sectors is seen to be helping the state in increasing total employment and in turn, decreasing national unemployment rate. It is undeniable that a developed country is a country with a low rate of unemployment. In addition, workers in these sectors also have a high purchasing power and have successfully expanded positive consumerism in society.

Besides that, this part will also highlight on the economic activities of these three economic groups because they also contribute to the vibrancy of the national economy. The vibrancy of middle-class economy will also boost industry and other sectors and then attract foreign investors to invest in this country. It then will contribute to national revenue through all kinds of tax payments such as business and services taxes. This will give strength to the state to face any negative economic changes which may occur.

The formation of middle-class Muslims in Malaysia has also become a source of political power. The Muslim middle-class comprising of literate and educated people are seen as able to influence the country’s political situation. Besides politics parties, these people also use NGOs as platform to voice their opinions and safeguard their interests.
Malay Middle-Class:

Theoretically, the structure of Malay society in the traditional era consists of two groups or two classes only. The first group is known as ruling class or ‘ruler’, while the second is known as ruled class or simply ‘common people’. However, there are also scholars who think that in today’s era has appeared a class that is known as ‘middle-class’. Gullick (1964), for example said that there is an intermediate or middle class between the ‘ruler’ and ‘common people’. They consist of village chiefs, religious leaders and traders who stand in a moderate position in the structure of society. However, this opinion is not well accepted by other scholars. Wheeler (1928) in his book, The Modern Malay, said that medium-class Malays appeared in the 1920s as an effect from the educational system that the British introduced. English-educated Malays were categorized as upper middle-class and were usually appointed as government servants. Lower middle-class refers to Malays with Malay school qualifications who worked as village chiefs, teachers, judges and agriculture officials. Nordin Selat (1976) said that Malay middle-class was formed in Malaya after the British government’s success in controlling all Malaya states, which was after Industrial Revolution in Europe in the 19th Century.

Therefore, it can be said that the emergence of middle-class Malays started after British colonization in Malaya. The Malay Federation under British rule had introduced two forms of public services, which were Malay Civil Service (MCS) and Malay Administrative Service (MAS). In the early stage, MCS was limited to English people only, but things started to change when administrative matters became more complex. To make the administration easier, Kuala Kangsar Malay College (MCKK) was established in 1905 specifically to educate and train future Malay officers, majority of whom came from the aristocrat group. The chance to enter this institution was then given to ordinary people after the development and establishment of other schools and educational institutions. The people who graduated from this institution would be absorbed into MAS which was lower than MCS. However, Malay administrators who had skills in management and administration were given the confidence to work in MCS. In addition to middle-class administrators, MCKK also had successfully produced professional Malays (Khasnor, 1984). These administrators and professionals from the Malay middle-class were known as ‘modern middle-class’ or ‘new middle-class’.

Middle-class administrators during that era had shown a different lifestyle compared to other Malays, whether from the aspects of education, appearance, occupation, or even their way of spending free time, that can be classified as according to Western lifestyle. Nevertheless, their position was always looked up to by other Malays. They played the role as liaison agents between the upper-class and lower-class and also became the leaders for the lower class. Besides that, they were also the first generation of the middle class. They played a big role in producing the later upper class group, besides helping the country’s growth in both economy and politics. The social status of the middle-class professional was on the upper level. They were highly-respected and highly-esteem by the Malay society and were seen as the ‘new Malays’ for their high standard of education. Through achievements in education, they had successfully taken important positions in government and private sector and also earned higher income than the common community. The high income allowed them to stabilize their economic status by collecting properties such as land, house, car, shares, and others that symbolized their professional status (Khan, 1991).

The Malay Middle-class receive many benefits from the New Economy Policy (NEP) that was introduced by the government in 1970, after racial riots broke out on 13th May 1969. The rapid economic growth within more or less two decades after the NEP implementation has hastened the process of shaping the working class, middle-class, and capitalist class in Malaysia (Embong, 2000). Besides government policy, the development of this middle-class is also affected by the changes in public sector which show increased participation of the middle-class in the sector. The Malay middle-class in Malaysia gradually became bigger in number and started to expand its specific characteristics until the society started to see them as the backbone of society. This middle-class is regarded as an important class to bring or strengthen the human resource for activities in many fields such as culture, politics, economy as well as social. They have been assigned with the burden and responsibility to hasten the unification process of society and to contribute in the country’s development.

The implementation of the New Economy Policy (NEP) has also increased Malay participation in modern economic activities, especially business. During the early days of independence (1957-1969) or laissez-faire economic policy era, Malay participation in business activity was too little. The chance to get involved in this field was monopolized by a minority of Malays who had links to big people such as sons and daughters of land property owners and administrators who were exposed to modern education. Besides that, many bumiputera companies that emerged at that time faced failure because of lack of funds, knowledge, experience, and expertise in the economic sector. Therefore, many ways had been implemented by the government to address their position in the economic sector, especially in business. In 1965, Bumiputera Bank was established to increase loan facilities to bumiputera people. Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA) also was established in 1967 to replace Rural and Industrial Development Authority (RIDA) to develop bumiputera people in the business sector and small-scale industry. However, programmes like MARA and RIDA failed to develop bumiputera to dominate industry (Whah, 2001). Official government data in 1970 showed that 63.3 percent of share capital in companies
in Peninsular Malaysia was held by foreign capitalists while the other 34.3 percent was held by Malaysian capitalists with only 2.4 percent coming from Malay capitalists (Crouch, 1996). Malay involvement in big business only started with Perbadanan Nasional (PERNAS) in 1969, after racial riots on 13th May 1969 erupted.

The implementation of NEP implementation also triggered a transformation in Malaysian society, specifically Malay people. Its effects started to be felt when it brought a new dimension to bumiputera entrepreneurship in 1980s, which was different from entrepreneurs in the 1960s and 1970s. Bumiputera entrepreneurs in 1980s possessed higher education qualifications and were able to handle bigger business operations like establishing big companies and getting involved in modern industry like banking, insurance, property, hotel, consultation service, and many more. Steps taken by the government in NEP implementation have managed to increase a large number of bumiputera-owned companies. NEP success is also influenced by the business middle-class. In addition, government agencies also helped a lot in increasing and developing bumiputera entrepreneurs, through entrepreneurship programs such as capital fund, infrastructure, and technology assistance. Programs that were carried out have succeeded in terms of increasing the number of entrepreneurs in business. In 1971, the number of registered bumiputera entrepreneur was only 24,549 (15.4%) compared to non-bumiputera entrepreneurs which numbered 135,320 (84.6%). In 1986, that total had increased to 78,871 (24.9%) from the whole total of 315,760. Then, in 1987, bumiputera entrepreneurs in single businesses and registered partnerships reached 35 percent of the sum total of 589,904 (Esa, 1992).

Today, many steps have been taken by the government to restructure human resource, especially bumiputera, towards increasing the number and percentage of bumiputera human resource in management, professional, and other high income job categories. The main strategy in restructuring human resource to allow more bumiputera to get jobs in the modern economic sector is by developing educational and training programs. The percentage of bumiputera human resource increased from 56.4 percent in 2000 to 56.5 percent in 2003 (Malaysian Government, 2003). The percentage of bumiputera human resource is also high if compared to other ethnic groups except in direct trading, retail, and construction sectors. However, the bumiputera percentage in administration and management such as law enforcement, senior officers, and managers was lower when compared to other ethnic groups, which was 37.2 percent in 2000. This number increased to 37.9 percent in 2003. While in the professional category, the percentage of bumiputera human resource increased from 58.3 percent in 2000 to 58.4 percent in 2003. Of this percentage, 54 percent were lecturers, pre-university and secondary school teachers, writers and artists, while 45.8 percent were in other professional categories. The number of registered bumiputera in eight selected professional occupations like accountants, doctors, lawyers, and engineers also increased in the period of 2000 to 2002. The bumiputera percentage in these occupations increased from 35.5 percent in 2000 to 37.2 percent in 2002, whereby the occupation which recorded the highest number of bumiputera is engineering. Nor Hayati Sa’at (2004) describes this group as the most important group to bring development to the country and society.

The Malay middle-class contributions in politics can clearly be seen through their involvement in political parties established in this country such as United Malay National Organization (UMNO), Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), and certain organizations that play a role of defending and fighting for their rights in many aspects. At the same time, they also play a role in driving those parties. The development of an English educational institution in Malaya together with a small number of people who furthered their studies in the Middle East have successfully produced a group of Malay intellectuals who were aware of Malay interests and Malay states ruled by British. Due to this awareness, they rose up and united under the Singapore Malay Society that was established in 1926 as a step to unite the Malay community from multiple social layers. Besides that, this society’s role was also to claim Malay special rights and to rebel openly against British ruling policy. The highlight of the Malay middle-class in Malay politics can be seen when the British government introduced the Malay Union in 1946. The middle-class people united in resistance and successfully established UMNO as a reaction of the opposition (Khan, 1991).

On observation, Malay middle-class contribution before independence was based on occupation. Teachers played a role in the village community, administrative officers and professionals focused on the urban community, while reporters roused up the Malay spirit through newspapers. They held to one aim, which is going against the Malay Union and uniting the community. With this, it is proven that before Malaya gained independence, the minority of Malay middle-class comprising of all kinds of occupations had successfully guided and brought the Malay community towards political awareness in the interest of race, country, and their special rights. Their struggle paid off when Malaya was pronounced by the British as an independent country on 31st August 1957. During the early days of Malaysia’s independence, the total number of Malay middle-class involvement in UMNO party was limited. Progress and development of urbanization which were accepted by the Malay community, especially after the New Economy Policy was implemented in 1970 managed to change Malay class structure, which was proven when the number of Malay community’s involvement in agriculture decreased drastically. This matter was a challenge to UMNO because they did not depend anymore on rural votes in order to ensure their victory in election, they even had to distract attention to the Malay community in
other areas. In contrast to farmers or village folks, the urban Malay community were usually inclined to make big demands from the government in return for their votes (Crouch, 1996).

The changes that occurred in the Malay community also occurred in UMNO. UMNO was then seen to get support from the increasing middle-class from time to time. However, the involvement of educated Malay middle-class had successfully made changes in the party leadership. This situation is very different from the past situation, whereby the appointed leader will always be respected by party members, but the new members who came from this middle-class were seen to have their own political aspirations. The conflict which happened in UMNO was the effect from the middle-class people and caused disunity at the end of 1980s leading to the formation of ‘Semangat 46’ party. The appearance of the Malay middle-class had also affected the Malay opposition party, PAS, whereby this party had successfully taken over many new areas in 1980s. Therefore, the disunity and increasing competition of parties in the 1980s were much influenced by middle-class growth. The formation of middle-class in Malaysia has become a source of political power in the political arena.

Middle-class formed from the educated with income group had increasing influence on the political environment as time went by. Their support and stand, especially in new cities have become a reference point for the working and lower classes in making their political stand. Indirectly, it influences the votes in every election. This situation is strengthened with the participation and involvement of the middle-class in national politics. Hence, because of the middle-class potential that is able to control local politics, they often become the political base of politics organizations to expand their influence. However, according to Datuk Nakhai Ahmad, Yang Dipertua Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia (YADIM), the Malay Muslim community should not only depend on political parties to voice out and fight for their cause, but instead it is better to count on other organizations like non-government organizations (NGOs) as counterweight.

Chinese Muslim Middle Class:

The emergence of the Chinese Muslim community in Malaya started since the 15th Century during the Malacca Sultanate. The total number of this group of people increased from time to time, especially during British colonial rule. At that time, British had implemented their policy by bringing in a large number of labour from China to work in the Malaya Peninsula, especially in the mining sector. A minority of them were traders of various ethnicities. Of this group, some came from the Muslim community (Wang, 2003). It is estimated that there were around 17.9 percent Chinese Muslim at that time. The British policy also brought a huge impact to the existence of pluralism in Malaysian society of various ethnic groups.

Besides British policy, the emergence of Chinese Muslim was also influenced by the migration of a group of individuals of Hui ethnic to Malaysia that took place at the end of 19th Century. Majority of them were students and traders who wanted to acquire more Islamic knowledge in this country. This group then built their settlements in states like Terengganu, Penang, Perak and Sabah. Among the Chinese Muslims who exist in Malaysia are Hainan (in Perak and Penang), Guangdong (in Terengganu), and Muslim Koay from Baiqi, Fujian (in Penang). These groups were the ones that shaped the minority Hui in Malaysia and their existence can be seen until today (Wang, 2009). In Terengganu, Chinese Muslim from the Hui ethnic are known as ‘Yunani people’ and are not called as ‘Muallaf’ or ‘converts’ because they have ‘Muslim identity’.

Rosey Ma Wang’s article (2003) reports that there were 57,221 Chinese Muslim in Malaysia in the year 2000, which is around 1 percent of the whole Chinese community which totalled up to 5,691,908 people. Selangor has the highest number of Chinese Muslim, which is 17,246 people, followed by Sabah, 8,589 people, Kuala Lumpur 7,991 people, and Sarawak 7,289 people. Of this total, the number of females (32,271 people) exceeds the number of male (21,850 people). The assimilation of the Chinese Muslim with the local community usually happens through the process of marriage, either between Chinese Muslim with local Muslim (Malay) or Chinese Muslim with non-local Muslim.

In the Malaysian context, Chinese Muslim consist of Chinese community who embrace Islam (convert) and they are known by the local community as Mu’allaf, although the Malay community are more comfortable calling them ‘converts’ or ‘our relatives’ (Leng and Shukri, 2008). Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia (PERKIM) plays a big role in converting the Chinese community since the early days of its establishment until today. In addition, PERKIM also helps the Chinese Muslim group to get jobs that suit their qualifications (Giap, 1986). The standing of Chinese Muslim ‘identity’ is different from ‘converts’ in Malaysia, whereby ‘converts’ are seen to be receiving benefits and profits from the government. For example, ‘convert’ newborn children who are fully registered with Malay names will be given a ‘bumiputera’ status and will be considered by the government to receive all kinds of help, even though they do not speak Malay and do not fully practise Malay culture. According to Nagata (1978), they also qualify to receive help from Majlis Amanah Raya (MARA).

Based on records of annual reports on conversion from missionary bodies such as PERKIM, Majlis Agama Islam Negeri, and Pejabat Agama Islam Daerah (PAID), the total who convert to Islam is increasing from time to time. Statistics issued by PERKIM shows that of 416 people who converted in the year 2000, 151 people were Chinese. The total then increased in the year 2001, whereby 186 Chinese people converted out of a total of 541
'converts'. The number of Chinese who convert is said to increase since the racial riots broke out in Kuala Lumpur in the year 1969 or specifically after the New Economy Policy was introduced (Giap, 1993).

A non-government organization (NGO) known as Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA) was established in the year 1970 in Penang by Haji Ibrahim Ma with the purpose of taking care of the whole Chinese Muslim community’s welfare in Malaysia. Besides putting missionary activities and the preaching of Islam as the main objectives, MACMA also put its economic objectives such as planning, coordinating and running an Islamic economy. They also introduced a welfare fund to support community activities and welfare among them. The economic objectives that MACMA implemented have indirectly developed the economy and welfare of the Chinese Muslim community welfare, especially MACMA members themselves. In addition, it also facilitates their movement’s activities especially in missionary work, education, welfare, and administration (Zakaria and Zain, 2006).

The Chinese Muslim community which is categorized as Muslim middle-class also aided in Malaysia’s growth and development. One of the famous Chinese Muslim family is Haji Ibrahim Ma’s family. Haji Ibrahim Ma along with Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tan Sri Mubin Sherppard, and Tan Sri Ubaidullah have put effort in the establishment of Persatuan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia (PERKIM). Besides that, he also played the role in defending Koe Y Jetty in Weld Quay, Penang which is a historical place for the Chinese Muslim community in Malaysia. His effort gained the support from the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, and Penang’s Chief Minister, Tan Sri Wong Pow Nee. Haji Ibrahim Ma’s effort in helping the country’s development is continued by his children. His third child, Minuira Sabki Ma Min is actively involved in Women’s PERKIM and has a few times held the post of director of that organization. The same goes for his eldest son, Mustafa Ma Chi who is also actively involved in PERKIM and held the position of MACMA president replacing him.

Administration and management activities in Chinese Muslim middle-class community are also helped by Chinese Muslim students who further their studies in Malaysia, particularly from China and Taiwan. For example, they have produced religious television programs using Mandarin language as the main medium of language. One of Chinese Muslim middle-class who is involved with such activities is Hajah Marimam Ma. She has combined her deep knowledge about Islam with her fluency in speaking both Mandarin and Malay to come out with interesting programs for the Chinese Muslim-Mandarin community’s interest in Malaysia. A few Muslim students from China also work part-time with religious institutions such as Regional Islamic Dawah Council of Southeast Asia and Pacific (REISAP) and PERKIM. They are also seen involved in certain events organized by associations like Darulfitrah (Wang, 2003).

Besides getting involved in administration and management, the Chinese Muslim community in Malaysia also consist of professionals like doctors and engineers. At the early stage, they consist of manual class who worked as labourers, rubber tappers, and many more. Alia Tung Ma Lin, daughter to the Malaysian Chinese Muslim figure, Haji Ibrahim Ma is one of the middle-class people who works as a lecturer and writer. According to Rosey Ma Wang (2003), even though the presence of a part of the professionals or traders from China to Malaysia is temporary, their presence as Chinese Muslim middle-class community is still felt by Malaysia. Their relationship with Malays and other Chinese communities has brought progress in social aspects, and even in economic and political aspects.

MACMA plays a big role in helping this group’s economy. The Chinese community has been synonymous with business and trading activities from small to big businesses. In other words, their business activities start with retail business, whereby they gain experience and skills out of it and learn how to handle customers, until getting opportunities to expand their businesses (Ann, 2006). Therefore, it is not surprising if many of Chinese Muslim community in Malaysia are involved with such activities. According to Nagata (1978), besides worker class, most Chinese who convert to Islam also consist of small businessmen. The increasing number of Chinese men who embrace Islam in 1972 has given a positive impact towards the country’s economic development.

Besides men, women also play an important role in managing small businesses. Through MACMA, the Chinese Muslim middle-class has also planned a few suitable activities and projects to generate income and enhance their economy leading to development of the national economy. Among the activities planned is the business of sale and leasing. ‘MACMA Selangor Bulletin’ reported that one of MACMA’s achievements through sale activities is their achievement to work together with SOGO Holdings and SOGO Department Store Bhd. Kuala Lumpur to promote a Chinese Muslim restaurant at Kuala Lumpur SOGO Complex. In addition, the women and youth bureau chaired by Marlina Wong also holds a Sunday Bazaar at the complex. Leasing projects also show encouraging results such as lease of a four-story building property in Jalan Taha, Kuching Sarawak by Mr. Lee Chin Min. This rental has brought income of more than RM 3,000 per month.

The main business of the Chinese Muslim community in Malaysia is food business. This can be seen with the emergence of Chinese Muslim food restaurants in a few states like Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, and Penang. Hj Sharin Low Abdullah is one of the famous Selangor businessmen who is active in this food business. At the same time, he is also responsible for mobilizing and administering the Selangor branch of MACMA for the 2011/2012 session. To date, he owns several food restaurants at certain branches. His main restaurant is located...
Indian Muslim Middle Class:

The Indian Muslim community is one of the communities that exist in Malaysia. Some of them are categorized as Muslim middle-class and play an important role comparable to other Muslim middle-class. The history of Indian arrival to Malaya began when Kedah emerged as the most important port which was geographically along the way in trade relations between the traders of China and India since the 3rd Century. Kedah then became the first Indian community settlement in Malaya. After the entrance of Islam into India, Indian Muslim traders in Kedah played an important role in leading and controlling trading activities within the area, especially in commercial relations with Chulia at Koromandel Island, South India. Therefore, it is not surprising that many of the traders or businessmen came from Indian Muslim community in South India. At that time, Kedah had become an international trading center between Arab lands, India and China for trading varieties of goods such as beads, pottery, glass, textiles and spices (Said and Majid, 2004).

The next presence of Indian Muslims happened in two phases, that is, after Malacca became the most important harbour to run entrepot trading in the 15th Century and after Penang became a British trading center in the 18th Century. In Malacca, the Indian Muslim maintained their management office in the city, but at the same time they also developed an estate or settlement around the main mosque that they built. Because of this, their settlement is known as Palli Village whereby the term Palli means ‘mosque’ in Tamil (Nagata, 1993). In Malaysian history, researchers recorded that besides coming from South India, which is Malabar, at Koromandel Island, Indian Muslim also came from North India, which are Gujerat and Bengal. Other opinions state that they came from Chulia, Pakistan, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar (Dali, 2008). They normally carried out trading activities and did not permanently live at a certain place. Nevertheless, there were also a number of them who created their own settlement at particular places and assimilated with local people through marriage. The Indian Muslim lifestyle in Malaysia has added variety to the local economy with their business culture which is different from other communities.

Today, ‘Mamak’ is synonymous with Indian Muslim community. The word Mamak varies in meaning based on their culture, practice, location, geography and race. Local people also use Mamak to differentiate Indian Muslim from non-Muslim Indian. In Tamil, Mamak means uncle. Besides Mamak, there are also other titles used
by local people to refer to Indian Muslim such as Kling, Darah Keturunan Kling (DKK), Jawi Peranakan, and Jawi Pecan or Jawi Pekan. For example, Jawi Peranakan is used in Kedah today and Perlis tends to use Jawi Pekan to refer to their community, while Malays in Penang or Orang Tanjung use Mamak, Darah Keturunan Kling and Jawi Peranakan for the Indian Muslim community of their area (Said and Majid, 2004).

Based on 1993 estimates, the total number in the Indian Muslim community (Tamil Muslim) in Malaysia is 300,000 people while in the year 2005, the total was estimated to have increased to 600,000 people. ‘Berita Harian’ newspaper dated 13/12/2010 reported that there were 648,000 Indian Muslim. Like the Chinese Muslim community, the Indian Muslim community in Malaysia also consists of new relatives who convert to Islam. Based on the data that PERKIM issues, there were 78 Indians who converted to Islam in the year 2000, 57 of whom are men and 21 are women. In the following year 2001, there were 59 and 45 Indian men and women respectively who converted to Islam making the total 104 people (Leng and Shukri, 2008).

History has proven that these Indian Muslim people indeed have high skills in business and enterprise activities. The Indian Muslim’s business and enterprise development starts with choosing businesses that have low risks. They tend to choose small businesses with the aim to create capital to open up other business branches. Those small businesses are then expanded to a few other branches that still maintain the old form of business or develop new businesses. There are several main types or forms of business and enterprise ventured into by the Indian Muslim in Malaysia such as food business, textile business and enterprises in the publishing, printing and distribution (Mohamad and Faisal, 2008).

Besides getting involved in business and enterprise, the Indian Muslim community in Malaysia are also directly involved in professional fields. This is because the arrival of Indian Muslim to Malaya in the early stage is not only joined by dealers and traders but by middle-class professionals such as clerks, lawyers, doctors, money changers and journalists. Journalists played an important role during British Colonial era in Malaya, especially in the effort to raise awareness of the Indian Muslim against colonial rule at that time through newspapers like Desa Nesan, Tamil Nesan and Tamil Murasu. This Indian Muslim middle-class appearance is also related to the English educational system that was introduced by the British. As an example, Bashir Ahmad and Ahmad Khan Suratee were two English educated leaders from the middle-class who played an important role in forming the Singapore Indian Association (1922) and the Singapore Muslim Association (1936-1938) (Stenson, 1980). Even though time has lapsed, it is undeniable that the emergence of middle-class professionals like doctors and lawyers from this Indian Muslim community can still be seen in Malaysia today. Writers like Abdul Rahman Fakir Malim, Muhammad Umar Syeikh, Muhammad Hashim Abd. Ghan, Ahmad Rijaluddin Kandu and Muhammad Naina Merican are among the Indian Muslim who contributed much to the development of knowledge in Malaysia.

Besides that, there are also among the Indian Muslim community who were themselves involved in administration and management such as Tan Sri Ali Abu Hassan who was once the Governor of Bank Negara (Central Bank). The Indian Muslim involvement in these fields have also focused much on business administration and management especially in their food company and shopping malls. Among the famous ones is Murat Ali who holds the position as an Information Technology Manager for the famous shopping mall in Malaysia, Mydin (Mohamad and Faisal, 2008).

Specifically, the early formation of politics of the Indian Muslim community was pioneered by the middle-class group that consisted of educated people involved in business. After World War I ended, the Indian Muslim community in Malaysia formed a few organizations to take care of their interests. Through these organizations, they were hoped that their problems could be solved. These organizations were divided into two forms, that is, organizations that were national-based and state-based. Among the organizations were All Malaya Muslim League (1940), Malaya Muslim League (1947), Penang Muslim League (1946) and Singapore Muslim League (1947).

The emergence of Malaya Muslim League (1947) was because of the formation of Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) political party in August 1946 by non-Muslim Indians. The Indian Muslim community did not give a positive reaction towards that party because they could not accept an Indian Hindu as a leader. They were more interested in supporting UMNO on the basis of a common religion with Malays. Their involvement then decreased and stopped in the 1960s because there were many other kinds of organizations. After that, to re-unite the Indian Muslim community in Malaysia, a corporation was formed, that is Persekutuan Muslimindo-Malaysia, Malaysia (PERMIM). PERMIM was based in Kuala Lumpur and was established in 1973 with the purpose of maintaining certain activities to promote the religious, social, economic, education and culture, particularly among the Indian Muslims in Malaysia. Then, in 1977, the Indian Muslim community in Malaysia formed Kongres India Muslim Malaysia (KIMMA) to facilitate their political movement. KIMMA aims to unite the Indian Muslim community under one Islamic political party and also to keep an eye on the Indian Muslim community’s interests in Malaysia (Nagata, 1993).

Up to 1977, KIMMA members were estimated to be more or less 20,000 people, a combination from 70 branches and 20 of the branches are centered in Penang. ‘Berita Harian’ newspaper dated 13/12/2010 reported that KIMMA targets an addition of 140,000 new members towards December 2011 and for registration of at
least 200,000 new voters on the 13th election coming soon. Besides putting hands in KIMMA, there are some in the Indian Muslim community in Malaysia who are also members of MIC, whereas Indian Muslim who assimilate with the Malay community tend to get involved in UMNO. KIMMA once became a part of Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (APU), a combination of Islamic opposition parties, that is, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), Parti Melayu Semangat 46 (S46), Barisan Jemaah Islamiah Se-Malaysia (BERJASA) and Parti Hizbul Muslimin (HAMIM).

Conclusion:

In the Malaysian context, Malay, Chinese, and Indian are among the main middle-class Muslim. The appearance of various forms of business and the opening of specific companies run by the three groups clearly show their progress in economy. The involvement of Muslim middle-class communities in economic activities is one of the important factors which drive progress and economic development. In the early stage, the involvement of the Malay middle-class in business activities and enterprise was really low to when compared to Chinese and Indian Muslim middle-classes. However, their number increased from time to time after various efforts were taken by the government to attract the interest of the Malay group in economic activities.

Groups of Muslim middle-class from professional, management and administration sectors are noted to have expanded the characteristics of their own lifestyle that symbolise their status and position as a Muslim middle-class community in Malaysia. They have also contributed to the development of positive consumerism by buying luxury items such as cars, houses, land properties, shares, and many more, which suit the lifestyle of a modern Muslim middle-class.

The development of a Muslim middle-class and the rapid growth of the economy also help in national political stability. English education that was introduced by the Western colonials has brought much political awareness to the new educated Muslim middle-class. Today, they not only stand up to voice their opinion on politics, but are also active in political parties in Malaysia. In addition, they also form Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) as a platform to speak out and claim their rights on certain issues. The majority of the Chinese middle-class also join UMNO, besides MCA and NGOs, especially MACMA. It is also the same for most Indian Muslim middle-class who become members of UMNO and other political parties such as MIC and KIMMA. Therefore, it can be said that the formation of a Muslim middle-class in Malaysia has become a source of political power in the political arena. Their support and opinion, especially in the cities have become the guideline to working and lower groups in making their political stand. Indirectly, it has affected the votes in every election that the government runs. Hence, because of the middle-class potential to control local politics, they are often made as a base by the political bodies in order to expand and establish their influence within the community.

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