

The Efforts of Malaysian Muslim NGOs in Spreading the Message of Peace in Malaysia: Activities and Challenges

Rahmah Bt Ahmad H. Osman¹
International Islamic University Malaysia

Article Received: 1 August 2017

Article Accepted: 15 November 2017

Abstract

This paper investigates the efforts of Malaysian Muslim NGOs in spreading peace at our current time, a time of hyper-volatility exacerbated by the threats of extremism. Part one introduces briefly the pressing urgency of combating terrorism in our time, and stresses how the Malaysian context on terrorism should not be equated with other contexts. The second part of the paper discusses the importance of breaking the monopoly on religion that terrorist sympathisers take advantage of. The endeavours of the NGOs in *dawah*² will be examined. Part three outlines the unique narrative on Islam that has been historically dominant in Malaysia and how this helps in forming a counter-narrative. Part four analyses how Malaysian NGOs deal with the malaise of identity crisis among Muslims. Part five looks into how NGOs in Malaysia widen the scope of Islam, thus allowing them to show via social projects a holistic vision of Islam as opposed to a reductive vision that terrorists endorse. The sixth part points to how the NGOs use creative strategies in spreading the peaceful message of Islam. Part seven highlights some challenges that Malaysian NGOs face in their pursuit of spreading a peaceful vision of Islam. The paper concludes that the success of Malaysian Muslim NGOs in spreading peace has been due to correctly understanding the threat of extremism, and also due to finding effective alternatives to extremism, thus allowing the NGOs to create a culture of peace in Malaysian society.

Keywords

Malaysia, Muslim NGOs, Islam, peace, *wasatiyyah*, *dawah*

¹ **Rahmah Bt Ahmad H. Osman** is a Professor of Arabic literature at International Islamic University of Malaysia. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Arabic Language, Literature and Islamic Studies from the Al-Azhar University, Egypt, Master's degree in Arabic Language and Literature from the University of Jordan, and a doctorate degree from SOAS, University of London, UK. She has published 20 books and 54 research articles in the field of Malay, Arabic and Islamic literature. Email: rahmahao@iium.edu.my.

² The practice or policy of spreading the message of Islam to non-Muslims.

Introduction

Never has there been a more urgent time, or a more pressing need, for spreading peace than the time we live in and the circumstances we witness around us. Islam is a religion of peace, yet Islam has now become the symbol of its opposite, the symbol of violence, death and mindless terror. Muslims are supposed to be ambassadors of peace, yet now Muslims are seen as the perpetrators of destruction. This paper highlights the various approaches Malaysian NGOs adopt in fostering peace and reducing violence in the country.

The atrocious attacks of 9/11 put the spotlight on Muslims. Muslim countries were suddenly pressured to combat terrorism. There was, in the attack's aftermath, a concerted effort by some countries to impose counter-terrorism policies onto Muslim countries. While these concerted efforts do have their rationale, they were executed in haste and with a lack of insight, no doubt due to the urgency of the situation. It was this very urgency, however, which should have acted as a restraining force against rash action. As Jean Baudrillard maintains, "You have to take your time... when [events] speed up this much, you have to move more slowly" (4).

In 1984, ABIM,³ a Malaysian NGO, translated and published a book by the renowned Muslim scholar Yusuf Qardawi (1926-), titled *Islamic Awakening Between Rejection and Extremism*. The translation and publication of this book highlights many important aspects of Malaysian society. Malaysia was aware, decades before that fateful day on September 2001, that religious extremism and violence were pressing issues. Malaysia took steps to ensure that terrorist ideology did not spread like a cancerous disease among the Malaysian populace. Thus, to impose the hastily drawn up counter-terrorism policies onto Malaysia was unjust. Successful peace-building comes from inside a nation, not from outside it.

Breaking the Monopoly on Religion

Malaysian NGOs have been careful not to conflate religion with terrorism. It is true that terrorists and terrorist sympathisers use the jargon of religion, but that by no means points to the religiosity of their actions. After all, even the devil can quote the scripture. Malaysian NGOs have been quick to point out the political underpinnings of terrorism. In the online encyclopaedia of Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia (YADIM), the editor writes, "Investigation and research has found that terrorists see the act of violence as the only way to achieve their political objectives. In the eyes of terrorists, political conflicts can only be solved via violence" ("Terrorisme"). This violence-is-the-only-means approach contradicts the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Prophet Muhammad compromised in his political dealings whenever the need arose, as in the case of

³ Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia or Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia.

the treaty of Hudaibiyah (Mubarakpuri 339-48). The Prophet was once stoned in the street, his blood flowing from his feet. Yet when he had the chance to destroy the village he chose to save it instead (Bukhari 3231). Compare this to the gun-toting habits of terrorists. The Quran makes it clear that a society should not be punished as long as people in the society are calling for the truth (8: 32-33). Terrorists call for the violent punishment of society under any circumstances.

Malaysian NGOs do not allow terrorist sympathisers to monopolise religion. In fact, Malaysian NGOs have continuously pointed out that terrorist ideology was never and still is not the norm of beliefs in Malaysia. Idris Zakaria, writing in YADIM's *Umran: The Journal of Muslim Affairs*, explains, "Peace and tolerance are the original characteristics of Islam. They are also the reasons why Islam has been easily accepted by various races and nations since its inception" (17). Because of this reason, there is no essential clash between the "religious" and the "non-religious" in the Malaysian socio-political domain.

The Unique Narrative on Islam in Malaysia

There are many ways of understanding Islam. The spiritual way has been the predominant way of understanding the religion in Malaysia since its arrival in the 13th and 14th centuries. Sufism, as the spiritual mode is known, is the foundational and dominant form Islam takes in Malaysia, which explains why Malaysia has a pluralistic society that accepts the diversity of religious experiences. Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas explains:

The peacefulness and non-militant characteristic of the [Sufi] Orders in Malaya have definitely influenced the outlook of the Malays with regard to their system of political and social thought. They have never been known to exhibit a religious militarism... [t]he Sūfī preaching... has made it possible, I strongly believe, for the plural societies that existed in Malaya to live side by side peaceably and with a spirit of tolerance that is evident even to this day. (99)

In keeping with the Malays' spiritual heritage, Malaysian NGOs actively promote Sufism among Muslims, thus helping to foster a non-divisive and non-sectarian practise of Islam. But most importantly, this promotion is not done in the name of national heritage; rather, it is done in the name of universal spirituality. That is why the Muslim welfare organisation, Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia (PERKIM), publishes and publicises the writings of Seyyed Hossein Nasr (*Islamic Herald*, 2012) and Hamzah Yusuf (*Islamic Herald*, 2017).⁴ The idea of unity

⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr is a world renowned scholar on Islam and is currently a University Professor at the George Washington University. He has published over twenty books and hundreds of articles in numerous languages and translations. Hamza Yusuf is the co-founder of the Zaytuna Institute. He is a leading exponent of Sufism and an icon among Muslim youth.

through spirituality is a good antidote to the “them vs. us” mentality that certain literalist interpretations of Islam perpetuate.

Another unique aspect of Malaysian NGOs is their focus on the concept of *Wasatiyyah*. This concept has been elaborated upon in great depth by both Muhammad Hashim Kamali and Muhammad Kamal Hassan. Wasatiyyah situates Islam in between two extreme poles: the pole of religious extremism, and the alternative pole of secular fanaticism. German philosopher Max Horkheimer has pointed out that capitalism and fascism fed off each other, so those who do not criticise capitalism must keep silent on fascism.⁵ It is a fact of history that many of the violent conflicts that occurred in the Muslim world, occurred due to a secular elite resorting to heavy-handed measures to pacify the religiously-extreme rabble. This only exasperated the tensions and exploded the conflicts beyond reasonable proportions. Wasatiyyah, on the other hand, takes a middle path, a central position, in between both these poles. ABIM, for example, “stresses” the principles of Wasatiyyah in its activities and outlook (Hassan, “Islamic Non-governmental Organisations” 105).

Solving the Identity Crisis

Many Muslim countries are racked with identity crises. Is Islam opposed to modernity? Is modernity part of Islam? Do we protect our tradition against increasing globalisation? Or do we embrace globalisation at the expense of our tradition? These are not just philosophical questions, but are also social, political and national questions. Malaysia’s response to these questions is *Islam Hadhari*. Ioannis Gatsiounis has noted that Islam Hadhari has achieved results and is unique to the Malaysian religio-cultural scene. Islam Hadhari can be translated into the phrase “Civilisational Islam.” Islam has been transformed from simply a set of religious doctrines into a civilisational dynamic. According to Al-Idrus, in his book *Islam Hadhari: Building Tradition and Modernity*, this transformation allows Islam Hadhari to bridge the gap between Tradition and Modernity. Islam is seen from an expansive lens instead of a reductive lens. That is why YADIM could state that Islam Hadhari “must not be viewed as an attempt to convert the non-Muslims to Islam” (Kamali, *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 12). Islam is not merely about conversion to a set of doctrines. Islam is a civilisation.

Malaysia is a pluralistic and multi-cultural country. The Malaysian population is made up primarily of Malays, Chinese and Indians. Tensions between the races, of course, exist. The tensions have their roots in the colonial history of Malaysia when the British wanted to easily manage the three races for its own ends through a policy of divide and rule. These tensions have carried on till the present, mostly in a simmering state, and are certainly a challenge that Malaysia has to constantly

⁵ See <https://thecharnelhouse.org/2015/03/20/the-jews-and-europe/>.

strive to overcome. One way of getting a grip on these tensions is by deconstructing the equivalence between Race and Religion. This equivalence occurred as a defensive reaction on the part of the Malays against the aggressive Christianising efforts of the British (see Al-Idrus, *Christians in Search of a Name for God*). While the equivalence was useful in the anti-colonial struggle, it has ceased to be useful in the post-colonial period. The presence of NGOs such as Pergerakan Belia India Muslim Malaysia (GEPIMA) and Persatuan Cina Muslim Malaysia (MACMA) suggest that being Muslim is not something exclusive to a certain race. This helps to clear the misconception that race-related tensions in Malaysia are religious based, thus closing the space for religious extremists to hijack the very real issues of race-relations in the Malaysian society.

Widening the Scope of Islam

One of the unfortunate aspects of the surge in 9/11 counter-terrorism is the reductive focus on terrorist violence in society. This meant that many NGOs around the world shifted their focus almost exclusively to terrorist violence and neglected the other types of violence found in society. A society can be as terror-free as you want it to be, yet it can also be filled with violence. The fixation on male terrorists, is perhaps a thin veneer for a fascination with the macho. Very few people would link societal violence with the abuse of women and children. Not that the link doesn't exist, but people do not usually take this link into consideration when dealing with peace-building efforts in society.

Fortunately, in Malaysia, women's issues have not been neglected. Alarmed by domestic abuse, the Malaysian government has made it compulsory for couples about to marry to attend the SMARTSTART Premarital course. This course is facilitated by NGOs. The course is an in-depth introduction to the various psycho-sexual aspects of marriage and includes discussions on legal and social issues.⁶

The Khazana Research Institute found that in 2015, 54% of women in Malaysia were employed ("Our Women Falling Behind"). Unlike countries where women play a more traditional role, Malaysia has a culture of women participating in the market place and workforce. This is not a new phenomenon that was unknown in the past. In Kelantan there is a famous market called Pasar Besar Siti Khadijah which was run almost exclusively by women. For this reason, female empowerment is on the dawah agenda for NGOs in Malaysia. I read that in

⁶ This premarital course was introduced by the National Population and Family Development Board (LPPKN) in May 2003 for all races to provide newly married couples or those intending to marry soon with the knowledge and skills required in married life, but the course was made compulsory by the Malaysian government from the end of 2015 ("SMARTSTART Premarital Course To Be Compulsory For All Couples Who Want To Get Married").

Morocco there is rising popularity and enthusiasm for Murshidas, female *du'at*. As a woman, I find this news very refreshing and exciting. In Malaysia there is no such popularity, because the trend of women making dawah and participating in social projects was normalised a long time ago. The major Islamic NGOs have their own women's branch that help provide counselling to girls and advice to women, while also providing much needed services such as education to females who are impoverished.

A certain problem that NGOs face is the issue of moral absolutism versus moral relativism. This issue is a familiar false dichotomy. In stressing moral virtues, NGOs can be overbearing and espouse a sense of moral absolutism which broaches no adjustments with the realities that people face. On the other hand, if NGOs shift their moral codes to fit the trends in society, they may end up epitomising Groucho Marx's well-known joke, "These are my principles. If you don't like them, I have others." Luckily, this dichotomy is false. There is the other option of principled pragmatism. An example from Malaysia's fight against drugs will illustrate the point.

It is well known to many that Southeast Asia faces a colossal drug problem. One way for NGOs to tackle this problem is educating people on the harms of drugs ("moral absolutism"). Another way to tackle the drug problem is for NGOs to call for the legalisation of drugs as a means of eradicating the profit-basis for drug gangs ("moral relativism"). NGOs in Malaysia have taken a principled pragmatic stand on this. Some NGOs are involved in the programme of providing clean needles free of charge to drug users, instead of informing the authorities to imprison these drug users. From 2012 till 2015, NGOs have provided 59,108 free sanitised needles (Edwards, "Harm Reduction Programme Shows Results"). This programme of distributing free sanitised needles has helped prevent the spread of HIV. It has also helped in loosening the link between violence and drug abuse as the NGOs can now provide a safe and sympathetic haven for drug users.

At this juncture, some might wonder what connections there could be between Islam and Malaysian NGOs giving out clean needles. How does dawah feature in this? How is the image of Islam and Muslims improved by this? The answer to these questions is that it "widens the horizon." One of the challenges Muslims face in our time is the reduction of Islam to a simple statement of faith. Islam is seen to be divorced from society, from the daily grind as it were. This divorce and detachment helps to fuel terrorist violence, because terrorists can point to the "absence" of Islam in society. This absence, the terrorists say, can be rectified if their minatory ideas are translated from the plane of ideology to the plane of physical concrete action. It is to the credit of NGOs in Malaysia that they have not worked with such a shallow definition of Islam.

When people see that Islam can contribute to every facet of society, they will be less drawn to terrorist rhetoric since they will realise that society can be

changed in different ways, not just by senseless violence. The expansive definition of Islam can be seen in ABIM's environmental programme. In 1991 ABIM established a group called MASA⁷ that deals with environmental issues. The group was renamed GRASS in 2014. This Islamic Environmental Group was created to apply the Quranic principles of sustainable living to Malaysian society. The objective of this group is to reduce pollution and increase awareness in sustainable living.

Now, when a terrorist sympathiser starts talking about how we need to change society and make it more Islamic, groups like GRASS will debunk the sympathiser's claim that only via violence can society be rectified. In fact, such groups expose the narrow-mindedness of the terrorist sympathisers, because these groups show that society faces more problems than simply the implementation of *hudud* or the banning of alcohol.

Creativity and Dawah

NGOs in Malaysia use innovative techniques and creative strategies to spread the peaceful message of Islam. In 2009, ABIM organised a treasure hunt for new converts to Islam. In this treasure hunt, the new converts were to find answers to questions on Islam which were hidden on the grounds around the National Mosque. YADIM held workshops to discover new young Muslim leaders and also gave Muamalah⁸ literary programmes educating people about the nuances of Islamic banking and finance. YADIM also partnered with TV AlHijrah, the national Islamic television channel, and produced a reality television show on family life and how to solve family issues.

Bringing creativity into the dawah scene is a very important step in showing people the vitality and dynamism at the heart of Islam. Many times people get attracted to terrorist narratives simply because these narratives are different from what their ustaz (religious teacher) taught them or what they hear in Friday sermons. These people are not seeking out violence per se, but they are seeking a way out of boredom. They want freshness in their lives, which they find lacking in the usual presentations of Islam.

Challenges Faced by the Malaysian NGOs

This brings us to the challenges that Malaysian NGOs face in their peace building efforts. One of the main challenges the NGOs face is relevance. How can they stay relevant to people at a time of hyper-acceleration? One way to overcome this is, as I just mentioned, injecting creativity into the dawah process. But there is more to this issue. People are now becoming more and more plugged into social

⁷ Majlis Alam Sekitar ABIM (ABIM's Environmental Council).

⁸ *Muamalah* is an Arabic term referring to business transactions.

media, thus they have less and less time for face-to-face interactions. This means that NGOs need to exert more effort in making themselves relevant online and in the social media. However, this is not easy to attain. It is hoped that if the Islamic NGOs make a partnership with media companies they will be able to provide online media content that can attract the attention of Muslims and non-Muslims around the globe. A good example of online relevance is the use of Pharrell William's song "Happy" to show that Muslims are as fun-loving and energetic as everyone else and can respond with smiles of joy, not anger, despite all the negative press, stereotyping and discrimination that they currently encounter, especially in the West. However, if NGOs try to replicate the success of the Happy Muslim videos on YouTube, the NGOs should use Muslim musicians and artists from their own countries. This will allow Muslims to showcase their artistic creations to the world.

Another challenge NGOs in Malaysia face is standardisation. Many NGOs in Malaysia follow the same strategies, use the same material and apply the same techniques when trying to rebuff violent representations of Islam. It is understandable from a management perspective why standardisation is needed. But it is also understandable what the drawbacks of standardisation are. To overcome the ailments of standardisation, NGOs must work with a different and more dynamic management model. This of course cannot be done all at once and by all NGOs in Malaysia. Instead, an incremental approach should be taken, with one or two NGOs adopting a new management approach and seeing the results. When NGOs in Malaysia stop copying each other and start doing things differently, the target audience of these NGOs will find greater diversity in services and products offered. This greater diversity will help in keeping sympathies for terrorists at bay.

Despite the success of NGOs, they still work on the periphery. This lessens their significance and impact. NGOs can take a more central role if they focus on long-term cultivation. If NGOs can put greater emphasis in getting volunteers in the Malaysian universities, they will find that more graduates will retain their links with the NGOs than before. Universities are where the future generation of Muslim leaders will emerge. NGOs need to utilise the university environment to nurture and cultivate life-long volunteers.

Conclusion

This paper concludes with a personal anecdote. A friend of my daughter volunteers regularly for social work. One day I asked this friend how her day went. She told me that she saw an old Chinese man about to jump off the top of her apartment tower. She ran up to the man and held him as his feet went over the railings. She took him back to his room and made him some tea. Suddenly he was telling her his whole life story. When he finished, he apologised for talking so much, but she said there was no reason to apologise, because Islam obliges us

to listen to others. The man, upon hearing this said, “No one listened to me for the past five years and now I find you, a total stranger, listening to me. What a wonderful religion you follow!” This is what Islam is, and it is hoped that this is how NGOs in both Malaysia and around the globe will try to portray Islam.

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