

APPROACH OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS (NGOS) IN ADDRESSING LIBERAL ISLAM ISSUES IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Discourse of the current Islamic thinking has seen the emergence of the Liberal Muslims who feel the flow of Muslim beliefs should be freed from the shackles of tradition and the clutches of the clergy domination. Based on the spirit of the liberation of the mind is centred on calls for reassessment of laws and the laws that already exists in the Quran. This notion has begun to find a place within the Muslim community in Malaysia and this is seen as one that could threaten their faith. To address these problems, various approaches and responses were submitted by various parties, whether government or non-governmental agencies. Therefore, this article will focus on the discussion of the approaches by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in preventing the development of the Liberal Islamic discourse of thought. By using document analysis, this study focuses on two NGO organizations, via the Association of Islamic Scholars of Malaysia (PUM) and the Islamic Youth Force of Malaysia (ABIM). This study examines and evaluates the activities being done by these associations as they approach in addressing the issues of the Liberal Islamic faith. This article therefore demonstrate that variety of approaches have been implemented by the NGOs such as writing books, newspapers, seminars, workshops and the website in Malaysia for the awareness of Muslims, especially of the dangers and threats of the doctrine pertaining to their faith and thoughts.

Keywords: Liberal Islam, Non-governmental organizations (NGO), liberation, approach, issues

INTRODUCTION

Debate about the Liberal Islam has been the issue either among the supporters of the Liberal Islamic faith itself or among the critics of the faith. Generally, the term Liberal Islam does not refer to a form of a new religion, yet it means a form of faith that have patterns of thinking that are very concerned about freedom and change, more than anything inherent in the pure and genuine Islamic shariah.

Liberal Islamic doctrine clearly highlights some of the ideas that conflict with Islam such as religious pluralism and gender equality. Through the idea of religious pluralism, the notion of the Liberal Islam has made several claims as to permit a Muslim to leave his religion (apostasy) and allow the marriage of different religions. While this group has been demanding that what is right for man must be a right for women in terms of the idea of gender equality. Among the issues put forward are issues of shame, polygamy, and women's leadership, and divorce, division of the estate and the testimony of women (Latifah et al 2011; Latifah & Nur Zainatul Nadra 2019).

Indonesia is the originator of this liberal understanding of Islam in the archipelago through figures such as Nucholish Madjid, Harun Nasution, Budhy Munawar and others (Budi Handrianto 2007). The influence of Liberal Islam in Indonesia is wide spread and most of her

people have accepted the ideas of thinking brought about by it. Proponents of the Liberal Islam beliefs in Indonesia also have their own website which is the Liberal Islam Network (JIL) that contains various information including the ideas that they bring together with the arguments, the activities undertaken and so forth.

In contrast to the ideology of the Liberal Islam in Indonesia where they have overtly labelled themselves as JIL, the notion of Liberal Islam in Malaysia is more comfortable to take cover behind the names or organizations such as Sisters in Islam, Musawah, Women's Aid Organization (WAQ), All Women's Action Society (AWAM) and The Joint Action Group for Gender Equality. They use various approaches in spreading their influence, such as writing books, newspapers, seminars, workshops and the website. It should be noted by those responsible, for public concern out there is also influenced by the ideas that are brought by them. This is because the Liberal Islam often plays with the arguments from the Quran as a helper or amplifier to their thinking. However, the interpretation of these verses is totally contradicted by the interpretation of earlier scholars. Therefore, it can be concluded that the concept that they have brought can be confusing, especially among the civilians who are unable to assess the validity of the ideas thrown by the Liberal Islamic faith.

Looking at these problems, the government bodies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a role in their multiple approaches to face the threat issues of Liberal Islam in Malaysia. Therefore, this paper describes the approach by these organizations by focusing on non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Nevertheless, this paper is not intended to focus on all the NGOs in Malaysia, but will only look at the approach of two organizations, viz the Association of Islamic Scholars of Malaysia (PUM) and the Islamic Youth Force of Malaysia (ABIM). Both these organizations have been selected as they are perceived as among the NGOs that are active in addressing the current issues in Malaysia such as the Liberal Islam.

BACKGROUND OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ASSOCIATION OF ISLAMIC SCHOLARS OF MALAYSIA (PUM)

Briefly, the Association of Islamic Scholars of Malaysia (PUM) was established after a special discussion which was held on 8 April 1972 at the Al-Malik Faisal Hall ITC (IIUM Matriculation Centre now) Petaling Jaya, Selangor in Malaysia to consolidate the opinion of the scholars and the Islamic scholars within and outside the government.

Two years later, in 1974, the PUM was officially established in the first special general meeting held at the Klang Islamic College, Selangor Darul Ehsan. In conjunction with the establishment of the PUM a seminar was held on Islamic education including the role of the Islamic scholars which was attended by leaders of Islam and the mufti. The late Hj. Nik Muhyiddin Musa was chosen as the first PUM President during the first General Meeting of the PUM. (http://www.pumselangor.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=35&Itemid=36)

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MALAYSIAN ISLAMIC YOUTH FORCE (ABIM)

The ABIM was established on 6 August 1971 at the Faculty of Islamic Studies of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. The Chairman of the establishment sponsors was the late Ustaz Abdul Wahab Abdullah and the Secretary was Datuk Fauzi Abdul Rahman. On August 17, 1972, ABIM was officially registered under the Societies Act 1966. Whereas in 2009, after the government made a revision of the national youth policy, ABIM was registered under the establishment of the Youth Organizations Act 2007.

To date, the ABIM leadership has been led by seven leaders. Starting with Razali Nawawi, then the leadership shifted to Anwar Ibrahim in 1974. After that, Siddiq Fadzil was appointed as the third President of ABIM after Anwar Ibrahim's participation in UMNO in 1982. In 1991, Muhammad Nur Manuty was appointed as the fourth President of ABIM, followed by Ahmad Azam Abdul Rahman as the fifth president in 1997 (Amaluddin 2004). Then, in 2003, Yusri Muhammad took over the leadership of ABIM as the sixth president. In the era of his leadership, ABIM had contributed actively in national aspects, especially on the issue of the special position of Islam in the Constitution and the question of the shariah in a pluralistic society. The latest transition in the ABIM leadership occurred in October 2019 in which Muhammad Faisal Abdul Aziz was elected as the tenth president.

THE NGO APPROACH IN FACING THE LIBERAL ISLAM ISSUES

Clarification on this topic is important to highlight the approaches taken by the NGOs in Malaysia as a step in confronting the issues of the Liberal Islam. This indirectly reflects the sensitivity of the Muslim community in Malaysia's current development and their concern for the issues that could threaten the faith of Muslims especially in Malaysia. Therefore, this topic would identify and evaluate the approaches of both the NGOs on the issues of Liberal Islam.

THE APPROACH OF THE ASSOCIATION OF ISLAMIC SCHOLARS OF MALAYSIA (PUM)

PUM is among the NGOs that has been responding a lot to the Liberal Islam in Malaysia. Various activities and strategies have been carried out to restrict the influence of the Liberal Islamic faith in Malaysia.

The Association of the Penang Islamic Scholars of Malaysia (PUMPP) has taken the initiative to establish a special motion to contain the spread of the Liberal Islam in Malaysia more effectively. The movement is called the Armed Islamic Action against Liberal Islam (ABABIL) that works to address and combat the Liberal Islam thought and its contemporary, especially in Malaysia. This effort would definitely be seen as being a wise approach and strategy in the face of the Liberal Islamic doctrine that has gained a place within the Muslim community and it should be emulated by the other NGOs so that the influence of its faith in this country can be addressed more easily and effectively.

In addition, this organization is also publishing numerous books in an effort to inform people about the ideology of the Liberal Islam. This includes a description of the purpose of the ideology, leaders, concept and the issues championed by the Liberal Islam. For example, the PUM has published a book entitled "Muslim Women: Issues of Rights and Empowerment". It was published so that all the negative perception of the position of women in Islam can be resolved and understood completely. In this way, the education approach and discussion is seen as the best way to deal with any conflicts of women and their status in the shariah (<http://pustakaiman.blogspot.com/2011/01/wanita-islam-isu-isu-dan-pemeriksaan.html>).

In 2009 the PUM has been taking proactive steps in publishing a book entitled "Liberal Islam: Issues and Challenges" which has fifteen papers as an explanation of the forms of attack and occupation of the Liberal Islam school of thought in Malaysia, Indonesia and Egypt. Although the book which was published by this NGO did not reach a figure of fifty or hundred, but it was seen as a good and important approach in conveying information to people about the threat

of the doctrine. This is evident because the book serves as a reference material at institutions of higher learning such as the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, the University of Malaya (UM) and the Selangor Islamic University College (KUIS).

In addition to publishing books, the PUM is also involved in organizing and participating in seminars related to the understanding of Liberal Islam. For example, the PUM has organized a seminar on Islam and Current Challenges in Port Dickson on 16 July 2005. Then, the PUM and the Tenaga Nasional Berhad Integrated Learning Solution Sdn. Bhd. (ILSAS) organized the Contemporary Islamic World 2009 seminar entitled Challenges and Future Direction which was held from 15 to 16 August 2009.

(http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2009&dt=0813&pub=Utusan_Malaysia&sec=Dalam_Negeri&pg=dn_27.htm). On 17 February 2011 the PUM was involved as one of the presenters at the National Seminar on Liberal Islam Issues held at the UKM. At the seminar, Mr. Nizam Mahshar represented PUMPP with his paper entitled “Mapping the Liberal Islam movement and the role of Islamic scholars, intellectuals and the PUMPP.

In addition, the PUM has also taken the approach to protest against the doctrine in Malaysia through a statement in the media. For example, a statement entitled “PUMPP Lashes Organizing Musawah Brings Liberal Islam Agenda to Malaysia and Disputes the Basic Principles of Islam” (<http://pumpp.wordpress.com/tag/islam-liberal/>). The discourse protested the Musawah meeting since it would give a negative perception to Malaysia as she would be portrayed as a country that practices shariah laws which discriminate against women, especially when the meeting would draw attention to a representative of the United Nations Organization in the presence of Professor Yakin Erturk (the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women), who would open the meeting. Besides, through another statement entitled “ABABIL PUMPP Trouble Calls Do not politicize the misled issue Liberalism of Sisters in Islam (SIS)”, PUMPP urges all parties to stop any of the views and press releases on the SIS to avoid disputes and confusion of society which would damage the Islamic values within the Muslim community (<http://pumpp.wordpress.com/tag/islam-liberal/>).

Generally, the approach and efforts of the PUM which has been stated above should be viewed as a positive step towards saving the Muslims in particular of the influence and confusion of the Liberal Islamic doctrine and thereby creating an Islamic generation which practice the true values of Islam in their lives. This should, in fact, have the full support of all parties, whether from government organizations or other non-governmental organizations to more efficiently implement in the interests of religion, race and nation.

THE METHOD OF THE MALAYSIAN ISLAMIC YOUTH FORCE (ABIM)

The ABIM uses a similar approach as the PUM in confronting the ideology in Malaysia. However, compared to the PUM, the approach taken by the ABIM to the extent of knowledge of the author is not so much. This may need a deeper study, such as conducting interviews with the ABIM and others.

The ABIM has also taken steps to respond through the literature, such as *The Flow of Contemporary Islamic Thought and Some Thought Attitudes in Facing the Liberal Thinking*. Both of these articles have analyzed the Liberal Islamic faith and have submitted proposals in

the face of the Liberal Islamic ideology. Through these articles, it can be indirectly explained that ABIM has also taken the approach by participating in the seminars in an effort to restrict the influence of the Liberal Islamic faith in Malaysia.

Based on the keynote address entitled Strengthening Commitment: Empowering the Da'wah Movement Agenda by Hasri Harun, the Selangor branch, a number of ABIM strategies in dealing with the Liberal Islamic faith propaganda can be understood. One of them is to intensify da'wah efforts, enhance the role of ABIM in mosque activities, and strengthen commitment and others. Although the ABIM is not as active as the PUM in facing the challenges of the Liberal Islam thought in Malaysia, but its contribution should not be ignored. However, these approaches require the consolidation and strengthening of the process according to the mission of ABIM to become a comprehensive Islamic movement to realize the Islamiyya ambitions.

CONCLUSION

From this it can be concluded that the Liberal Islam doctrine has spread within the Muslim community in Malaysia. However, the concerns of various parties, both among governments and non-governmental organizations to some extent have managed to curb the spread of the Liberal Islamic ideology from becoming more critical like in the neighbouring Indonesia. Debate on the approach of the NGOs in facing the Liberal Islam shows that there exist an effort among the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Malaysia in response to combat the inverse beliefs. A variety of approaches have been implemented by the NGOs in Malaysia for the awareness of Muslims, especially of the dangers and threats of the doctrine pertaining to their faith and thoughts.

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