

The Existence Of Religious Tolerance In The Multi-Racial Society of Malaysia

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Abstract

In this modern age, similarities and differences play an important role in building a society. It could either unite a society particularly of those that come from various backgrounds of races, cultures and religions or it could create disjunction among them. The situation is mainly caused by a lack of awareness among the society on values such as acceptance and tolerance. Tolerance includes respecting the opinions or thoughts of others as well as helping each other or living side by side regardless of ethnicity, race, religion, and between groups. History shows that tolerance existed and is embodied in many successful nations that live harmoniously despite the differences. This article is to significantly address religious tolerance in history and the development of religious tolerance in Malaysia in order to better understand and improve the current condition of society to live harmoniously despite the differences. The methodology adopted for this article is the qualitative approach which included content analysis, observation as well as particular interviews with prominent academic as well as religious activists who represented different higher education institutions and religious organizations. The finding shows religious tolerance has long existed in history and its existence could be taken as an example among the society in Malaysia in order to improve the level of tolerance and acceptance among each other.

Keywords: religious tolerance, acceptance, religious organizations, national identity, religious diversity, cultural diversity, unity.

INTRODUCTION

History has shown that tolerance creates a society with peace and harmony. The embodiment of good values among society particularly for those who live differently from each other in terms of cultures and religious practices is crucial. It is not only to ensure the society could collectively come together and unite despite many conflicts that could arise as well as any provocations that could affect the unity negatively, but it is also as a value in each individual so that

facing any differences in backgrounds would not be a struggle despite any settings.

Respect the opinions, races and other cultures is important to ensure harmony and peace in society. Many agree that tolerance should be nurtured from a young age. Therefore, it is important for parents and society as a whole to be an example for the younger generation as they grow up to live in a multiracial country. Tolerance is a real strength for a harmonious life especially

when the country is facing various issues and challenges involving race and religion. The younger generation needs to be nurtured with good values because tolerance will not only lead to strength in relationships between races, religions, and social backgrounds but can also promote harmonious life in Malaysia.

In general, cultural diversity among society gives an idea of the complications of balance in identifying and defending the identity of each individual. According to Rozita, Nazri and Ahmad (2011), action in balancing between respecting differences and efforts to achieve national identity requires active management. Difficulties in structuring and maintaining national identity can be seen through the extensive differences in religious and cultural practices as well as the close relationship between religions and races that have become the essence of society, particularly in Malaysia. One way to structure the national identity is to understand the concept of tolerance that has become part of every belief and religion in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research used a method of interviews with four key informants comprised three Muslim activists from different organizations and one academic from a particular higher institution who are experts in activities related to religious tolerance. The interviews provided first-hand information related to the research. (Firdaus W., personal interview, February 13, 2019), (Nicholas S., personal interview, February 14, 2019), (Shah K., personal interview, February 15, 2019), (Jaffary A., personal interview, July 24, 2019). In addition, it proved the significance of having specific discussions on certain implementations. Besides, the observation method was used to understand the differences in society as well as to explore the subject matter directly.

HISTORY OF DIVERSITY IN MALAYSIA

Before independence, Malaysia has become a multicultural country, and to this day, ethnicity remains a major factor underlying the various aspects of the nation (Abdillah, 2010). This stems from the liberal immigration policy that was introduced by the British government through the entry of labour from China and India into the mining and business industries. Although assimilation with the local community can occur, the policy of 'divide and rule' brought by the British Colonial government has created a huge separation gap to the formation of Malaysian society, not only economically, but also involves the development of education and geography.

These differences have had a major impact on the economic position of the *Bumiputera* community as a result of their pattern of involvement in the rural economy which is far behind compared to the mining and business industries dominated by the Chinese and Indians. This has also resulted in long-term effects on socio-economic positions that are becoming unbalanced. Nation-building in Malaysia started after Malaya achieved independence from Britain in 1957. In 1963, Malaya, along with Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore consolidated to form Malaysia.

The continuation of the policies formulated by the British government before independence, as well as the effects of socio-economic imbalances between the *Bumiputera* and non-*Bumiputera* communities, Article 153 was enacted as a commitment by His Highness the Supreme Ruler of Malaysia to the *Bumiputera* community in education, economic development, social welfare and participation in the service of the government through providing a reasonable quota considered by His Highness the Supreme Ruler for positions in such matters. However, the drafting has caused

political tensions in the government involving racism as the main sentiment between *Bumiputera* and non-*Bumiputera* ethnics causing racial riots in Singapore involving Chinese and Malays, also killing 36 people. Later, Singapore left Malaysia in 1965.

The chronology of events involving the issue of socio-economic imbalance has continued to this day. This can be seen through the statistics of the Department of Statistics Malaysia which shows the income gap between ethnic groups that are widening to place the *Bumiputera* ethnicity in the bottom position (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2016). On 13 May 1969, Malaysia once again faced ethnic riots in the same context (Whah and Guan, 2017), but involved a much larger scale of casualties. Following the riots, Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman resigned a few months later, a state of emergency was declared on 16 May 1969 which resulted in the suspension of the Federal Constitution and the country being ruled directly by the His Highness the Supreme Ruler under military law. This incident has become a turning point in the construction and development of the country. Following the riots, the National Consultative Council was formed in 1970 to set positive and practical guidelines on inter-racial cooperation and social integration for the growth of Malaysia's national identity.

In general, the formation aims to ensure that events involving ethnic riots do not happen again. Therefore, *Rukun Negara* was introduced as a tool of unity, which consists of five ambitions based on universal principles for Malaysia as a nation (C. Da Wan, M. Sirat, 2018). This incident also forced the government to introduce assertive action for *Bumiputera* through the New Economic Policy (1971). NEP exists to address the issue of the economic weakness of the Malays (J. C. H. Lee, 2018). In addition, the NEP aims to restructure socio-economic imbalances in Malaysian society and eradicate poverty regardless of ethnicity.

It acts as an affirmative action program to re-engineer Malaysian society towards achieving national unity, harmony, and integrity.

Apart from restructuring the economy from the British heritage structure based on ethnic lines, the implementation of the NEP was also expanded to provide educational opportunities for *Bumiputera*. By addressing these socioeconomic differences, the NEP has also become an aspiration in producing greater inter-ethnic harmony. Although a number of specific economic targets were later achieved, the goal of greater national unity remained uncertain, especially when resentment and inter-ethnic suspicion emerged (Jomo, 2004). Whatever the outcome of the NEP, Islam, politics and the economy will still be linked together in unexpected, and perhaps unpredictable ways (R. Camilleri, 2013).

Although history proves that the economy is a primary source of tension in society, there are other factors that influence the crisis. This can be seen when the government formalized the Malay language as the national language (Wan Norhasniah Wan Husin, 2013). The declaration is clearly stated in Article 152 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia. However, the right to use, learn and develop other languages remains. Despite 64 years of independence, the issue of the use of language and Malay as the national language is still a topic of debate among the different ethnic communities which most of the time invites discord and dissension.

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN MALAYSIA

The value of such tolerance is considered a universal value that is indispensable to ensure the cohesion of a plural society. It has also been widely adopted especially in multicultural countries with the objective of promoting the acceptance of the practices, opinions, and beliefs of others (Oberdiek, 2010). Maurer and Gellera (2020) state that there are many studies that agree on the

position of tolerance as a major subject in early modern times, especially in the fields of philosophy, theology, politics, and law. Examples of tolerance can be found throughout history, but scholars generally found their modern roots in the struggle of religious minorities in the 16th and 17th centuries to achieve religious rights from the oppression of the nation.

“Misunderstanding has potential for conflict. We have May 13 as a bad experience, that must not be re-experienced...so we must have good harmonious co-existence and it must begin with a healthy dialogue and mutual understanding of each other” (Nicholas S., personal interview, February 14, 2019).

The above quote emphasized that the creation of humanity is to submit the purpose of getting to know and understand each other as a way to foster a good relationship between people of different backgrounds. As a country with a multicultural society comprised of differences in many areas such as races, religions, ethnicity which involves differences in the first language, dialect, and cultures, almost everything is interrelated. For example, religion and race are highly associated. Being Malay means being a Muslim. Even though such a relationship has been established, it is not necessarily be true. In this case, being Muslim, however, does not determine one's religion, as well as any other preferences and associations.

“People abused religion. It is not religious intolerance, I would rather say, dissatisfaction. Racial and religious

dissatisfaction” (Shah K., personal interview, February 15, 2019).

Based on the above quote, the association between races and religions are heavily impacting the growth of society, particularly on issues related to races, which most of the time, when involving Malays or any other races, would always be twisted to the religious expanse. This can be seen through a few incidents related to races, such as the issues that have occurred at the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple which were initially known as an internal management issue, ended as a life-threatening riot. This led to religious provocations and racist sentiments related to the Hindu religious symbol which is a temple (Berita Harian, 26/11/2018). Since these religious issues are interpreted differently according to their personal and social interests, it has resulted in divisions of society (Zawawi et al, 2019).

In 2019, calligraphy issues were also raised by the Federation of Malaysian Chinese School Managers Association (Dong Zong) which claimed the government's action in introducing the art of calligraphy as additional content in the Primary School Standard Curriculum (KSSR) as an Islamization agenda. This statement was followed by various reactions that are racist and contain religious provocations (Berita Harian, 13/8/2019). Even though calligraphy is a form of cultural appreciation, the impact of unnecessary association has actually burdened the religious institution that, to begin with, has no portion in generating the establishment.

It can be observed that religious institutions bear the burden and the impact of the criticism of the government that is considered prioritizing the Malays and Muslims in building places of worship compared to non-Muslims. This has caused dissatisfaction among non-Muslims, which

unnecessarily bringing races card to the table although structurally, is understandable. An example is a criticism of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) against the Kelantan government which was late in approving the construction work of the Hindu cemetery. There are also some local authorities that prevent non-Muslims from placing Christian symbols on buildings, schools, classrooms, and so on. However, the granting of land to Buddhist institutions to build worship centers is evidence of the increase and recognition of religious freedom in Malaysia (The Star, 9/5/2017).

The increases in issues related to disturbance of religious symbols such as mosques, churches, and temples with petrol bombs and raid cases could give negative impacts on religious tolerance (Zawawi, et al., 2020). In addition, the quarrel that took place involving members of the congregation at the mosque during Friday prayers and a Chinese car driver also gave a picture of the current tolerance of the community. The quarrel is believed to have occurred when traffic jams and obstructions made it difficult for a car to move. This causes the driver to press the horn non-stop while the Friday prayers are running (The Star, 7/5/2017). Although both parties have made an open apology and reconciled peacefully, the incident affected the reactions of people from various backgrounds with endless racist sentiments and religious provocation that could disrupt the unity, well-being, and harmony of the country.

Discussions on tolerance have been around for centuries. The definition of tolerance evolved with the development of the times. However, there are always a definite definition of tolerance based on the background of the place and society. The definition of the concept of tolerance in this study includes politeness that involves treating others with respect without necessarily accepting the values, beliefs,

practices, or importance of these practices to their respective ways of life. The author aspires to preserve the meaning of tolerance from a radical sense; which demands too little, as well as an acceptance; which demands too much. However, acceptance of existence is highly emphasized (Mohd Zawawi, T. S. N. A. T., Zain, A. D. M., & Embong, R., 2020). It can be understood from the quote below;

“Religious tolerance is that we can talk about the differences and disagree respectfully. We can talk about the differences but yet, we can disagree respectfully. Rather than, you seem like very tolerant to the people, to that particular person right in front of them, but then behind them, you are spreading lies and rumours about them. But if I disagree with you, I will tell you this is the part that I disagree with you, respectfully, no insults but we can talk about it. This is tolerance. Tolerance is not about what we have to do and accept one another’s a view, not necessary” (Firdaus W., personal interview, February 13, 2019).

This study emphasizes tolerance without compromising any beliefs. This position of tolerance occupies the middle ground between the interpretation of traditional and contemporary terms. It involves behavior and reaction, whether involving consent, acceptance, or defending something from individuals with background differences. Such behaviors and reactions are interspersed with politeness, good manners, good citizenship identity, concern for the well-being of society through tolerance, although conflicts and tensions in society are inevitable.

CONCLUSION

Initiatives taken by society in understanding religious matters, especially in this contemporary century in reality has opened the door to new criticisms, defences, and interpretations of certain beliefs. Conflict

involving differences of opinion will shape society through two main situations. If society is educated to always be tolerant and concerned with their choices, then the aspiration of unity and harmony of the country is not something that is impossible. However, if society prefers to evaluate differences as an instrument to justify extreme attitudes in religion, they will remain ignorant of the existence and importance of unity among society.

Although various structural guidelines on unity issues have been carried out, such things are still happening. Therefore, in understanding tolerance as a universal value, the formation of national identity is an effort in finding common ground. This is to enable the community to face the crisis involving religion by referring to similarities rather than differences as is happening now. It can also maintain the uniqueness the multiculturalism in Malaysian society by applying the national identity formed based on the value of tolerance as a point of similarity for each religion, as well as humanity.

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