Islam Reform and Malaysian Identity

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ABSTRACT

Being one of the major branches of global Islamic civilization, the identity of Malay-Islamic values plays a significant role in 21st century. With ASEAN arguably the most religious diverse organization in the world and with Malaysia representing the three most diverse racial and religious societies; pluralism, religious tolerance and balance among different ethnic groups are cherished and celebrated in the region. Thus, the story of South-East Asian and Malaysian-Islamic Identity is on the front page of the current Islamic Reform across the globe. This paper discusses about the present Global Islamic Reform and highlights the need of more active role of Islamic Community in Malaysian Peninsular.

INTRODUCTION

Notable British scholar and historian ‘Arnold J. Toynbee’ studied 19 major civilizations in his famous book ‘A Study of History’. He saw religion as a prime motivation in history and argued ‘Civilizations die from suicide, not by murder.’ [1] According to Toynbee, civilizations start to decay when they lose their moral and cultural values. He is very convinced of the importance of the spiritual dimension in a success of a civilization and also warned us by saying “Of the twenty-two civilizations that have appeared in history, nineteen of them collapsed when they reached the moral state the United States is in now.”

Without a doubt, the modern secularist Europe and the many parts of the West is now one of the most challenging and hostile places for Muslims to be. Including the founder and President of the European Muslim Network, Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies from Oxford University Tariq Ramadan and many prominent intellectuals have been arguing and demanding urgent need to address the issue for more than a decade. The challenges Muslim communities face is the West is immense. If we could not overcome, it will be a bigger and worse threat to the next generation Muslims of the community. Along with the evolving world and global pursuit of Democracy and Secularism, Asia will be facing the same challenges soon enough if not worse. Are we ready for it?

Because of current Islamic identity crises throughout the world and with every Global Muslim communities facing the thread in both physical and spiritual dimensions, reformers from many fields voiced out and called for a better change. What kind of policies we are currently practicing to withstand these calamities to maintain or improve our identities?

This paper argues for a restoration of the previously lost unity, balance and equilibrium to our contemporary Islamic civilization. And above all else it is an argument for reform. There are those who will call it apostasy, but that is not troubling. No one speaks for God—not even the prophet (who speaks about God). There are those who call it apologetics, but that is hardly a bad thing. An apology is a defense, and there is no higher calling than to defend one’s faith, especially from ignorance and hate. [2]

2.0 Literature Review & Discussion:

Three major waves of globalization have impacted in Southeast Asia since the arrival of Islam as early as the eleventh century. The first wave itself was initiated by establishment of Islam in the region to the point where it becomes the most dominant civilization [8]. And the second wave hit the shores of Malay-Indonesian...
Archipelago upon the arrival of the Portuguese and other Western Colorizations. The third wave, an American dominated one, is in the post-colonial period. [3] Southeast Asian Islam may be seen as the historical product of centuries-long civilizational encounters with the pre-Islamic indigenous cultures and civilizations [4]. ‘Malay-Indonesian Islam’ and the newly arriving religions and cultures brought by both the colonial and post-colonial West also acclaim that Islam in the region has been significantly impacted by each of the three waves [5]. If we were to point out that many scholars has been stating that the contemporary Muslim community is undergoing an identity crisis for a considerable period of time, it is also to state that this unique cultural and Islamic Identity is also under a big threat.

The region traditionally known as Southeast Asia comprises eleven modern nation-states with a total population of about 570 millions. With exception of a relatively tiny nation, Timor-Leste, all nations belong to ASEAN, which is arguably the world’s most hetero generous regional grouping. Muslims, Buddhists, Christians and Hindus not to mention Confucians and Taoists are all found in large numbers in the region. Complementing this religious diversity in making the region’s cultural landscape more heterogeneous, more complex, and more colorful is ethnic diversity. [6] With a large and highly visible presence in ASEAN, Islam may find itself a significant role in future development of the region, especially in contributing to its peace-construction, security, and common prosperity through more enhanced forms of inner-communitarian understanding and cooperation by virtue of its rich intangible human resources. The possibility of such a future regional role for Islam within ASEAN cannot be brushed aside what more when there have been historical precedents of Muslim leaders in the region initiating several significant moves toward regional cooperation and integration prior to the formation of ASEAN, [7] Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, a Malay Muslim, Malaya’s and also Malaysia’s first Prime Minister played a key role in formation of ASEAN. He was a great believer in unity in diversity. When ASEAN was still in its infancy, comprising only half of Southeast Asia’s ten countries, he dreamt of the day when the whole region would join the grouping as its full members, knowing fully well that were that to happen ASEAN would emerge as the most culturally heterogeneous regional organization in the world. [8]

The Muslim demographic strength in the region is itself a sufficient reason for optimism in a broader and more dynamic future role for Islam within the ASEAN community. Muslims constitute the biggest religious group in Southeast Asia. They account more than 40% of its population (more than 250 millions). Three out of eleven countries in the region are Muslim-majority states namely Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam. Compared to many other Muslim communities in the world, Muslims in these three countries are more advanced in education, economic development, scientific and technological achievements, and women societal roles [11]. These countries also have a relatively large Muslim middle class which is a traditional guarantee of a more open multicultural living. [8]

However, Contemporary human civilization is rich and advanced in scientific and technical knowledge, but poor and backwards in moral and spiritual knowledge and wisdom [8]. Consequently, we are superb at solving even the most complex of scientific and technological problems and extremely successful in controlling the forces of the natural world that is external to us. But we are utterly hopeless when it comes to solving the most basic of human problems, and we fail miserably in the task of social engineering, that is, in ordering and controlling human behaviors and the inner forces of human nature which govern them [3]. Modern civilization which is supposedly founded on humanism and which in fact takes great pride in having adopted it as its philosophical worldview, is also a witness to the greatest genocide in human history, one in which millions of American-Indians, Australian aborigines, New Zealand Maori perished, purportedly committed in the name of civilization and progress, not to mention the genocide of millions of Jews. It is the same civilization that acts as the midwife to the birth of institutionalized racism which is clearly as affront to human dignity and man’s moral worth [3]. As believers and individuals of Islamic civilization, what do we do to overcome this?

Identity crisis is not to viewed as of being the same kind as the cultural, economic, energy, environmental, and other crisis that are usually treated as components of civilizational crisis. It is far more fundamental and all-embracing crisis than any of these. In fact, it is even more fundamental in nature than civilizational crisis to the extent that the identity of a civilization is defined by its core element, namely which its individuality and its core qualities and characteristics that manifest themselves in all sectors of human life. Thus, we may speak of the identity crisis of a civilization in the same manner and breadth that we are speaking of the identity crisis of the Muslim Ummah [3]. But according to the ideals of the human civilization as set forth by the Quran – modern civilization, which is largely of western inspiration and making, has undergone a progressive inner decay while displaying marvels of scientific and technological achievements unmatched in human history. This inner decay is understood essentially in terms of human degradation or dehumanization as measured according to the traditional criteria of human development and human perfection best personified by the Quranic model of the justly balanced community [3]. Thus, contemporary Muslim world must start to reconsider the terms and modalities of the reform process [5]. I therefore, along with many scholars across the globe, call for general awakening and a critical evaluation of all consciences and all skills, those of ordinary Muslims as well as of intellectuals, scientists, and ‘ulama’. Awakening of Islamic thought necessarily involves reconciliation with its spiritual dimension on the one hand, and on the other, renewed commitment and rational and critical reading
(jjihadh) of the scriptural sources in the fields of law and jurisprudence (fiqh). Today’s Muslims of both East and West urgently need contemporary fiqh, distinguishing what in the texts is immutable and what may be changed. [5]

Many Muslim scholars (ulama), as well as intellectuals and ordinary Muslims, oppose the use of the word ‘reform’ because they think it is unfaithfulness to the Islamic tradition. For some, ‘reforming’ Islam sounds as changing Islam, preventing it to adapt it to current time, which is not acceptable to a believing conscience. The second criticism comes from those who see in ‘reform’ something foreign, an approach imported from the Christian tradition to cause Islam to undergo the same evolution as Christianity and thus make it lose its substance and its soul. The third criticism is based on the ‘universal’ and ‘timeless’ character of Islam’s teachings, which, therefore, the argument goes, are in no need of ‘reform’ and can be implemented in the all times and in all places. Those criticisms are set forth usually in very general terms and raise serious questions and require accurate answers. The stated intention of protecting Islam however cannot be expressed through the refusal of any critical approach. Self-ignorance, nurtured by fear of change, of losing oneself of more generally ‘fear of the other’ is one of the major dangers that threaten the contemporary Muslim conscience. [5]

According to a famous hadith, ‘God will send to this community at the turn of each century someone or some people who will restore (revive/renew) its religion. What the hadith tells us is that the Muslim community will nevertheless be accompanied and guided through the centuries by scholars and thinkers who will help it, every hundred years or so, to “regenerate” or “renew” the religion of Islam. This renewal of religion does not, of course, demand a change in the sources, principles, and fundamentals of Islam, but only in the way the religion is understood, implemented, and lived in different times or places [9]. The precise definition of the term ‘reform’ in this paper means scriptural sources (Quran and Sunnah) remain the primary references and the fundamentals of faith and practice are left as they are, but our reading and our understanding of the texts will be ‘renewed’ by the contribution of those scholars and thinkers who will point to new perspectives by reviving timeless faith in our hearts while stimulating our minds so as enable us to face the challenges of our respective times [10].

The Revelation informs us in Quran that nothing has been left out and that it is “complete”, “clear”, “detailed” and “perfect” in numerous verses (11:1, 12:1, 6:115, 6:38, 6:114, 16:89) stating that the Book explains all things and nothing is omitted. The absence of critical thinking and of meaning is indeed a great danger especially in the present time. We should ask ourselves if not now, when?

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
It was the age of wisdom; it was the age of foolishness.
It was the epoch of belief; it was the epoch of incredulity.
It was the season of Light; it was the season of Darkness.
It was the spring of hope; it was the winter of despair.
We had everything before us, we had nothing before us.”

Borrowing the lines of Charles Dickens’s description of Europe of 1775, we could recognize the positive and negative fundamentals and uncertainties of our world still seems to be very apt in describing our modern civilization right from his time until now.

The real need for Malaysia is to have an enlightened national policy on interreligious relations that would help guarantee social peace among the country’s diverse religious communities. Or, the least we expect to have from such a policy would be a help to generate favourable societal forces and a favourable cultural climate that can serve as a preventive social medicine to religious conflicts and strife so rampant in our contemporary world. [11]

Both Malaysian society and the Malaysian state are religiously conditioned in a very pervasive way. And Malaysian society is deeply religious in a way and to an extent not found especially in Western countries which call themselves ‘secular’. Given these conditions peculiar to Malaysia, neither ideological secularism nor the increasing presence of exclusivist interpretations of religion in the public space could be presented as an efficacious answer to the country’s need for interreligious tolerance and peace. The consequences of either choice for Malaysia could be far worse than its present situation. To remove religion from the public space and to turn it into a ‘private matter’ would mean the uprooting of the structural foundations of both the Malaysian state and Malaysian society, the greater part of which are inspired by religion, if not directly traceable to the religious sources. [4] But in the pursuit of religious tolerance and interreligious peace, we recognize the state as one of the major key players. [4]

Desirably, an enlightened national policy on interreligious relations has to be the end-product of a process of dialogues and consultations among the experts in the field and the representatives of both the government and the civil society groups. [4]

Methodology:
A qualitative method will be implemented in this study with the findings of multisite (cross case-study) on several major Islamic countries. The study will results to a recommendation of the most appropriate planning
methods to improve modern pluralist society of Kuala Lumpur with several secondary outputs such as: categorizing the different pluralist societies within Islamic World, pinpointing the Islamic guidelines dealing with pluralist societies and identifying methods to main the Malaysian Islamic Identity [9].

Conclusion:

Many Malaysian scholars and intellectuals worry for their simple minded citizens who tend to hang on to the others and the leaders with the blind faith [11]. There are immense voices from scholars and intellectuals calling for reform throughout the world even from the utmost corners of the Globe. Unfortunately, not many places has an opportunity to go far.

This reform requires speech to be free, minds to be called on, debate, criticize and question openly and honestly. Southeast Asian Islamic community holds such a wealth of human and material resources, intelligent minds, so many skills and potentialities to overcome our numerous present and upcoming crises.

For this each heart and mind, every individuals with their respective assets, need to contribute to this radical reform. A famous African proverb states 'If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together’. If our destination is peace and success of the civilization, it’s about time we start cherishing pluralism. The road is long, but there is no lack of spiritual and intellectual energy. The tide of reform cannot be stopped. The Islamic Reformation is already here. We are all living it. Whether to be a part of it or not is one’s call. But in the name of responsibility, we owe it to our faith.

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