

THE NOTION OF UMMAH IN A MULTI RACIAL SOCIETY: THE MALAYSIA EXPERIENCE

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Abstrak

Konsep ummah adalah penting di dalam Islam. Ia dilihat sebagai suatu "kemestian" bukan sahaja bagi umat Islam, bahkan bagi kemanusiaan sejagat. Makalah ini cuba mempamerkan bagaimana nilai-nilai murni konsep ini dipromosikan di Malaysia, seterusnya reaksi kerajaan, parti-parti politik dan masyarakat bukan Islam terhadap usaha-usaha tersebut.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of ummah in Islam is very important. The term itself is used at least sixty-two times in verses of al-Qur'an, which not only suggest it important, but also the variety of contexts in which it is used provide a concise definition of its ride and the context in which it is to be analysed and applied. Fundamentally, the meaning is defined as 'upholding the word of God'. This means that the practice of the ummah's values, according to Muslim scholars, is an obligation for all human beings. Therefore the values of ummah are not only for Muslims but also for non-Muslims.

As a result, Muslims should always make an effort to promote the values of ummah among society at large. They must believe that the values are universal ones. In relation to the ummah, Malaysia as a multi-racial society, has also tried to create an environment where the values of ummah can be practised by all ethnic groups. However, there are some problems cause by both Muslims and non-Muslims which must be solved if all these values are going to be adopted as part of Society's framework. Based on that argument therefore, in the following discussion, the writer would like to examine first, how the Islamic notion of ummah is promoted in Malaysia and second, what is the reaction of the government, opposition parties, and non-Muslims towards the government's Islamization programmes.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Malaysia is a multi-racial society, where the main ethnic groups comprise Malays, Chinese and Indians (Tamils); in addition there are the aboriginal people or "orang Asli." Geographically, Malaysia is divided into West Malaysia, also called the Malay Peninsular, and East Malaysia which includes Sabah and Sarawak. For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be West Malaysia, that is the Malay Peninsular. This is because the Malay Peninsular has come under the influence of the revival of Islam.

In terms of religion, Malaysian society is multi-religious, comprising Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs and Magians. The main religion is Islam, whose followers are mainly Malays, approximately 45% of the population, and other ethnic groups, such as Chinese 35%, Indians 10% and the indigenous community.¹

Politically speaking, from independence in 1957 until the present day, Malaysia has been governed by Barisan Nasional (the National Front) which is composed of the UMNO (United Malay National Organisation), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association), MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress), GERAKAN and other more minor parties. The backbone of the Barisan Nasional is UMNO, which is a predominantly Malay party.

Even though government by the coalition Barisan Nasional which has pledged to uphold Islam,² Malaysia is a secular state. In terms of connections between Islam and the peninsular, the term "Malays" has always been synonymous with Islam. That is because all Malays are regarded as Muslims. Of course it does not mean that all Muslims are Malays. However, since the majority of Muslims in Malaysia are Malays, in the Malaysian Constitution, Malays are interpreted as Muslims, speaking a Malay language, and practicing Malay customs (adat).³

The government, even though it does not claim Malaysia as an Islamic state, runs the Islamic programme while the Islamic programme is not always very prominent, the Islamic system began to be introduced more rapidly in the early 1980s. Some scholars regard this phenomenon as a result of pressure from the Muslim revivalists and the opposition party, especially PAS (The Islamic Party). As a result of this, the govern-

¹ These Communities would be the Kadazans, Ibans, and others of East Malaysia in the main and some of the Orang Asli of West Malaysia.

² Article 3 of the Constitution of UMNO provides inter alia, "To promote, uphold and safeguard Islam in Malaysia". This is among the other main objectives of UMNO which are otherwise more national and ethnic in nature.

³ For an interesting discussion on the issue of Malay identity, see J. Nagata, "What is a Malay? Situational Selection of Ethnic Identity in a Plural Society," in *American Ethnologists*, 1(2), 1974, pp. 331-350.

ment took action to introduce some Islamic programmes, especially in economics and with regard to the social agenda.⁴ During the early days of independence, much emphasis was given to missionary aspects, converting other groups to Islam. However, in the early 1980s, the focus upon Islam was combined more with economic aspects of the nation's development programme. For example, the Islamic Bank, Islamic Economic Foundation, Islamic Insurance (Takaful) and in education such as the International Islamic University; and also in law.⁵

There is no doubt that since the period of Islamic revivalism, the Malays have become more aware of Islam.⁶ The majority tend to look to Islam to solve their problems and not just the state or its administration. This kind of mood has profoundly affected the students in Malaysian universities. The fact is that the university students have played a prominent role in creating increasing levels of awareness among the Malaysian community. At university, the Malay students were given an Islamic programme, to combat a programme which contradicted Islamic teaching. At the social level, the student unions ran a social programme of which the main objective was to create awareness of Islam's power to solve social problems.

As a result of increasing awareness of Islam among the Malaysian community and the response of government by creating Islamic economic conditions, such as Islamic banking, the non-Muslims become worried. The deepest concern among non-Muslims in Malaysia, especially the Chinese community, is their business. As a result of the Islamic resurgence, for instance, in the economic domain, many of their Malay Muslim clients turned to the Islamic banking system. This is believed to have a negative impact upon the business of the Chinese.⁷

Not only this, but non-Muslims also become worried when they heard groups of Malay Muslims talking about the phenomenon of an emerging Islamic state. The ma-

⁴ See for example, Hussin Mutalib, *Islam in Malaysia: From Revivalism to Islamic State?*, Singapore: National University of Singapore, 1993, pp 33; some of this points have also been noted in this writer's book entitled "Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics", Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990.

⁵ For a detailed analysis the Islamic economics in Malaysia especially during the Islamization policy, see Norhashimah Mohd Yassin, "Islamisation or Malaynisation? A Study on the Role of Islamic Lavin the Economic Development of Malaysia: 1963-1993," unpublished Ph.D Thesis, University of Warwick, England, 1994, pp.128ff.

⁶ For more information regarding dakwah and the role of university students, and the Islamic revivalist phenomenon, see Zainah Anwar, *Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia: Dakwah Among the Students*, Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Pelanduk Publications, 1987; see also, C. Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia*, Petaling Jaya: Penerbit Fajar Bakti, 1987.

⁷ See interview between Hussin Mutalib with Lee Kim Sai, *Islam in Malaysia*, 1993, pp. 102ff.

majority of non-Muslims think of the nature of the Islamic state from a legal, rather than spiritual perspective.⁸ In other words, when the Muslim talk about the Islamic state, they tend to think that in any state where shari'a is the supreme law, their trade or business will be destroyed, they have to follow the shari'a law rather than their own and, most crucially, their language also will have to change.⁹

This dilemma among the non-Muslims becomes more serious when competition between UMNO and PAS arises.¹⁰ Since both parties are principally supported by the Malay voters, the elements of Islam cannot be ignored. In order to get popular support, both parties have resorted to a different approach regarding the issue of implementing the Islamic system. UMNO feels that there is no need to declare Malaysia an Islamic state. But it is thought to be most important that the process towards any such declaration should be made gradually. While Muslims should be concerned about the level of understanding among the Malaysian community at the same time the government also must take account of the facilities and expertise that would be needed if they were to implement Islamic concepts of statehood, governance and administration in Malaysia.

PAS, on the other hand, continuously and consistently stresses the need to create an Islamic state, one in which the Qur'an and Sunnah are the supreme law and the dominant ideological component in the Malaysian constitution. For PAS, there is no problem in terms of expertise, because it is only deemed a technicality. However, the main task is that the Malaysian Constitution should be changed if Malaysia wants to be an Islamic State. PAS lays stress upon such fundamental concepts if the government seriously intends to remodel Malaysia as an Islamic State.

The Islamic resurgence in Malaysia has a positive impact upon PAS, while, for the government, the phenomenon of increasing awareness of Islam among the Malays made it imperative that they take action. The programme of Islamisation was introduced by Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, in 1982. Even

⁸ See for example, K. Haridas, "Islamisation of State and Society", in Norani Othman (ed.), *Shari'a Law and the Modern Nation-State: A Malaysian Symposium*, Kuala Lumpur: SIS Forum (Malaysia) Berhad, 1994, p. 99-103.

⁹ Interview with Kamal Koh, one of the Chinese Muslims who were active in PAS, April, 1996.

⁹ See for example, Ackerman, Susan E. and Raymond Lee, *Heaven in Transition: Non-Muslim Religious Innovation and Ethnic Identity in Malaysia*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988.

¹⁰ See Yusoff Rawa, "Ke Arah Pembebasan Ummah", keynote address in PAS Annual General Assembly on 16 Rejab, 1043/ 29 April, 1983, at Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, quoted in Yusof Rawa and Fadzil Mohd. Noor, *Membina Ketahanan Ummah*, Pulau Pinang: Dewan Muslimat Sdn. Bhd., 1995, p. 26.

though this programme was regarded by the opposition, particularly PAS, as only a cosmetic programme,¹¹ it also had some impact upon non-Muslims, both directly and indirectly.

For the majority of non-Muslims the policy of Islamisation, as represented by the programmes it engendered, was simply a response towards the particular and specific needs of the Malays. Therefore, there is also a group among non-Muslims which responded to the Islamisation programme. For the first time in Malaysia, non-Muslims have formed a confederation among themselves which is called the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism & Sikhism (MCCBCHS). The idea of forming this group is to unite all non-Muslim religions under one umbrella. Their most important task as a body to check upon the position of non-Muslim religions and their reaction to the Islamisation policy and give suggestions to the government regarding this.¹⁴ However, this confederation is said not to represent all the non-Muslim groups in Malaysia.

In 1990, after the general election, one of the states in Malaysia, Kelantan, was captured by the opposition party, PAS. Following that, PAS announced that the state government intended to implement the Shari'a law, including the hudud (Islamic Criminal law).¹³ This announcement provoked a great response, not only from non-Muslims but also from the federal government, where UMNO is a backbone of the National Front party. Even though it is constitutionally impossible for the state government to implement the hudud law, because it would bring it into conflict with Malaysian Constitutional law, it is enough to make an impression on the government, non-Muslims and Malay Muslims alike.

In order to make shari'a a reality, the State of Kelantan has set up a committee to draw up proposals for shari'a codes.¹⁴ Following this, the state government also held a seminar on the issues of hudud law and shari'a law. The main purpose was to get a response from the public. Politically, UMNO were in a dichotomy, because they could not deny the substance of shari'a law, but could only say that they would have to be interpreted according to PAS' doctrines. In other words, it would not be a genuine form of Islamic law.¹⁵ As a result of this announcement, more people become aware of the issues Islamic law attending and its implications for Malaysia. The press, which is

¹² See Paul Tan Chee Ing, "Muslim-Christian Relations In Peninsular Malaysia", in *Islamachristiana*, 19, 1993, pp. 140ff.

¹³ *New Straits Times*, 23/11/1995.

¹⁴ Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, *Kelantan: Universiti Politik Terbuka*, Nilam Puri, Kelantan: Maahad Ad-Dakwah Wal-Imamah, 1995, p. 134.

¹⁵ *Berita Harian*, 17/5/1994; *Berita Harian*, 12/4/1995.

largely controlled by the Federal government, has given a negative response towards the draft. However, there is no doubt that this issue has opened Islamic law to public scrutiny and requires that it be examined thoroughly.

Another step taken by the government has been to promote greater understanding of Islam among non-Muslims. The government believes that Islam is often seen by non-Muslims in the modern context in a negative light. Therefore, in order to clear these perceptions, the government has set up the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM).¹⁶ The main task of this Institute is to promote Islam as a progressive and tolerant.¹⁷ This institute also lays stress upon science and technology as previous Islamic traditions have done. In order to promote greater understanding among the various communities in Malaysia, the institute has organised a dialogue with non-Muslims, and with the business sector. This government sponsored body has a high reputation.

Among non-Muslims, as stated before, there has also been an effort to strengthen their commitment to religion. It is reported as a result of the Islamic resurgence in Malaysia that many groups in Malaysia are trying to form confederations, probably in response to government policy and to the Islamic revival. In an attempt to become more organised, a group among the non-Muslims has formed a committee which comprises Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Confucians, and Taoists (MCCB).¹⁸ This new phenomenon should be seen in a positive way. Through this body, non-Muslims have made a formal response to the Islamisation policy. Not only have they done this, but they have also made suggestions about ways in which integration can be maintained without the implementation of the Islamic legal system.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the position for non-Muslims in Malaysia is much as it was in the period of the early Abbasid in Islamic history.²⁰ They are free to practise their own

¹⁶ *Utusan Malaysia*, 29/7/1997.

¹⁷ *New Straits Times*, 23/3/1994.

¹⁸ Paul Tan Chee Ing, "Muslim-Christian Relations In Peninsular Malaysia", in *Islamochristiana*, 19, 1993, pp.140ff.

¹⁹ Paul Tan Chee Ing, "Muslim-Christian Relations In Peninsular Malaysia", in *Islamochristiana*, 19, 1993, pp.144.

²⁰ See for example, Ali Husni al-Kharbutli, *al-Islam vs ahl al-Dhimmah*, Cairo: al-Majlis al-A'la al-Shu'un al-Islāmiyyah, 1389H/1969M, pp. 143-146; see also, Mat Saad Abd. Rahman, "Kedudukan Orang Bukan Islam Dalam Sejarah Pemerintahan Islam (622M-1924M): Bahagian 2," in Abdul Monir Yaacob and Sarina Othman (eds.), *Pemerintahan Islam Dalam Masyarakat Majmuk*, Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM), 1995, pp. 114-118.

religions and customs. In fact, non-Muslims also hold some positions in the government. Moreover, their rights are protected by the Malaysian Constitution.²¹ The fact is that non-Muslims are deeply worried about the future of their religions and their customs. Some of them believe that the Islamisation policy is one way to promote Islam about other religions and finally to convert non-Muslims to Islam. In addition, Chinese opposition parties, such as the DAP, try to take the opportunity to attract sympathy votes for their party through scare-mongering tactics which cite government Islamisation policies and programmes.

In politics, non-Muslims have a right to express their views and are free to choose whomever they want to be their leader. In fact Malaysian politics operate within a democratic system. Every five years, Malaysia has a general election and political parties are almost always configured along ethnic lines. Every race is represented, especially the Malays as represented by UMNO and PAS; the Chinese as represented by the MCA, the DAP (Democratic Action Party) and GERAKAN; while Indians participate through the MIC, the DAP and GERAKAN. UMNO is clearly a Malay dominated party. However in 1985, before the general election, PAS set up the CCC (Chinese Consultative Council) in order to inform non-Muslims about PAS.²² At the same time, PAS has accepted some of the Chinese Muslims as its members.²³ In fact, PAS is working hard to try and change the image of the party, especially among the non-Muslims. However, this effort seems none too successful in attracting non-Malay voters, but at least it gives some anxiety to the Chinese political party.²⁴ At the same time, the DAP and GERAKAN are also represented by multi-ethnic groups in Malaysia, but the dominant supporting groups are Chinese. The same phenomenon also occurs in the Chinese political party in that it has failed to recruit enough Malay members to provide any realistic balance. That is the nature of Malaysian politics.

In the economic sphere, the Chinese have always been the dominant people. They form the big companies, dominate banking and middle management and largely determine the success of Malaysian economics. In order to try and end the classification of ethnic groups on the basis of their economic activities, the government launched its New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970. The main objective of this policy

²¹ Federal Constitution, compiled by Legal Research Board, Kuala Lumpur : International Law Book Services, 1995, p. 20.

²² *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 29/5/1986.

²³ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 25/4/1985.

²⁴ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 29/5/1986.

was first to eradicate poverty among the people, and second, to abolish racial grouping on the basis of economic activity.²⁵ This policy was said to have emerged as a result of the riots that took place on May 13, 1969. With the introduction of this policy, Malays were given an opportunity to participate actively in business ventures and entrepreneurship. The government wanted to help the Malays to learn about and improve their knowledge and skill in business. At the same time, the normal activities of other ethnic groups were not threatened.

The latest development shows that the government tends to promote a dialogue between religions. In order to implement this, the government has set up IKIM, beginning by organising seminars on various issues which also are of concern to other religions.²⁶ Many representatives of the major religious groups in Malaysia were invited to the seminar. Its purpose was to reduce the gap between Islam and other religions. The scholars who gave talks to IKIM came not only from local places, but also from overseas. IKIM also publishes a magazine and journal as part of its activities. Their research fellows actively participate in seminars and forums through television. However, the issue which IKIM tackles is mainly that of economic development. That is why some Malaysian observers regard IKIM as having been established in order to justify the government programmes. Meanwhile, in Kelantan, the state government has tried to involve the whole society in Muslim festivals and special occasions.²⁷

It is clear that the reality of the ummah in Malaysia is very complex. The ethnic sentiment which forms with the support of politics and its attendant affiliations become more difficult to reconcile with the potential of the ummah. Sometimes, pro-Malay sentiment becomes more important than Islam does. In addition, UMNO, which based its ideology on nationalism, did not try seriously to overcome this problem, while the Islamic opposition party, namely PAS, has become predominantly Malay. Until now, PAS has still not succeeded in getting a sympathetic hearing from non-Malay voters. Finally we may ask, can the ummah be applied at all within Malaysian society?

²⁵ See, Jomo K. Sundram, "Malaysia's New Economic Policy and 'National Unity': Development and Inequality 25 Years After Independence", in Sritua Arief and Jomo K. Sundram (eds.), *The Malaysian Economy and Finance*, Australia: The Southeast Asia Research and Development Institute, 1983, p. 3-34.

²⁶ Ahmad Sarji Abdul Hamid, "Prologue", in Syed Othman Alhabshi and Syed Omar Syed Agil (eds.), *The Role And Influence of Religion in Society*, Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM), 1994, pp.xii.

²⁷ See *Buletin*, Bil: 68/96/Syawal (1)/(2) Mac 1996