Malay Perspectives on the Muslim Malay Issues in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Development and modernization in Malaysia comes with a price. They changed the Malays in almost every aspect pre-dominantly in economical and social aspects. The Malays today are no longer the same Malays once known during the height of Malacca Sultanate. The Malays today are achieving more. Many became great people owning assets, land and intellectual properties; however some issues faced by the Malays in the olden days still exist, as if they have never been dealt with. Issues such as insecurity in regards to land ownership, lack of self-confidence in many areas, and other problems with religion and perception. The gravest challenge now faced by the Malays and the Muslims, is the negative perception and the lowest possible image of them in the eyes of the world. The Malays were said to be lazy and dependent while Muslims were associated with terrorism; perceiving them as people who are intolerant, violent, bigoted and generally disrespectful towards other religions, and worst, as threats to world security and peace. The intense and rapid globalization process has brought together in direct contact various communities, nations and religious faiths, without much filter and buffer mechanisms, giving rise to bewilderment, challenges, threats, prejudices and conflicts. This research note aims to answer misconceptions and to illustrate that Islam is indeed a religion, a way of life that acknowledges and accepts religious diversity in a society, and censures religious discord and conflict.

Keywords: Malay perspectives, Muslim Malay, issues, dilemmas, Malaysia

Introduction

Malays are ethnic group of people predominantly inhabiting the Malay Peninsula and parts of the western Malay Archipelago. The definition is very wide. If we accept ‘Malays’ as people who live in Peninsular Malaysia, Borneo, Riau islands, Sumatera, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and Philippine, the total would reach 350 million people in total (Ibrahim, 2009). This large number of people does not represent one race, because in reality they are different altogether, therefore to avoid confusion, all perspectives on the Malay race in this article only refers to the Malays in Malaysia.

The Malays speak Bahasa Melayu and generally have brown complexion although mixed marriage has resulted in many half-Malays to have slightly fairer or darker skin tone. Islam is the official religion of Malaysia and all Malays here are Muslims. Islam came to the Malay land during the 12th century through all sorts of means, mostly through Muslim traders who stayed to do business. Some of them married the locals and converted the Malays. According to Hashim Musa (2009), Islam came around the 2nd century of Hijrah and it begins in the northern island of Sumatra. Two renowned world travellers, Marco Polo visited Perlak in 1292 and found Islam was already established. Ibn Battutah visited Pasai in 1345, which was at that time governed by a pious Sultan. The famous Malay state of Malacca was established in 1400 whose king became a Muslim in 1414 and converted his entire courtiers and subjects into Islam.

Subsequently other Malay-Islamic states were formed throughout the Malay Archipelago such as Acheh on the northern tip of Sumatra in 1507, the Johore-Riau kingdom in the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula together with the neighbouring islands in 1530/1536, and other centers in the islands of Java, Borneo, Sulu, Sulawesi, Mindanao, etc. In these centers, Islam and the Malay language became the supra-elements that transcended and united them into a vast Malay civilization known as the Tanah Jawi. Islam brought many great transformations into the Malay society, culture and civilization since that era. The message of Islam was then spread throughout the whole of peninsula.
Origins of the Malays come in many versions. Stories from arguable authenticity claim that the Malays come from the Marinos in Madagascar, or the Chams from Cambodia and Vietnam and the Cape Malays from South Africa. However, a familiar history and old tales tell us that the Malay race in Malaysia appeared with Parameswara in Malacca (who became Muslim in 1414) and was better known as Iskandar Shah (Winstedt, 1935; Gungwu, 1968). News about the conversion of the ruler influences the royal families and the people of South Africa. However, a familiar history and old tales tell us that the Malay race in Malaysia appeared with those who were living in Selangor state where in the 1969 election the Chinese-dominated opposition parties wrested almost half of the Selangor state seats (Musa, 2009).

There are three external influences that affected the culture of the Malays, namely the Indians, the Muslims and the Western cultures. However before the arrivals of those external influences, the Malays were already in possession of their own local culture some of which still survive to this day. Bahasa Melayu and Islam are the two cores which shape the culture and character of the Malays. During the Hindu-Buddha era, the Malay language had to compete with Sanskrit. However, after a while, Sanskrit can only remain as language of the elites and for religious purpose while Bahasa Melayu soars to greater heights and became the lingua franca of the region among the traders. During the early 20th century, the British who occupied the land during that time introduces English in schools and in higher institutions. English then became the most important language of the country replacing Bahasa Melayu for almost three quarter of the decade (Wan Teh, 2005). At the beginning of the 70s, a huge reformation was done lead by Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak to bring back the pride of Bahasa Melayu as the language of education. They marked their reformation by building Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in May 1970. All courses there were taught in Bahasa Melayu, including Science and Technology. It was not proven yet at that time whether or not this is the right move, however leaders during those days thought that the best way to put Bahasa Melayu back to its place is by installing it as the official medium of teaching and learning.

Language is admittedly a very important characteristic of the country in order for it to be distinguishable. In Malaysia, Bahasa Melayu is the language of the original people who set up the first effective government; therefore it is logical that Bahasa Melayu should be the national language. As seen here, two important characteristics which define the Malays are Islam and the Malay language, or Bahasa Melayu. The Muslims in Malaysia makes up the majority of the population that is 60%, while the Buddhists 19%, Christians 9%, Hindus 6.3%, Chinese traditional religious believers 4.5% and the rest are either animists or sans religion. Thus Islam forms the definitive colouring or cultural landscape of Malaysia, with other religions and cultural elements adding to its overall patterns.

The Muslim Malay Issues:

It would be too much to say that the Malay problem is the root of the nation’s problem, but that is the talk that is going around. The biggest issue questioned by the writers is that, how the new generations of Malays, who are considered privileged compared to the Malays before development area appeared to be so uncivilized (for lack of better words) especially in terms of values. Religious education is a mandatory subject in schools, yet the people are still very much behind in moral aspects. More babies are being abandoned; corruption is at its worst, while politics did not seem to get any better. The Malaysian people were fragmented, the economy at a virtual standstill, returning feudalism, and theocracy. Additionally, issues such as poor education performance, economic disparity, racial conflicts and social problems which are common in most countries, Malaysia is not excused (Ibrahim, 2009).

A discussion between Ungku Aziz and Mahathir Mohamad in 1966 addressed hereditary and environmental influence as being the factors contributing to the problem of poor education performance and economic disparity (Mohamed, 1970). Other factors include education policy, poor facilities, inadequate and inadequately trained teachers also play a part during that time, but nowadays things have improved so only the first two factors mentioned are still very much relevant. However, it is believed that the root of the problem is the lack of religious influence in daily lives activities which will be dealt with in detail later on.

Hereditary and environmental influence in this sense does not mean that the Malays have bad genes or that they are surrounded by filth. It is more of finding the reason why the rich gets richer and the poor remains poor. Reasons behind cannot be dealt in this article for it is too big a subject and requires very careful analysis of cause and effect.

Racial conflict is another issue. In conjunction of the Islamic revivalism, two related events occurred a few years after independence that triggered greater impulsion to the Islamic resurgence. Firstly, the tragic event of the 1969 racial clash between two races- Malays and Chinese, shocked the country tremendously, especially those who were living in Selangor state where in the 1969 election the Chinese-dominated opposition parties wrested almost half of the Selangor state seats (Musa, 2009). There emerged a feeling of insecurity and fear among the Malays that they were losing their political dominance as well, beside the economy. This fear and realization triggered several affirmative actions on the part of the government, such as accelerating the national language and educational policies, the launching of a 20-year National Economic Policy (NEP) 1970-1990, the
increase in the University of Malaya’s intake, the establishment of the National University of Malaysia (1971) and the expansion of MARA Institute of Technology to accommodate more Malay students into tertiary and professional education, etc.

Ownership of the land was also an issue during that time. There have been arguments about the Chinese and Indians having as much right on the country as the Malays for they are the people who have developed Malaya just as much and made it prosperous. This statement is not only false, but also bias as it ignores all precedents and facts of history. If the Malays had objected to the influx of immigrants, they would not be here at the first place. Not only have the Malays allowed immigration, they were also responsible for ruling and policing the country so that wealth could be accumulated without fear of expropriation. Besides, the immigrants were not here to develop Malaya, but to accumulate wealth of the land. Mahathir Mohamad (1970) thought that having them in the country was good enough, and they should not demand special privileges. The issue was argued in The Malay Dilemma, and one fact was pointed out. If mere development entitles any race of settlers to the country in which they settled, then surely the British would have first claim in Malaya, Kenya and other colonial territories. Such reasons could not be accepted for claiming that the contributors owns the country, therefore the claim that the Chinese and Indians are responsible for the development of Malaya still does not confer on these immigrants and their descendents the same status as the indigenous Malays unless they satisfy a series of conditions. So it is very much unfair to blame the Malays for getting privileges.

On the other hand, the Malays’ claim in saying Malaya is the land of the Malays is in fact arguable. As put by Barry Wain (2009) in Malaysian Maverick, The Malay Dilemma argued that the Malays were the original or indigenous people of Malaya and should be accepted as the ‘definitive race’. It rejected non-Malay claims to political, linguistic and cultural parity with the Malays, but not on the grounds that the Malays were superior in any way. Truth is, the Malays were not the first settlers in Malaya for the aborigines were here first, so many argued that if the Malays can take the land from the aborigines, so can the Chinese and Indians. As mentioned in The Malay Dilemma, the issue of who owns the country has been a cause of wars and dispute since the beginning of history. During Singapore’s withdrawal from Malaysia, the prime minister of Singapore Mr. Lee Kuan Yew said that ‘We (the Chinese) are here as of rights’ saying that the Malays have no greater right to the peninsula than the Chinese and Indians since they have been here just as long. To solve racial integration issues, government has come up with many solutions such as the 1Malaysia campaign. Although it seems like the efforts solved the issue on surface level, the truth is there are always racial issues every day.

The Malay supremacy seems like it is more of a self-claimed thing for it is not sincerely accepted by the significant minorities. What is happening is this: non-Malays thirst for Malays to accept them as Malaysian citizens with equal rights. Equal rights here cover all aspects political, economical and social. Before leaving the office, Mahathir Mohamad had condemned Malays who relied on privileges provided by the country. Perhaps many realized that, despite having privileges, the Bumiputeras are still not getting the opportunities that is said to be their right. There are still many Bumiputeras who do not own homes, have the right jobs and good salaries. So during Abdullah’s administration, he began the practice of meritocracy and university admission quotas were eliminated causing heated arguments. Some in UMNO considered meritocracy too harsh on rural Malays disadvantaging them from their urban counterparts. On the other hand, the non-Malays argued that meritocracy still benefited the Malays in a way, for university entrance comes from two pre-university streams. One is a standardized exam of Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM) lasting two years while the other is an internally-graded matriculation course lasted a year. The non-Malays argue that it was unfair to consider both streams equivalent because most people who took matriculation were Malays. As a result, matriculation was opened to non-Bumiputera.

Racial issues are a never-ending story in Malaysia although deep in the heart of all Malays is a whisper of wanting unity. As said by Ibrahim (2009), racism is the norm in Malaysia; there is no sense of shame and embarrassment when we practice racial and religious discrimination. Malaysia is the only country where the majority needs special privileges when it is the minority that needs such protection generally. Looking back through the years, one fact which must be admitted is that there never was true racial harmony, only tolerance, accommodation and a certain amount of give and take.

In terms of economy, the goal to transform Malaysia into a developed nation has started since the instalment of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971 which focused on industrial development based on export trade using massive labour force (Mohamad Said 2009). Many factories were built at the city side of the country, encouraging people from rural areas to migrate. Ten years after Independence, the population of the country was a mere 10 million and the growth rate was at 3%. In an article entitled The Future of Malaysian Economy, Dr. Lim Chong Yah wrote that at 3% growth, Malaysia would not be able to create jobs at 100,000 p.a. Unemployment would be increase at a horrendous rate and the country, like other developing countries, would need to depend on foreign capital inflow. But the picture became bright for the country has palm oil, timber, pepper and other resources for domestic growth.

Today, the country is more prosperous than other countries which attained independence during the same era (Mohamad, 2008). The people of Malaysia are all the beneficiaries of the policies of those early people who
lead the country, and it is safe to say that there is no single race, or a single person who can honestly say that he or she has gained nothing from the independent Governments of Malaysia. However, other than being grateful, the Malays need to be analytical at some stage. Although the country has improved by leaps and bounds compared to during the early days of independence, there are always rooms for improvement. As mentioned earlier, many qualified Bumiputera are still unemployed, the economic gap between the rich and the poor is huge, and the rural dwellers are still very much left behind in many ways.

Social problem is another big issue. The Malays were once known for their rich culture and good manners, however if we walk on the streets of this land today, such characteristics are no longer visible. It is common to see Malay youth walk in crowds, talking loudly, making a nuisance of themselves, and Malay girls behaving just the same as their male counterparts. News of unwanted pregnancies, drug addiction, crimes and divorce are making headlines every day indicating that something is wrong in the way our system works that the Malays today no longer hold the pride of being well-mannered and courteous. Dressing is another issue. In Malaysia, it is known that all Malays are Muslims, but appearance and behavior does not seem to show that we are, in fact Muslims. This goes back to Aqidah and Islamic knowledge, which deserve a whole new topic altogether. The gravest challenge now faced by the Malays (and Muslims), is the negative perception people had around the world. Muslims are perceived as people who are intolerant, violent, bigoted and generally disrespectful towards other religions, and worst, as terrorists threatening world security and peace. The call for attitude change in this sense is urgent.

In political arena, where every political party clamour for public supports and power, extolling their own virtues and superiority while condemning others, then friction, tension and conflicts among different party members and supporters bound to happen. The reality with Islam is that it is a religion that embraces all the realms of human activities. It is not just a religious belief pertaining to a personal God with a collection of personal or communal rituals restricted to some religious occasions and celebrations. Islam is a way of life with revealed laws and injunctions that govern and embrace the whole of mankind’s activities individually as well as collectively. It embraces all activities at the levels of the family, community, society, nation-states as well as the whole humanity. If all believers hold religiously to the teachings of Islam, problems mentioned above would not occur.

The Minds of the Malays:

It is true that Malaysia has achieved independence in 1957 and the people are no longer occupied by external forces after the British. But had they really freed the minds of the people when they leave the country was worth a discussion. The Malacca Sultanate era was a startling truth and the effects of 500 years of colonialism haunt the country and the minds of the people until this very day (Mohamad Said 2009). When the Europeans came to Malaya, the Malays were already doing well with their trading industry and the economy was good as well. However, the influx of the Europeans during late 15th century retarded the economic development of the Malays. The Malays had to give way and settle as peasants, fishermen and farmers instead (Wan Teh, 2005). It is admitted in The Malay Dilemma that the Malays are the rightful owners of Malaya, and that immigrants are guests until properly absorbed, which is when they are ready to abandon the language and culture of their past, but why is it that the Malays give ways and tolerate too easily? Tolerance in this case, is no longer considered a good thing.

The Malay problem first and foremost, is closely related to attitude and character. Not many can easily understand the Malay character unless they live with one. The Malays are courteous, well-mannered and self-effacing, and this is often misunderstood. Unfortunately, what is merely good manners to the Malays is often wrongly interpreted. In The Malay Dilemma, it is reported that Winstedt, in one of his English-Malay dictionaries say that the correct way for Malays, including the rajas, to address any European is to append the honorific Tuan to the name (Mohamad, 1970). The British consider the deference and the constant giving way on the part of the Malays as evidence of weakness and inferiority. The Malay habit of calling the British Tuan or master was taken as an acceptance that they were in fact the master of the Malays. This mistake was never corrected because the Malays feel that is it bad manners to correct etiquette made by foreigners.

Decades after the British era saw changes in the way the Malays communicate with people due to exposure from abroad, migration and media influence. However certain characteristics of the Malays remain the same. It is true that the Malays no longer became ‘servants’ to the British, admitting each and every action they made and serve them as masters. But today it is seen that such ‘treatment’ is still present between a worker and his superior. The Malays are too absorbed by titles and power that everything made by a person more superior is considered right, and mistakes done by them were never corrected just like how they treat the British during the British occupation. Another thing about the Malays is that they like to play safe and avoid controversy. The Malays rather give way than confront an issue; they avoid provoking others and let misery drown by time.

Humility and modesty, although are categorized as ‘good’ characteristics in which humans should have, often causes confusion making communication with the Malays complicated at times. The Malays are never
frank, except with those whose sympathy he can rely on (Mohamad, 1970). Their habit of rejecting favour even when they want and need it gives people mixed signal. The Malays’ shyness can also be interpreted as lack of confidence, and this is evident when accepting a post. Volunteering for a post is rare, so the people around them often have to push or recommend. The Malays are also shy. They shoo away from attention and avoid being in the limelight. Furthermore, it is typical of the Malay to stand aside and let someone else pass. These little courtesies are also expected in others, but the expectation stops if the other person is not Malay. Malays did not expect the same gestures from non-Malays for they are always excused from having to conform. The fact that these characteristics are symbolic and confusing is a problem, except to those who understand the Malay character so they see the line on when to insist and when to give way (Ridhwan, 2005). These characteristics, if summarized, would come to a conclusion that what the Malays are lacking is just self-confidence. This leads to the emergence of other characteristics as mentioned above.

A Cure to the Malay Problem:

The Quran has given clear injunctions on the subject of racial disparity and other differences such as ‘Let there be no compulsion in religion; truth stands out clear from error’ (Quran, 2:256), ‘I will not worship that which you worship, nor will you worship that I worship. To you your religion and to me mine’ (Quran, 109:456), and ‘O mankind! We created you from a single pair (Adam and Eve) and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (amicably and not that you may despise each other). Verily, the most honoured of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous. And God has full knowledge and well-acquainted with all things’ (Quran, 49:13).

In this Quranic injunction, it is clear that the Muslims, in the process of reviving and reaffirming Islamic practices that have direct contact with the non-Muslims, must be careful not to force them upon the non-Muslims. Thus, the governing principle underpinning any operation of Islamic rules and regulations in all social interactions, contracts, agreements, transactions, etc., must be applied, administered and implemented upon the Muslims only, and must not impinge in anyway the rights, freedom and practices of the non-Muslims’ religious and cultural norms.

Nonetheless, the doctrinal differences aside, there are many norms, values and principles that are common among different religions and cultures, especially pertaining to basic universal values such as human rights, ethical and moral values. Thus, to instill and enhance mutual understanding, respect and cordial relationship (as propagated by the Quran) among various religious and cultural groups, the dialogues must search and emphasize the common features shared by them. In this manner they can help each other in realizing and actualizing them and establish the practices of giving and helping each other the common good.

Apart from that is mentioned in I too, am Malay that the country need to repositions its strategy in developing the country. The Malays need a good education system and not one that produces 44,000 unemployed graduates every year where the public’s tax Ringgit has to be used to create jobs for them (Ibrahim, 2009). The country needs more good teachers, lecturers, deans and directors of education. The Malays need to be exposed to healthy competition that can give true confidence to their personalities by having a transparent and competitive system so they can focus their attention and energy to achieving real growth. It sounded rhetoric but it is achievable.

Like any other races, the Malays are just as strong, brave and intelligent. And just like other races, there will be hardworking ones and lazy ones. They need to know that the Chinese and Indians are not their enemies, provided they know their boundaries and we know ours. The Malays do not need excessive subsidies and privileges for it will only spoil their skills and ability. The attitude and policies installed by the Malay leaders, especially article 153 in The Constitution had causes the Malays to shy away from competition. Aid and assistance should only be given to those who truly need them because grants and privileges that are not based on need have created a race that is lazy and fearful of progress (Mohamad Said, 2009).

As Muslims, the Malays should not kneel before anyone except Allah. They should be able to succeed on their own two feet, have self-confidence and pride, and be willing to accept a job and responsibility as an act of obedience to the Creator. The Malays are not lazy; despite the many claims persist on repeating this stereotype. The Malays are capable to be successful with the right motivation and the right mind set. The people who lead must not be selfish in distributing the wealth of the country, in making policies, and in handling crimes. In short, the country needs benches of good leaders, people who lead without personal interest in mind, leaders who can demonstrate to the people that being multi-racial is not a problem and we should not be afraid of our differences. This goes back to good education system because good leaders only come out from good education background other than good upbringing (Al-Attas, 1987).

In solving social problems, one should always go back to religion. Religion is the only way out to challenges of modernization. As known, the Malays in Malaysia are all Muslims and Islam is known for its modesty, and justice. Social challenges are common in any human civilization but being Muslims, we should try to put a halt to the growing situation. In ‘Understanding Islam: Contemporary Discourse’, it is mentioned that
Allah has declared in no uncertain words that He will not improve the situation of any people unless the people initiate the change first: ‘...Verily never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change themselves (with their own souls) (Quran, 13:11).

Muslims have a right to a decent, peaceful, dignified and productive life—this goes without saying. If the Malays hold on tightly to Islam, problems such as abortions, drug addictions, crimes, corruption and domestic violence would stop. Less money will have to be spent on protecting victims of violence, curing drug addicts and solving corruption issues in court. More money can be channeled towards development. Easier said than done, but a starting point has a strong connection with revision of laws and reinstatement of Islamic education since young. For Muslims to effect changes, they need to seriously review themselves and their situation. Muslims today need a paradigm shift in thought and attitude, from a state of passivity and complacency to that of active engineering social changes and social advancement. Meaning, Muslims ought to make the revival of the Islamic identity and civilization a personal duty and commitment, and this can be achieved by adopting three general approaches (Kamaruzaman, 2009).

Firstly, Muslims need to understand their own religion and to live up their religion in all aspects or life and living and at all levels—the spiritual, the intellectual, and the material levels, as well as at the individual and social levels too. To do this they need to know the strength and beauty that religion offers so that they do not feel as though they are sacrificing something in their life but gaining something instead. Secondly they should import good things from other civilizations, adapt and adopt to appropriately complement with the Islamic worldview and value system. Not everything from the west is bad, so the Malays should learn to pick which ones to emulate. Thirdly they need to update their social dynamics, namely the social systems and institutions, to keep ever contemporary so as to fit the need of the time yet still stay within the parameters of the Islamic paradigms as elaborated earlier (Kamaruzaman, 2009). The Malays make up the majority of the population in the country, which is big enough to make a difference. If the Malays fulfill their duty as a Muslim, think as a Muslim and act as a Muslim, the country will be able to cure not only social problems, but racial conflicts as well.

Conclusion:

The Malays have a few problems, but then all was not plain sailing either for the Muslims in those days of yore, even during the glorious periods of the Islamic civilization. Basically the Malays knew the issues they are facing, the leaders and the people are aware, but few can be done if individuals do not cooperate. Attitude is the key to most problems. If the Malays retain their identity as Muslims while continuing their rich cultural inheritance of being well-mannered Malays, development and modernization would only benefit and not harm the people. Having said that, it is seen that all the Malays need is gradual changes. Changes are hard if we are divided, for only unity can make it happen. Unity stems from harmony and gratitude, which can be achieved when one, is happy with the system of the country. So all in all, everything goes back to good leadership. Unfortunately, some leaders are doing exactly what Allah precisely instructs them not to do, despite the fact that they know better. Good life-long education system which stays in the heart of a person and the one which is capable to shape the values of its people is needed, not just the one which gets people employed. Contemporary Muslims should re-activate the Islamic civilization and make the effort their personal mission. This is because Islam as a religion is not meant only to be a spirituality affair but a civilization and a lifestyle as well.

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Quran al-Karim.