

Living in The “Veranda of Mecca” Political Contestation and Religious Tolerance in Kelantan, Malaysia¹

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Abstrak

Sebagai basis utama kebangkitan Islam di Malaysia sekaligus kubu terpenting Parti al-Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), Kelantan secara populer sering digambarkan sebagai negara bagian yang miskin toleransi terhadap kaum non-Muslim. Namun, penggambaran ini menyesatkan. Isu utama di Kelantan adalah persaingan politik antara UMNO (United Malays National Organization, partai yang berkuasa di tingkat nasional) dan PAS, daripada perkara Muslim-non-Muslim. Kaum non-Muslim, yang diperkirakan berjumlah sekitar 6 persen dari total penduduk negara bagian Kelantan yang berjumlah sekitar 1,6 juta jiwa, dalam banyak hal menikmati toleransi kehidupan beragama. Artikel ini mendiskusikan bagaimana kaum non-Muslim memaknai ‘toleransi beragama’ yang mereka nikmati itu. Alih-alih melihatnya sebagai sesuatu yang terberi, mereka memandangnya sebagai buah positif yang tidak sengaja muncul dari persaingan antara UMNO dan PAS. Kendati menjadi minoritas, suara mereka dalam pemilu sangat berarti dan bisa menentukan kemenangan satu pihak atas pihak yang lain karena persaingan antara UMNO dan PAS itu senantiasa berlangsung ketat. Itulah sebabnya guna mengambil hati mereka, baik UMNO maupun PAS sama-sama menawarkan jaminan perlindungan kepada mereka. Jaminan itulah yang pada gilirannya membentuk preferensi politik kaum non-Muslim dalam pemilihan umum. Dengan demikian sebagai minoritas mereka tidak harus menjadi yang tertindas atau yang menindas, karena suara mereka yang sangat signifikan dalam konstelasi politik yang ada.

Kata kunci: kontestasi politik, toleransi keagamaan, Kelantan, Malaysia.

Introduction

The question of the relation between Muslims (as the majority) and non-Muslims (as the minorities) has been increasingly crucial since the event of September 11 happened. It is curious how both parties live together in the

1 Special thanks are due to my academic counterparts, A/P Sumit K. Mandal and A/P Norani Othman. Both are staff members of my host institution, the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (*Institut Kajian Malaysia dan Antarabangsa*), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (IKMAS-UKM) during my fellowship in Malaysia (March – September 2007).

shared public space. It is such a question that this study is concerned with. Taking the case of Kelantan, traditionally called the “Veranda of Mecca” of Malaysia due to not only its predominantly Muslim population, but also its long historical root and stronghold of Islamist party in Malaysia. This study aims at achieving a better understanding of how Muslims as the majority deal with the non-Muslim as the minorities, and/or how the latter posit themselves in a state obsessed with Islamic law (*shari’a*) and anything Islamic affairs. Kelantan as a *locus* is then a sort of case to look at how the relation of both parties is understood and practiced. This study thus explores various aspects of the society to examine the possibilities and limitations of such interreligious relation. Consequently, grasping the contexts of the locality is of primarily importance.

By contextualizing the issue, this study does not intend to offer a generalized understanding on the nature of Muslims – non-Muslims relation, but rather to explore how particular contexts shape the relation of both parties. This sort of understanding would enable one to avoid the trap of being either easily judgmental or extremely defensive – one condition which could be counter-productive to the possibility of enhancing the interreligious dialog and harmony in a genuine sense.

This paper is organized as follows. Firstly, it will discuss the theoretical framework on the ‘majority’-‘minority’ relation. This will help not only to make sense of, but also to locate the case in question within the broader theoretical discussion. Secondly, it will describe a brief historical background of Kelantan, the making of PAS (*Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*, All Malaysian Islamic Party) and its rivalry with the ruling party of the Federation UMNO (United Malays National Organizations), and the contested issue of “Islamic state” in Kelantan. These features would present the contexts upon which the non-Muslims posit themselves. Thirdly, it will feature how the Muslims deal with the non-Muslims, and/or how the non-Muslims posit themselves in Kelantan. Everyday life experiences as observed and somewhat anecdotal information collected during my field research in the state from the late of March to the mid of June 2007, will set up this section. The data were gathered from interviews with various informants.² Finally, it will present a closing remark, showing how being non-Muslims mean in a state obsessed with ‘Islamic agenda’ but witnessing a tight political contestation among the Muslim-based political parties.

Majority-Minority Relation: A Theoretical Framework

Based on the equilibrium of power relation, three patterns of majority-

² Since this study does not apply a quantitative method, number of informants does not so significantly matter. The aim is not collecting data with a high degree of ‘validity’, but the richness of nuances of the gathered information.

minority relation can be discerned. First, the situation where the minorities are oppressed and persecuted. Second, the situation in which the minority in question turns oppressor and proceeds to establish its hegemony over the numerically superior but militarily helpless host society. The third pattern, where ways are sought and means devised with a view to making it possible for minorities and majorities to coexist peacefully and living in conditions of mutual respect ('Abd al-Rahim, 1997: 1).

These patterns are only a model by which one can conceptualize the phenomenon observed. Yet, it is not the aim of this study to test which one closely fits the case in concern. These patterns are presented just to show that the notion of "minority" does not necessarily signify a group numerically smaller in number than the majority group, as majority and minority are "primarily socio-political concepts" (Hussain, 1997: 3), and "numbers become secondary" (Ansari, 1996: xiii).

The relation between the majority and the minority should then be grasped in the context of power relation rather than in the number as such. However, power relation does not necessarily refer to the one between the majority and minority. It could happen within the majority group itself, rather than between the majority and the minority. Therefore, being a majority does not necessarily mean homogenous. One (or even more) aspect of life can significantly split the majority group, where it is much more crucial than the one(s) making the boundaries between the majority and the minorities. The same thing can likely happen to the minority.

In such a constellation of power relation, being a minority could be neither the oppressed nor the oppressor, nor simply coexist peacefully with the majority. However, it is not the intent of this study to search for a new model. Rather it only offers another way of seeing the majority - minority relation, in which the economic term of *externality* is perhaps the best concept to use to grasp the case better.

By definition *externality* is an unpriced effect of not a deliberate creation but of an unintended by product of some otherwise legitimate activity (Mishan, 1981: 133). One is not involved in but affected by what other parties do. It may be a benefit or a loss. These external effects are also termed third-party effects (Pinch, 1985: 80). In the context of majority - minority relation, the *externality* is negative when the minority becomes the very victim of the conflict between the two factions of the majority, for they are blamed for the rift, or placed as the mediated target by one or both of the factions. They can likely be termed 'passive losers'. While the *externality* is positive when the minority gets benefit from the rift. The benefit could be in such forms as being untouched by the conflict, or being acknowledged since both factions of the majority group need their support to win over the other. They can be termed as 'passive winners'.

As I would like to feature in another part of this article, the non-Muslim minorities in Kelantan are in such a strategic position since the crucial issue is a tight political contestation between the two factions of the Muslim majority, rather than between the Muslims and the non-Muslims as such. In this case, number matters not due to the power the minority likely has, but rather due to what the majority expects from them. Hence, the minorities become the ‘winners’ of the contest they are not involved in. This has made their position uniquely different from their counterparts elsewhere in Malaysia.

Kelantan: Political Rivalry and the Issue of “Islamic State”

Located in the northeastern coast of Malaysian peninsula, Kelantan is a distinctive state socially, culturally, and politically since the percentage of its Malay population is higher than the rest of the peninsula. As Clive S. Kessler (1978: 27) notes, its population in 1970 was 686,266, of whom 92.8 percent were Malays.³ This is due to the fact that, unlike in western coast of the peninsula, British colonial rulers did not encourage the commercial development or non-Malay immigration. The agrarian nature of its society, therefore, did not change significantly. Neither did the social structure of the Kelantanese society, being divided into the privileged elite enjoying a mutually advantageous relation to the British and a peasant majority shielded by its superiors from direct contact with the modern influences then transforming Malaya (Kessler, 1978: 31). This ‘class divide’ has shaped the political rift of the two Malay-based parties, i.e., UMNO and PAS.

1. Political Contestation between PAS and UMNO

Since the independence of Malaysia in 1957, Kelantan has been the PAS’s stronghold. As Mohammad Agus Yusoff (2006: 102) notes, scholars explaining why PAS has been so successful in this state have used religion to account for its appeal. The driving force behind PAS’s electoral support was derived from the manipulation of religious sentiments among rural and religiously devout Malay communities.

Employing religion for winning the mass support was inseparable from the formation of PAS itself. Formerly, it was the religious wing of UMNO. Many leaders in UMNO’s bureau of religious affairs were dissatisfied with the top party leaders’ policy which they perceived to have given much concession to the non-Malays and too cooperative with the British colonial rulers. In addition, they were disappointed with the top party leaders’ lack of

3 According to the National Census of Malaysia in 2000, the population of Kelantan was approximately 1.5 million, of whom 92.5 percent were Malays, and in terms of religious affiliations, 94.5 percent were Muslims. While the national population of Malaysia was approximately 21.8 million, of whom 65.1 percent were Malays and other ‘bumiputeras’ (‘sons of soil’). (The non-Malay ‘bumiputeras’ are the so-called indigenous population of Sarawak and Sabah in East Malaysia). While in terms of religious affiliations, 60.4 percent were Muslims. The percentage of both Malays and Muslims has not changed significantly.

concern in Islam. Therefore they broke away from UMNO to form the *Majlis Agama Tertinggi Malaya* (Malayan Highest Religious Council) in 1947.⁴

A year later, it was transformed into *Persatuan Islam Se-Malaya* (Pan-Malayan Islamic Union), representing the convergence of elements wishing to establish an Islamic state. Since its inception, UMNO had viewed the formation of an Islamic party as a major threat to its popularity within the Malay community. Yet, it could not prevent the Islamic radicals within UMNO to break away. In 1951 PAS was formed. UMNO then had to incorporate a religious program to compete with PAS (Verma, 2002: 32).

In Kelantan, PAS reached out widely to Malays in *kampongs* by campaigning on an uncompromisingly pro-Malay platform. On the contrary, UMNO leaders campaigned on the strength of their political record in getting independence from the British and their success in overcoming the Communist insurgency. Eventhough UMNO recognized that ordinary Malay villagers had been the main source of its strength, they chose not to exploit parochial issues to win the popular support. It was more concerned about the need to strengthen inter-communal cooperation rather than appealing to communal sentiments (Yusoff, 2006: 105-6).

Obviously that PAS portrayed itself as the advocate of Malays and Islam, while UMNO as the promoter of “*bangsa*” (nation), implying the incorporation of the non-Malays. However, as the political articulation of their special ethnic interests was persistently reformulated within the Malay community, the on-going struggle between the *bangsa*-minded and the *shari’*a-minded was intense. The former were often accused of following secular, un-Islamic laws; the latter were accused of being dogmatic and bigoted (Verma, 2002: 45). In short, PAS and UMNO leaders searched for issues to discredit one another (Yusoff, 2006: 108).

In revitalizing the party, PAS leaders stressed that Muslims needed a strong Islamic opposition party in order to protect the position of Malays as well as of Islam. In *kampongs*, PAS revived the *kafir-mengkafir* (infidel) issue and warned the ordinary villagers that while voting for UMNO might get them development, it might also bring retribution in the world hereafter. Such arguments did have their impact. In some remote areas they split local communities into two camps: *the believers* (PAS supporters) and *the infidels* (UMNO followers) (Yusoff, 2006: 131).⁵ Since then, the relationship between

4 UMNO itself was founded in 1946. Due to such radical aspirations, these elements of Malay nationalist movement were called ‘leftist nationalists’, regardless of their Islamic tone of thoughts. See Saat (2007: 230). On a study specifically concerned with UMNO in Kelantan, see Kamarudin (2004).

5 Mohammad Agus Yusoff (2006: 140) even informed that as a consequence of the approach of the new PAS leadership, the animosities between PAS and UMNO supporters became greatly exacerbated. In many *kampongs* of heavily Malay populated areas, for instance, two *suraus* (small mosques for praying only, like chapels for Christians) and *kuburs* (graveyards) were set up, one for UMNO members and another one for those supporting PAS. In his personal observation, he even found a divorced couple who ended their marriage after the husband, a PAS follower, discovered that the wife’s father was an UMNO supporter.

the political contestation and the issue of “Islamic state” has been more intense.

2. Islamic Resurgence and the Issue of “Islamic State”

Initially the rivalry between UMNO and PAS was indeed the contestation between the “secular nationalists” and the “Islamist nationalists”. However, such a perspective is no longer simply applicable since UMNO has coopted the Islamisation agenda as well. What has happened is then a war of claim upon whose Islam is “more truthful”.

One important point to understand the change of the issue(s) of the rivalry is the Islamic resurgence in Malaysia since the late 1970s, partly due to the impact of the Revolution of Iran. This has to be understood in relation to a changing environment. As already observed, there is a close relation between Islam and Malay ethnicity, and between that ethnicity and politico-economic situation. Hence, began the Malaysian Islamist quest, helping the *ummah* (Muslim community) to cement its old solidarity (Batumalai, 1996: 56).

The Islamic resurgence was then a moment when the Malays reasserted their cultural membership through a religious identity. In the Malaysian context where all Malays are Muslims and Islam is viewed as a Malay institution, calls for the promotion of Islam were synonymous with the promotion of Malay interests. Islam was used as a suitable vehicle for ‘striving for the Malay rights’ to acquire and sustain political legitimacy and to mobilize the masses. Being the initiator of playing the “Islam” card, PAS was then in a position to claim as the defender of the Islamic faith and the Malay rights, even if UMNO coopted (as well as contained) Islamization as a state project (Mohamad, 2001: 116-17; Verma, 2002: 95).

In late 1980s the contest on ‘who is more Islamic’ was even increasingly confrontational as by the time witnessed the transformation and radicalization of PAS politics under a new group of leaders like Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, Fadzil Mohamed Noor, and Abdul Hadi Awang. PAS became more uncompromising as more militant activists, pressured the PAS leadership to adopt a purer Islamic stance. For the first time, PAS declared its stand as an Islamic party with the objective of creating an Islamic state (Verma, 2002: 107; Hilley, 2001: 183).

On the other side, UMNO’s campaign was intimidating. They promised further economic development for Kelantan, with the threat that if PAS were to win control of the state government, the state would be discriminated against in the distribution of federal development funding. Such tactics appeared to have a reverse effect. Many *kampong* folks who earlier would have supported UMNO changed their stands. UMNO was heavily defeated in Kelantan (Yusoff, 2006: 160-61).

Kelantan was then under the PAS's rule. It could sustain its victories in the subsequent general elections (1994, 1999 and 2004), despite UMNO's attempt to keep delegitimizing PAS's rule. UMNO's first striking effort to delegitimize PAS was dealing with the issue of "*Hudud*" laws (Syariah Criminal Code Bill)⁶ as proposed by PAS. Although passed in Kelantan as a State Act in 1993, the introduction of *hudud* laws requires Federal approval to become constitutionally enshrined; and that proposal was rejected to legislate in the parliament as the Malay community lacked a two-thirds majority (Yusoff, 2006: 181-85; Hilley, 2001: 191-92).⁷

Even though the PAS's proposal of *hudud* laws had failed to legislate, UMNO used the issue of *hudud* to portray PAS as an ultra-conservative Islam and Kelantan as the land of ultra-conservative Muslims.⁸ Yet, it has failed to delegitimize the PAS's rule. Even if in the aftermath of September 11, UMNO had blackened PAS as an Islamic party akin to the Taliban and allowed for detention without trial of scores of alleged Islamic militants (Mohamad, 2003: 82), but PAS remains in control of Kelantan.

Being in control of Kelantan, PAS had an authority to implement its ideas on 'Islamic state'. However, much of what passed was in reality an attempt to introduce Islamic modifications to localize practice and culture. For example, revenue derived from *haram*⁹ sources, such as dog licenses and pig-rearing, are separated from the *halal*¹⁰ ones and used for non-Muslims only. Alcohol is not banned, but it is strictly for non-Muslims only. Traditional art performances are allowed only after their "un-Islamic" elements are sorted out. Muslim dress codes are introduced and it is compulsory for Muslim women to wear headscarf (*tudung*). Shortly the Islamization agenda was carried out through various forms of civil exchange and adaptation (Hilley, 2001: 188).

It is under such 'Islamist' regime the non-Muslims in Kelantan have been experiencing their everyday life. However, as UMNO's ambition to regain Kelantan persists, they have been living under the rivalry between PAS and UMNO as well. What has happened to the non-Muslims then?

6 Among the punishments that the Kelantan government could impose under such a law were the amputation of hands for thieves, the administration of one-hundred strokes by cane for fornicators, and the stoning to death of adulterers. Because of the severity of these punishments, rigid evidentiary provisions relating to the number of witnesses, their character and the content of their statements needed to be met. (Part I, *Enakmen Kanun Jenayah Syariah* [II] 1993, as cited in Yusoff, 2006: 181-82).

7 The debate on the controversy of *hudud* law has been well-compiled in Tarmizi Mohd Jam (1999).

8 Such an image is still effective to many people outside Kelantan. A Malay Kelantanese informant told that quite often when he visited other parts of Malaysia, he faced a question: "Hi, how could you escape from the 'hudud' land?". He knows that it is not a completely serious question. But, it indicates that the UMNO's propaganda on associating Kelantan with "hudud" has been so effective in the minds of most Malaysians (Interview with Mr. Wan Manan bin Wan Muda, Kota Bharu, March 26, 2007).

9 It means strictly prohibited in Islam.

10 It is the antonym of "haram".

Living in the “Veranda of Mecca”

It probably sounds ridiculous to raise a question of the relation between the Muslims and the non-Muslims in Kelantan, since the more crucial issue has been the rivalry between PAS and UMNO. Not a few scholars (see, for example, Embong, 2001: 70; Yusoff, 2006: 152; Bakar, 2001: 66; Khoo, 2006: 145; Kessler, 1978: 241) have argued that there is ‘no problem’ between the Muslims and the non-Muslims in Kelantan. This is based on the fact that Kelantan has never witnessed any single violent conflict on religious (or ethnic) differences.¹¹ Besides, the non-Muslims (or non-Malays) are able to adapt to the local cultures, mainly the Kelantanese dialect.¹²

Such argument is not wrong. Yet, what is missing is what the ‘no problem’ response means to both the Muslims and non-Muslims. Exploring how both Muslims and non-Muslims define this ‘no problem’ response could reveal what is likely going on ‘below the surface’. In addition, many parts of the popular portrayals about Kelantan should be rectified, as the state has witnessed various changes after the 2004 elections, where PAS had only won a slight victory over UMNO.¹³ A proper portrayal will help to understand how the non-Muslims posit themselves.

1. Kelantan: Some Recent Socio-Cultural Features

Associating Kelantan with “*hudud*” laws to “*hudud* land” is apparently shaped by UMNO’s portrayal of the state. This portrayal is, in fact, ambivalent in effect. On one side it has obviously dismayed the image of PAS as the ruling party of the state. Even as the discourse of “*hudud*” has been already associated with the notorious Taliban’s regime of Afghanistan in 1990s, one is easily tempted to put PAS onto the same table as Taliban. However, unlike Taliban which quite often produced horrible news related to the implementation of “*hudud*” laws, there has never been such news from Kelantan. On the other side, this has attracted outsiders and foreign journalists, researchers, travelers, etc. to know personally ‘what is really going on’ in Kelantan.¹⁴ As one finds that

11 The racial riot of May 1969 did not affect Kelantan. A number of Kelantanese Malay informants whom I interviewed were proud of it. However, as is already known, the riot took place in Kuala Lumpur and its suburbs only, not spread to other states of the peninsula. Yet, its effects might have been felt nationally.

12 Abdul Rahman Embong (2001: 69), for instance, emphasizes this adaptability of the local Chinese to the Malay environment as an evidence to argue that interethnic and interfaith relations in the state ‘have been generally harmonious’. He explains that this is partly because Kelantan Malays do not perceive them as a political or economic threat. While this is not undeniable, it has not touched upon how they – the non-Muslims – make sense of the ‘harmony’ there, and how they posit themselves amidst the Muslim majority.

13 In the 2004 elections, of 45 and 14 seats for the state council and national parliament respectively, PAS gained 24 and 5, while the UMNO-led National Alliance gained 21 and 9. See *ibid.*, p. 76.

14 An executive member of PAS in Kelantan said that UMNO’s negative propaganda of Kelantan has made many people – both non-Kelantanese Malaysians and non-Malaysians -- curious about what really happens there. When people personally find that ‘nothing happens’ there, they would realize that UMNO’s stories about Kelantan are cheating. (Interview with Mr. Wan Mahmud, the director of human resources development of PAS, in Kota Bharu, April 28, 2007).

hings are not as bad as one might have heard of, one would likely say that Kelantan's "*Hudud*" is a sort of propaganda. The issue of "*hudud*" has been employed by UMNO to construct a negative image of PAS, at least as it is opined by PAS people.¹⁵

However, the problem for PAS is that UMNO's use of the issue of "*hudud*" persists, since "*hudud*" in Kelantan has been "a law in waiting" (Ahmad, 2007: 226). Seen from the 'zero sum game' politics, UMNO's attempt to immortalize the issue of Kelantan's "*hudud*" laws can be understood as a revenge, since initially PAS used this issue as a trump card *par excellence*, "not dissimilar to the gambit of either you are with us or against us" (Ahmad, 2007: 219). Unsurprisingly that the issue of "*hudud*" laws has turned to the interest of UMNO, but in the purpose of undermining PAS.

Any foreign observer might have such an impression after living in Kelantan for some time. They would find that 'odd' stories such as the separation of sexes in queues in supermarkets, the arrest of a couple who have no marital relationship but showing personal intimacy in public places (*khalwat*), the arrest of Muslim men who do not go to the mosques for the Friday prayers, etc., are not completely true. One can find the reason partly by referring to the result of the 2004 elections, when PAS won a slight victory over UMNO for the state council. It could sustain its rule but it had to compromise on many businesses. It indicates that PAS is not only defensive, but also, as seen in its 'relaxing' policies on "Islamization" agenda in the last three years,¹⁶ desperate in facing the next elections.¹⁷

Despite its "conservative radicalism" in the sense of 'revitalizing Islam for the apprehension of mundane social experience but under the conditions that required doctrinal reinvention' (Khoo, 2006: 142), PAS cannot reject the presence of 'icons of globalization' such as shopping malls and fast food restaurants. Such public places are even a site where the state government

15 PAS people seem to have been accustomed to listening to foreign researchers' amazement on the fact that what happen in Kelantan is not as bad as what they have heard before. When I told such amazement, a PAS state board member said that 'almost every foreign scholar coming to Kelantan has said the same thing'. What he did not say explicitly was that foreign scholars having an interest in Kelantan have now realized that what UMNO tells about Kelantan is full of lies. (Interview with Mr. Mohd Amar, Pasir Puteh, Kelantan, April 21, 2007).

16 These 'relaxing' policies are such as the issuing of licenses to reopen amusement premises like snooker houses, karaokes, bowling centres, etc. An informant of PAS member certainly denied that this indicates that PAS is worried to be abandoned by its supporters among the young people. He said that these 'relaxing' policies are based on the PAS' confidence that people have already understood PAS' platform on 'Islamic state'. (Interview with Mr. Mohd Amar, Pasir Puteh, April 21, 2007).

17 According to a prominent Malaysian public intellectual Chandra Muzaffar, seizing power through the ballot-box is their primary goal. This is why PAS is prepared to adjust to the agendas of its Pakatan Rakyat partners, the DAP and PKR in order to maximize non-Muslim/non-Malay support in the coming General Election. Its motto is simple: power first; dogma afterwards. See Chandra Muzaffar, "PAS and the Islamic State", in http://www.justinternational.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4564:pas-and-the-islamic-state&catid=41:press-statements&Itemid=122 (Accessed on September 17, 2011).

cannot impose the Islamic religious practices.¹⁸

In spite of some ‘relaxing’ policies on things previously prohibited or strictly controlled, the state government in October 2005 declared Kota Bharu as “*Bandar Raya Islam*” (an Islamic City). A number of measures following this declaration have been taken such as putting placards on public interests referring to the *Qur’an* or *Hadith*,¹⁹ labeling drugs as the “enemy of Islam”, etc. In short, this declaration was aimed at making Kota Bharu *look* more Islamic. Obsession on appearances is more dominant here than searching for substantially alternative measures on the Islamization agenda. This is due to the fact that the agenda, to many extents, has been taken over by UMNO’s idea of “*Islam Hadhari*” just after the latter took over the control of neighboring Terengganu from PAS in 2004.²⁰

Kelantan after the 2004 elections has been more Islamic, but in its appearances rather than in its substances. Perhaps it is ironical that many ‘odd’ or ‘horrible’ stories dealing with the Islamic practices have been deteriorating, in a time when its appearances are more Islamic. How has such irony shaped the relation between Muslims and non-Muslims? How has the ‘no problem’ response been understood within such a change by both groups of religious communities?

2. The ‘no problem’ response according to the Muslims

In one of his Friday morning sermons, the Chief Minister of Kelantan Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat said:

Unlike in the present time where humankind is categorized into hundreds of nation, during the Prophet Mohammad’s era humankind could be classified into three types based on their faith. First were the Muslims;

18 In “KB Mall” – the only shopping mall in Kota Bharu, started its operation just in early 2005 – for instance, several times I noticed that during the Friday prayer’s time not a few Malay men – who must be Muslims – kept playing bowling in the bowling premise, even though there is a notice board next to the ticket booth stating that “Muslim men are strictly prohibited to be in the bowling premise on Fridays from 1.00 to 2.00 pm”. This means that, at least in this case, the ‘syariah’ or ‘Islamic law’ – if such a prohibition could be considered as a part of the ‘syariah’ – does not work (effectively).

19 A rule on banning littering, for instance, refers to an article in the *Hadith* that “Cleanliness is a part of faith”. This placard is found everywhere. Placard on promoting “friendliness to the visitors” in the context of promoting “Visit Kelantan Year 2008” is opened by a citation from the *Hadith* saying that “welcoming, greeting and feeding the visitors is a part of religious imperative”. There are many more placards on such public interests which I have documented in photographs.

20 Under the control of UMNO with its “Islam Hadhari” slogan, meaning “modern and progressive Islam”, everywhere in Terengganu one can easily find posters and billboards saying “*dulu hanya mimpi kini menjadi realiti*” (in the past it was just a dream, now it has turned to reality) amidst the picture of various development projects such as new mosques, hospitals, school buildings, while at the corner is the picture of the chief minister of the state, Dato’ Mohd Idris Yusoh. Such words are clearly aimed at undermining PAS’s rule over Terengganu from 1999 to 2004, which is portrayed to dream only (Personal observation in Terengganu on April 10-12, 2007).

second were the infidels; third were the hypocrites. The infidels were indeed the enemies of the Muslims. They had their own space, separate from the Muslims. Yet, Muslims did not have to be hostile to them, if they were not in hostile to the Muslims. Even both could co-exist based on some mutual agreement and respect.

Now, the ones whom every Muslim has to be cautious with are the hypocrites. Why? Because the hypocrites claim as our fellow Muslims, but they stab us from behind. (The audience was then laughing...)²¹

If the so-called 'infidels' are non-Muslims, the citation above reaffirms what this paper has discussed, i.e., the Muslims have no problem with the non-Muslims as long as the latter do not make any trouble with the former. The problem to the Muslims is the existence of the 'hypocrites', i.e., the ones who claim to be fellow Muslims but betray the former. Perhaps one can say that the problem between the Muslims and the non-Muslims is potential, while the problem between the Muslims and the 'hypocrites' is always already real, so that it is much more crucial. It is such a crucial problem that in another sermon Nik Aziz emphasized that 'being a hypocrite is being the evil *par excellence*':

Don't be a hypocrite. Why? Because how evil the infidel is, it is much more evil to be a hypocrite. Like the Jews. They claimed to be the faithful of the Holy Books, but they betrayed their own prophets, including Prophet Isa.²²

By the emphasis on 'not being a hypocrite', the relation between the Muslims and non-Muslims is then secondary.²³ However, it does not necessarily mean that PAS has put aside this issue. In its official website, PAS publishes an article concerning with the position of non-Muslims within the Islamic state. It says that non-Muslims living in an Islamic state have a number of rights, and the state has the duty to protect their rights. One of these rights is to practice their religious beliefs. By this point, one can say that there is a religious freedom within Islamic state. However, the state sets a number of prohibitions for the non-Muslims. One of these is the banning of demonstrating non-Islamic religious symbols in the centers of Islamic City.²⁴

21 Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat's public sermon on Friday, March 30, 2007. It is easy to understand why the audience were laughing if one knows the context of political rivalry between PAS and UMNO. It is the style of Nik Aziz's rhetoric in his speeches. He never insults particular individuals or parties. He only mentions, such as, 'a group of people have planted a sense of hostility' ... And, his audience would immediately know whom he means. On Nik Aziz's style of rhetoric, see Sulaiman (1999: 57-58).

22 Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat's public sermon on Friday, April 6, 2007.

23 Cf. Kessler (1978: 241).

24 See www.pas.org.my

Such normative rules have been a common reference by the Muslims in dealing with the non-Muslims. Political activists, either affiliating to UMNO or PAS, shared such a perception as well. However, to them this perception is based on political calculation rather than on the norm as such. According to them non-Muslims in Kelantan are potential supporters to their parties. Realizing that the contestation between PAS and UMNO in every election is almost always tight, the non-Muslims’ votes can significantly affect the result of the elections, where in the final analysis the fate of the government could merely depend on the margin of one or two seats.²⁵ However, their references are different. To the UMNO activists, their reference is the Federal Constitution,²⁶ which states that even though Islam is the religion of the Federation, other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation (The Federal Constitution of Malaysia, Article 3 [1]). While for the PAS people, their reference is the *Qur’an* and *Hadith*, which say that ‘my faith is what my faith is, your faith is what your faith is’, implying that non-Muslims have to be protected within the “Islamic area” (*Dar’ul Islam*).

One key word arises in such opinions, i.e., ‘to protect’. If it is a shared perception among the Muslims, according to a Muslim feminist Salbiah Ahmad (2007: 353), the mindset of Muslims concerning with the non-Muslims reflects “the politics of empire”, which sees non-Muslims not as equal citizens, but rather as the “protected other”. Protection is thus not the right the non-Muslims deserve to, but rather as the virtue of the protector. However, due to somewhat pragmatism for the sake of their survival, such a point of view is not completely adopted by non-Muslims in Kelantan.

3. The ‘no problem’ response according to the non-Muslims

Pragmatism is perhaps the most proper word to feature the ‘*psyche*’ of the non-Muslims in Kelantan. It is a way of seeing things based on practicality, in the sense whether a thing works or not. Formerly it was indeed a form of compromise, as it has to sacrifice parts of the so-called religious convention. However, as pragmatism has been normalized, it has turned to be a ‘new convention’.

In Kelantan, one of the best examples to feature such turn is the non-Muslims’ adaptation to the PAS’s idea of “Holy Day”. Since PAS took over the rule of the state from the National Alliance in 1990, it has determined Friday as the ‘Holy Day’, in the sense of praying day, while Saturday as the holiday. (It has adopted five work days of the week, i.e., from Sunday to

25 A number of scholars have identified the existence of non-Malays (or non-Muslims) in Kelantan as ‘swing voters’, which can significantly determine or affect the result of the elections. See, for example, Khoo (2003: 136; 2006: 145), Mohammad Agus Yusoff (2006: 164), while Kessler (1978: 241) terms ‘Sino-Malay antagonism as secondary’.

26 Interview with Cik Gu Mat, a retired secondary school teacher who consistently supported UMNO. (April 23, 2007).

Thursday, while in other parts of Malaysia, the weekdays are from Monday to half-day of Saturday). PAS' decision to put Friday as the praying day is certainly biased of Islamic tradition. Yet, since it is also the best time for non-Muslims to organize religious gatherings or services, they also adopt Fridays as their praying day.

It is no surprise then that all religious communities hold religious rituals or gatherings on Fridays. The Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians go to their worship places on Fridays. To the Sikhs, it does not matter to do their religious rituals on Fridays since they have no idea of fixed boundaries between sacred and profane times. In addition, since on Friday every member of the Sikh community is off, then "for the sake of practicality, we organize our religious and community gatherings on Friday".²⁷

The Hindus and the Buddhists share such a reason as well. Their emphasis on what they do on Fridays in the worship places is the communal gatherings. While to them religious ritual can be done any time. Therefore, they have no objection with the state government's conditioning of Friday as the praying day, even though it is biased of Islamic tradition.²⁸

While to Christians, it was unusual to join religious services on Fridays as it is out of the 'universal' convention. In fact, some churches hold services on both Friday and Sunday.²⁹ Yet, the local congregates tend to join the Friday morning services, while Sunday services – held in the evening – are attended mostly by expatriates. However, there might be something 'odd' to the non-local Christians firstly coming to Kelantan, as the so-called Sunday school for Christian children is held on Fridays. It sounds inconsistent between the name of the program and the time the program is carried out. However, to them it does not matter as long as the program works.³⁰

Due to the absence of religious conflict and a sense of mutual threat, one can likely say that there is indeed a religious tolerance in Kelantan.³¹ Yet, it is a tolerance or interreligious harmony in a minimal sense. Perhaps this level of tolerance will never develop into the stage of mutual understanding

27 Interview with Mr. Harbindar Jeet Singh, April 5, 2007.

28 Interview with Mr. Khoo, April 7, 2007; and with Mdm. Selvi, April 8, 2007.

29 In Kota Bharu there are eight churches of different denominations. Only two of them are landed buildings, while the rest are in shop lots. It indicates how small the number of the congregate is. To my personal observation, the largest number of attendances is fifty people, as happened to the St. Martin's Anglican Church in the Easter Day service. The churches in the shop lots like the Latter Rain Church, Bible Church, Methodist, etc. are attended by around fifteen to twenty five people.

30 Interview with Pastor Reuben Daniel – the minister of St. Martin's Anglican Church of Kota Bharu – on April 14, 2007.

31 A number of informants, both Muslims and non-Muslims, claimed that since PAS ruled Kelantan in 1990, there has been no demolition of non-Muslim worship places. They were proud of telling this as they know that such cases often happen in the other states of Malaysia, and the very victims are always the non-Muslims. In Kota Bharu, there was a case in early 1990s where a Sikh worship place had to relocate to another place, since the state government wanted to use the site for a government building. The Sikh community did not have any objection because the state government helped the relocation. (Interview with Mr. Harbindar Jeet Singh, April 5, 2007).

as a prerequisite of inter-religious collaborations for common concerns. The obstacle to achieving such a level of interreligious harmony is a spatial segregation between the Muslims and non-Muslims. Demarcations in physical and in psychological terms are clearly drawn. It is hardly possible to find residential areas inhabited by people of different faiths, in the sense of Muslims and non-Muslims. Non-Muslims (Buddhists, Christians, Sikhs, and Hindus) can reside in the same neighborhood, but it is impossible to them to have Muslim neighbors, and it is also impossible to the Muslims to have non-Muslim neighbors.

Due to a spatial segregation there is a lack of interaction between the Muslims and the non-Muslims in the everyday life. To some degree, this has made the non-Muslims feel socially ‘floated’. They are not convinced whether they have been completely accepted as parts of Kelantanese. They feel neither welcomed nor expelled. They feel that they can live there, not because they have the right to be there, but because the Muslims by law cannot expel them.³²

Closing remarks

Regardless of having enough freedom to do their religious practices under the PAS’ rule, non-Muslims in Kelantan still have some anxiety that if the PAS’ idea of Islamic state – where all government regulations refer to the Qur’an and Hadits – is completely implemented, they are not entirely convinced how their future would be (cf. Khoo, 2003: 141). They feel that the freedom they have enjoyed is not taken for granted, but rather as a result of the political contestation between PAS and UMNO.

To the non-Muslims, UMNO is perceived as the guardian of the Federal Constitution, in which it is stated that Malaysia is not and will never be an Islamic State, although Islam is put on the top priority. There is a guarantee on the religious freedom. While from the PAS, the non-Muslims have got some guarantee that they are not supposed to follow the Islamic law once the Islamic state is established.

Consequently, the non-Muslims tend to vote for UMNO for the Federal Parliament, and to vote for PAS for the State Council. (At least it was what they did – as some non-Muslim informants admitted – in the 2004 General Election). By such political preference they expect that the political *status quo* remains there, meaning that the PAS’ rule over Kelantan is not disrupted – as it has been historically rooted there – but its ambition for establishing an Islamic state is hanging, for UMNO – as the guardian of the Federal Constitution – will always hinder it.

³² Interview with Mr. Harbindar Jeet Singh and Mr. Daljit Singh, April 5, 2007; interview with Mr. Khoo, April 7, 2007.

Due to such a calculation, the re-branding of Kota Bharu as an "Islamic City" in late 2005 – by which Islamic slogans and symbols are presented everywhere – has no psychological effect to the non-Muslims. The omnipresence of "Islam" does not make an "Islamophobia" among the non-Muslims. They realize that such re-"Islam"-ization of the public space and place is only a responsive measure to the UMNO's proclamation of "Islam Hadhari".

Being a minority then does not necessarily mean being the oppressed nor the oppressor, nor completely integrated with the majority. The case of non-Muslim minorities in Kelantan is unique as it cannot be explained by the patterns of majority – minority relation as such. It can only be explained by its particular historical contexts.

The non-Muslims living in the "Veranda of Mecca" do indeed not necessarily feel worried of being threatened by "Islam" and the "Islamization" of public life. Yet, they are and will never be completely integrated into the local community. A sense of being perceived as 'half-visitor', regardless of living there for generations, is predominant among them. Coexist does not necessarily mean cohabit, as the latter requires some emotional bound. ●

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