CURRENT ISLAMIC THEOLOGICAL DISCORSE ON MIDDLE CLASS

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The ‘class’ structure, in particular ‘middle class’ is a concept that has always been a discussion and debate in the field of the social sciences today. Although Islam does not recognize the existence of classes in the community structure, the study of ‘class’ structure should be highlighted in order to comprehend this concept from the perspectives of Muslim societies, particularly in Malaysia. Hence, this paper seeks to discuss specifically about the concept of ‘class’ and ‘middle class’ in the context of Malay Muslim societies. It finds that there is no special concept for defining the term. Sociologists however, generally use a different approach based on three main areas of political, economic and social development in defining the term.

Key words: Current, Islam, theology, discourse, middle class, Malaysia, Malay, Muslim

Introduction

Islamic theological discourse on middle class is significant and has flourished both in terms of themes and approaches. At the heart of this growth is the significant contribution of Muslim middle class to the political, economic and social agenda of a country. Undeniably, the issues of class, particularly the middle class have been much discussed in western countries. Moreover, the term was said introduced by them. Therefore, before discussing in detail the issue of class based on Islamic theory, it is important to know in advance how western scholars conceptualized the term.

Middle Class According to the Western Scholars:

Prominent western sociologists such as Marx and Weber are two of the earliest sociological leaders discussed issues related to ‘class’ in western countries. According to Marx, division of classes are not identifiable in every society as class is a creation of history that will disappear in the near future. He has distinguished several forms of class society in European history, the people of ancient (Greek and Roman), medieval feudal and capitalist. Capitalist society is seen to have specific features that distinguish the two previous days of the community. Thus, Marx focused his attention on studying the characteristics of these differences and analyzed the historical development of capitalism that has managed to establish control of the socialist and eliminate other social classes.

According to Marx, capitalism is a class system based on one of the dominant class relations, i.e. between capitalists and wage workers. The investors are those who have the plant and machinery, which has replaced land ownership as a means of production (means of production). Employees or wage labourers or the working class who do not have tenure and have lost control of their production tools. Maturity of the capitalists make most people turn into workers wages. They had to sell its labour to the owners of capital as rescue efforts and balancing their lives. Wage workers will gain back its value in the form of wages is based on the amount of time allocated to produce the output. Value is created by groups of workers will return the expenses incurred by investors to finance the wage. In addition, the added value is also the most important source of profit to the capitalist economy as it forces the company to run (Gidden and Held, 1982).

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Therefore, we can see that Marx’s theory of class not to emphasize the issue of ‘middle class’. Classes are formed based on economic factors, or more precisely through the individual modes of production. Thus, in theory, emerge two classes in the structure of society, the class ‘bourgeois’ and ‘proletariat’ in which frequent conflicts between them. ‘Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonism. Society as whole is more and more splitting up into great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat’ (Edgell, 1993).

In contrast also with Weber, a prominent sociologist who came after Marx in which according to him, a class should not be determined with reference only to economic factors (modes of production) only, even with respect to other factors such as position in the market and property. Therefore, the discussion of the class, he was more focused on the class as a social class rather than economy class. Weber (1961) asserts that the class refers to a group who share the same class situation: ‘The typical chance for a supply of goods, external living, conditions and personal life experiences, in so far as this chance is determined by the amount and kind of power, or lack of standard and poor, to dispose of goods or skills for the sake of economic income in a given order’.

According to Weber again, the class consists of those who derive income from sources such as humans (workers), land mines (mines), plant and equipment, ships, debt and guarantees. Features are found in possession of a positive. In addition there is a positive ownership of ownership which is made negative by those who do not have the freedom, the proletariat, the debtor and the poor. In between these two forms of ownership, there are ‘middle class’ (Mittlestandsklassen) is enjoying life through the wealth, skills and abilities they have. In addition, the middle class is also composed of the merchant class. Therefore, it can be concluded that social class according to Weber is composed of the working class, the bourgeoisie of small (petty bourgeoisie) and those who have the know-how or privileges as white collar workers, technical and management (Gidden and Held, 1982).

Thus, the theory of Weber might be more appropriate to highlight the ‘middle class’ than Marx’s class theory that seems more limited. However, the class theory put forward by Marx and Weber is said to have their weakness by failing to locate and determine the function of the middle class in the whole structure of society. Thus, emerging scholars later known neo-Marxist and neo-Webrarian to enable the theory put forward by their class. Eric Olin Wright (neo-Marxist), one of the researchers in sociology, the latter has reviewed and developed the original theory put forward by Karl Marx. He established a schedule of classes due to the problem of understanding the position of the ‘middle class’ in capitalist society, which is based on the theory of every class has a different position ‘to see the emergence of the managers, owners and employees of small semi-autonomous. All three groups have different positions with the bourgeoisie and the proletariat class and create a class called ‘middle class’. Wright’s class theory can be understood through the following table (Edgell, 1993):

Based on the above table, Wright has developed a theory class by introducing a group known as ‘small bourgeoisie (petty bourgeoisie)’. According to Wright, the manager has a distinct position among the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, semi-autonomous workers also have different positions of the small bourgeoisie and the proletariat, while the small owners in the different position of the small bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie. Differences of class position are presented based on the three major forms of domination, the domination of the investment, production equipment and labor. In a capitalist society, the bourgeoisie controls of the three different aspects but also with the small bourgeoisie only acquire the investment and production tools. Group managers, owners and employees of small semi-autonomous control are also seen to have, but the rate is less than the greater of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

In addition to Wright, Goldthorpe classified as a neo-Webrarian also analyze the class structure in western countries since the 1960s. His research is based on employment status, i.e. the difference between manual and non-manual workers (middle class). He formed the theory of the class appropriate to the category of work ordered by the three main groups, namely white-collar workers (white collar), or class of service, the middle class (intermediate class) and the working class or manual workers. Goldthorpe has used seven jobs in the schedule of classes it provides, namely (Edgell, 1993):

| I | Higher-grade professionals, self-employed or salaried; higher-grade administrators and officials; managers in large industrial establishment; and large proprietors |
| II | Lower-grade professionals and higher-grade technicians; lower-grade administrators and officials; managers in small business and industrial establishments and in services; and supervisors of non-manual employees |
| III | Routine non-manual employees in administration and commerce; sales personnel; and other rank and file employees in services workers |
| IV | Small proprietors; self-employed artisans; and other own account workers apart from professionals |
| V | Lower-grade technicians; supervisors of manual workers |
| VI | Skilled manual wage-workers in all branches of industry |
| VII | Semi and unskilled manual worker; and agricultural workers |
Monopolized by the capitalist, the working class are forced to work with very minimum wages, barely enough through increased production, improved communication tool and wealth exploitation. In capitalism, wealth is prominent. Islamic scholar disagrees with Marx that capitalism has brought great progress to human civilization. First, the strength of capitalism is usury and monopoly, Islam on the contrary, forbids both. Qutb (1980), a prominent Islamic scholar disagrees with Marx that capitalism has brought great progress to human civilization through increased production, improved communication tool and wealth exploitation. In capitalism, wealth is monopolized by the capitalist, the working class are forced to work with very minimum wages, barely enough for survival. Unlike capitalism, Islam promotes justice and reprimands any act of monopoly. When two parties work towards a similar goal, any wealth derived should be shared. The capital provided by the employers is important towards production, the labour expanded by the workers is equally important. So when there is wealth, it should be shared.

Accordingly, there is no class in Islam. Qutb (1980) emphasizes that in Islam, there are no special hereditary privileges as practised by the aristocrat in medieval feudal Europe. At that time, the law on the administration of estate gave all property to the eldest son, regardless of whether the deceased left behind other children. Emerging from this law is a class of people who considered themselves to be above the law, enacting law that suits their interest and ignores the well-being of other class. On the contrary, Islam does not allow excessive wealth accumulation which marginalizes other people. Surah Al-Nisa’, verse 8 reads: ‘But if at the time of division other relatives, or orphans or poor, are presented, feed them out of the (property), and speak to them words of kindness and justice’.

Second, acknowledging that social and economic polarization is common in all human civilizations, class struggle to minimize social polarization is allowed in Islam, especially if it is done in the spirit of upholding justice is allowed in Islam (Kuntowijoyo, 1991). The following two verses of the Quran describe social and economic polarization. In Surah Al-Nahl, verse 71, the Quran says: ‘God has bestowed His gifts of sustenance more freely on some of you than on others: those more favoured are not going to throw back their gifts their gifts to those whom their right hands possess, so as to be equal in that respect. They will then deny the favours of God?’ In Surah Al-Zukhruf, verse 32, the Quran says: ‘Is it they who would portion out the Mercy of thy Lord? Is it we who portion out between them their livelihood in the life of this world: and We raise some of them above others in ranks, so that some may command work from others. But the Mercy of thy Lord is better than the (wealth) which they amass’.
The giving of alms (Zakat), which is ordained on the wealthy to give some portions of their wealth to the poor, is Islam commitment to minimise social and economic polarization (Kuntowijoyo, 1991). In Surah al-Hashr, verse 7, the Quran says: ‘What God has bestowed on His Messenger (and taken away) from the people of the townships, belongs to God, to His Messenger and to kindred and orphans, the needy and the wayfarer, in order that it may not (merely) make a circuit between the wealthy among. So take what the Messenger assigns to you, and deny yourselves that which he withholds from you. And fear God; for God is strict in punishment.’

Third, the nature of conflict between classes is also different. However, the conflict is not a conflict to the destruction of another class of Marxism as understood by linking the emergence of structures that are not just the mastery of tools of production and wealth. Islamic principles of justice declare that the structure will not be created to destroy the master classes of production tools (Kuntowijoyo, 1991). In addition, Islam also does not form a class centred on the property, but it forms the dignity based on the knowledge and character of a person. In other words, prestige is measured based on knowledge rather than wealth. For example, the Islamic scholar and Mujtahid in view as those who have high prestige. Although not wealthy, they still respected and admired of community. However, in the modern social sciences, society was divided according to class, which is based on power or politics and is no longer looked at science as something that is important. These elements are seen to have a size in the process of forming a modern society.

In Islam, according to the class of political power and wealth did not exist, only those who are knowledgeable and virtuous because Islam views all human beings are the same and no distinguishing their status. Therefore, the best measure of the man is a human duty to Allah (Senapi and Sannusi, 2008). This is evidenced by the word of Allah in Surah al-Hujurat, verse 13: ‘O mankind! Verily We have created you male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may contact (and getting acquainted with each other). Verily Allah is Knower, Aware (the state and deeds)’.

Research on Middle Class in Malaysia:

Middle class plays an important role in the political, economic and social agenda of a country. As a country’s economic development is often measured by its population of middle class, it not surprising that many countries including Malaysia have taken many positive steps to support middle class. In ASEAN, the number of middle class in Malaysia is slightly higher than that of Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand but is much lower than those in more industrialized countries like Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea. As Islam is the official religion in a multi-ethnic country, the Muslim middle class in Malaysia comprises of Malay Muslim middle class, Chinese Muslim middle class and Indians Muslim middle class.

The study of the middle class in Malaysia has been done in two stages. Initially, a specific study was done on the middle class administrators during the British colonisation. This includes their origin, development, social position, role, thoughts and lifestyle pre and post independence. With industrial development and economic growth, a more comprehensive study was made in the following areas, i.e. concept and theory class, the changes of the social structure, the country’s role in supporting middle class, ethnic status, class consciousness, political, and cultural impact of national unity and democracy to the country’s middle class (Embong, 1999).

Syed Husin Ali (1964) in his study of village communities to categorize them in classes based on economic dominance. The arrival of British Malaya was a bad influence on society and major changes either in the political, economic or social. The influence of education, administrative and economic reforms are accepted by the village has changed the social structure as they see them start to engage in other jobs that are no longer tied to the agricultural sector. Therefore, this situation has led to the emergence of a new class known as the ‘middle class’ and it consists of the teachers, clerks, priests, chiefs and headmen. This middle class is seen as a group that has a status and a stronger economic position than other villagers. In addition, he also lists six factors that affect a person’s position in the social structure of society, the personal factors, religion, education, responsibility to society, work and share in the economic field.

Syed Husin Ali’s (1984) studies further showed that the middle class is made up of three main areas, namely management, professional and business services. More management accompanied by the Malays, but the non-Malays were involved in this field, particularly in the technical work, medical and educational services. Meanwhile, the professional sector is composed of a majority of non-Malays. Business is dominated by non-Malays, but once the policies implemented by the government were encouraging the participation of Malays in the field. According to him, most of the middle class share the same lifestyle. In addition, middle-class administrators, professionals and businessmen as well as guidance and support from political parties, the government whether at the city or region.

The study of the middle class was followed by Nordin Selat (1976) with a focus on the emerging middle class administrators and the development of their lifestyle. Like Syed Husin Ali, Nordin Selat also linking this with the successful emergence of the British control of the states in Malaya, after the onset of the Industrial
Revolution in Europe. He said British officials who ruled Malaya at that time consisted of groups of middle-class Europeans, and managed to persuade middle-class lifestyle in the Malay land administrators. Therefore, an administrator at the time of the middle class is seen to develop a lifestyle that is different from other Malays. For example, they enjoy spending time with reading English magazines such as Times, Far Eastern Economic Review and Reader's Digest. They also prefer to spend leisure time to travel abroad and to play golf and tennis. Middle-classes are assigned to assist the administrators of this business was born out of education introduced by the British, namely the Kuala Kangsar Malay Collage (MCKK). His research in 1978 showed there are two sizes that can be used to describe the middle class, a measure of objective and subjective measures. Objectives include the approval of education, employment, income and residence. Meanwhile, subjective measures include lifestyle and attitude towards some things (Nordin, 1978).

Jomo K. Sundram (1977) used a historical approach to analyze and explain the formation of classes in Peninsular Malaysia during the colonial period and after independence. He said the class is determined by the social relations of production. Contradictions and class conflict in production processes need to be considered for understanding the formation of social classes in Malaysia. Classes are not only defined by the economic aspect alone even political and ideological aspects. He also stated that the two social classes appear before the invasion, the ruling class and ruled class. In between these two classes is a class was formed known as the ‘middle class’ of the administrators and managers, professional workers and technical workers. Jomo referred this group as a small emerging bourgeoisie in society at that time. Bourgeois class of small-speaker known as the administrator (administocrat) emerged as the government groups that mediate between the foreign and local investors, the top layer in the farming community, small rural bourgeoisie and the working class.

Therefore, we summarized the early researchers of the class in Malaysia are less emphasis on theory and explanation of the concept of middle class, but more emphasis on the early history of the formation and the factors driving the growth. Theory about the middle class in Pakistan has been discussed by Johan Saravanamuttu (1989). He is more likely to accept and use the concept of middle class developed by Giddens when discussing the question of the middle class in Malaysia. According to Saravanamuttu, the middle class are non-labour workers and not farmers. They have the qualifications, skills and technical competence as well as middle-class position based on the ability of the market. Hence, from this sense he categorizes the middle class based on the seven types of work, the professional, technical, administrative and managerial, clerical, sales, and some other services. He stated that the development of the middle class in Malaysia occurs very significant, while the percentage of peasant class and the working class remains the same and may be impaired. In addition, he also recognizes that the middle class is represented by every nation that is generally considered to be involved or play a role in highlighting some current political issues are not a racist.

The approach taken by Saravanamuttu has received criticism from other researchers in the middle class. Joel S. Kahn (1991) was one of the critics is less agree with the approach used by Saravanamuttu. He stated that Saravanamuttu action is action that attempts to restore the middle class model, introduced by the West in the 19th century that is more capitalist. Kahn believes that the concepts used should be reviewed and reassessed, especially before a discussion on the question of the middle class. He said the middle class should not be identified by reference to the relationship of cultural production or the capitalists, but is based on the formation of the modern state whether colonial or post colonial era. Kahn’s approach shows that development plays an important role in the formation and development of the middle class. Kahn also saw that the modern state plays a more important role in forming middle class in Malaysia compared to capitalist development (Kahn, 1996).

Shamsul Amri Baharuddin (1993) also saw the middle class as a social phenomenon that exists not only in Malaysia but also around the world. According to him, those who saw the middle class in the context of the framework of the doctrinaire social class would say the middle class is not actually exist. They think society is divided into two, namely the dominant and the dominated. Thus, the middle class is considered in terms of social as a false image (illusion). Based on the social situation in Malaysia, there is no denying that those who belong to this class will eventually belong to either the class that dominates or is dominated. In addition, he also showed a measure of determining the membership of the middle class in Malaysia, which is based on manual and non-manual jobs. Middle-class of manual jobs is growing in number, and its members will enjoy the income and employment far greater than the working class. This is due to educational qualifications and technical skills that they possess which is seen much better than the working class, leading them to have a very different lifestyle amongst each other. However, this measure may be less significant in determining the middle class, because the middle class is made up of three cases, the upper middle class, middle and lower classes. Lower middle class is similar to the working class in terms of income and lifestyle. The upper class have wealth, while those who truly like the middle class are very small in the amount. Therefore, according to him, the line separating the middle class with other classes is ambiguous and difficult to identify.

The approach presented by Saravanamuttu and Kahn have been used by Abdul Rahman Embong (1995) when discussing on the issues related to the middle-class in Malaysia. He saw that the relations of production and modern countries are equally important in creating and expanding the middle-class in Malaysia. He said Malaysia’s middle-class is a phenomenon of history emerging from specific conditions in the political,
economic, social and also cultural aspect of Malaysia. Therefore, the middle-class needs to be based on specific historical forces that influence the formation of the class. He also saw that although the social transformation has made the middle-class in Malaysia multi-ethnic and share some objective features, class consciousness and the trend towards democracy among them cannot be regarded as something all by itself. Instead, ethnic sentiments, cultural and religious values are important variables in shaping the views and orientation of the middle class with a diverse ethnic.

Conclusion:

Many scholars agree that the concept of ‘class’, especially ‘middle class’ is a difficult concept to define. The discussion of the concept is still debated until today. It is not surprising if some of the researchers are not attracted to these concepts. In general, sociologists use a different approach in discussing the issue of class and middle class. They based on the dominance in the economy. Karl Marx was among the western sociologists who used these approaches. He was followed by the scholars like neo-Marxist and later Max Weber and his followers were known as the neo-Webran a social approach to define the two concepts.

In contrary, Islam firmly rejects the existence of classes in the community structure. Despite the revelations of the Quran that show the existence of social inequality and the classification society based on social groups, it is by no means can be equated with the concept of class as understood in the modern social sciences. This is because the concept of class is merely an emerging concept in the 19th century in the structure of European society. Islam evaluates the position and dignity not based on real person, but based on the properties and character of such person. However, this concept should be addressed in particular to understand the context of its use based on the Muslim community.

Scholars in Malaysia also use a different approach when discussing on Malay middle class. Unsurprisingly, there are also researchers who apply the theory introduced by the West in discussing the issues of ‘class’ and ‘middle class’. In summary, scholars in Malaysia apply two main approaches in discussing the concept namely; an objective and subjective approach. An objective approach includes education level, occupation, and income. On the other hand, the subjective approach covers aspects of lifestyle and attitude and thinking about something. However, more importantly, it is not on which approach is the right one matter, but the existence of this group in building up a particular society politically, economically and socially.

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References

