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The Influence of Parenting Behaviour and Social Support on Parenting Stress and Behavioural Problems of Autistic Children: A Conceptual study within the Malaysian Context <i>Rokhwatun Nisa Damanhuri and Nazariah Shari'e Janon</i>	1-17
Liberalism Philosophy Influence in Islamic Social Movements in Malaysia	18-26
Ibrahim Majdi bin Mohamad Kamil, Wan Adli bin Wan Ramli, Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali	
Understanding Teenage Pregnancy Out of Wedlock within the Structure of the Malay Family Iyad M. Eid, Abdulwahed Jalal Nori, Najibah Bt Mohd. Zin	27-38
Facebook And Female Member of Parliaments in Malaysia: Where Are We Going Now? Najwa Mazlan, Rohana Abdul Hamid, Rabi'Ah Aminudin	39-57
A Potential Role of Physical Activity Intervention for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Study Protocol Noor Hasina Abd Rahman and Mariam Adawiah Dzulkifli	58-68
Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) as Main Intervention for Autistic Children Syarifah Zafirah Syed Azman, Lihanna Borhan, and Roziana Shahril	69-77

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Liberalism Philosophy Influence in Islamic Social Movements in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the early development of evolution and the development of liberalism specifically in Malaysia since it was brought by the western colonists to form a social movement in Malaysia. The objective of this article is to see how liberalism progresses in influencing a liberal Islamic movement in Malaysia. The philosophy of liberalism in Malaysia is not a new issue, but a philosophy that has long existed among the Malaysian Muslim community. This article uses the method of historical analysis to look at the development of the philosophy of liberalism to highlight the impact of the evolution of liberalism in Malavsia. This writing found that the philosophy of liberalism has been seen as having an evolution among the community in Malaysia since it was first brought by the colonialists to form a social movement in Malaysia which is referred to as the liberal Islamic movement. In fact, supporters of liberalism are increasingly highlighting the philosophy of liberalism, especially through the liberal Islamic movement and in the name of human rights. Although the philosophy of liberalism has existed in the middle of society in areas of life such as economics, politics, culture, law and administration in Malaysia. This article found that the development and dissemination of the philosophy of liberalism can lead to threats in the society if there are no social control of various new ideology in Malaysia.

Keywords: Liberalism, philosophy, social movements, liberalist.

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the evolution and development of specific liberalism in Malaysia since it was brought by the western colonists to form a social movement in Malaysia. This article uses 'philosophy' because it refers to a more holistic ideology including ideology, thinking, and action. The thought of liberalism is a form of independent thinking. It is different from traditional or conservative thinking that adheres to the absolute truth. Prior to the development of liberalism especially in Malaysia, this article highlights a brief background on liberalism thinking with the aim of correcting misunderstandings of liberal concepts and liberalism. The objective of this article is to see how the evolution of the philosophy of liberalism has impacted the existence of various Muslim liberalist social movements in Malaysia. The study used the method of historical analysis.

Liberal and liberalism are two different terms. Although both tend to the meaning of freedom, the term liberal refers more to the type of action than the term liberalism that refers to philosophy, understanding or even stance. Referring to the Malay Literary Reference Centre of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), the word liberal refers to freedom and democratic rule, or the space of freedom in the market in the economic sphere, or freedom or openness in the field of science and technology (retrieved from http://prpm.dbp.gov.my on 27/11/2018).

While for the purpose of liberalism, it refers to a form of understanding, or understanding or stance that requires democracy and freedom in economic activities (DBP, 2010). In fact, the term 'liberal' refers to the actions that an actor must perform. While 'liberalism' is a philosophy that is in the

form of understanding, ideology, principle or belief that can influence an individual or group of society. Accordingly, in an effort to understand the term 'liberalism' in more detail, this article denounces it by referring to the ideologies and thoughts that are brought by the philosophy of liberalism. From a terminological point of view, liberalism is defined as a form of philosophy by positioning individual freedom as a politically entrenched value (Coady, 1995). Ludwig Von Moses stated that liberalism is a political movement in which the main goal is to improve the well-being and standard of living of every group of society (2015).

Background of liberalism

The word 'liberalism' is the result of a combination of the word 'liberal' which means freedom and 'ism' which means belief. This means that in general, liberalism is a philosophy or belief that places individual freedom as the highest political value. Liberalism was born from the renaissance era (Mohamad Kamil et al, 2011), a group of people who fought for freedom from the clutches of traditional power that is the power of the church and sparked the philosophy of liberalism that gave birth to such philosophical figures of liberalism as John Locke (1634-1704), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Adam Smith (1723-1790) (Mohamad Kamil et al, 2011).

Accordingly, the term born of this Western scholar is often paired with elements of secularism, absolute freedom, individualism, liberal democracy, rationalism, feminism, humanism, pragmatism, and pluralism. Thus, any form of thinking that is characterised by liberalism certainly has a high tendency towards liberalism. Some of these elements exist in the context of the Muslim community in Malaysia especially through the liberal Islamic movement (Mohamad Kamil et al, 2011).

According to the opinion of Malaysian Malay scholars, Abdul Rahman Abdullah (1998) stated that liberalism is a new form of thinking after traditionalist, modernist, and reformist thinking. Meanwhile, Shamsul Amri Baharuddin stated that liberalism is a process from the west to fight Malaysian society either physically or epistemologically (2007). Furthermore, this group of liberalism trends understands the revelations based on the paradigm of liberalism. This is among the outrageous attitudes of supporters of liberalism thinking to the point of misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the message of revelation specifically and the will of religion in general (Wan Adli Wan Ramli, 2014). Unsurprisingly, liberalism is often associated with something more harm than good especially in the context of the Malay and Muslim communities in Malaysia.

Liberalism also often uses slogans that are seen to be of interest to the current society. The liberalism movement often claims that its movement is important in facing challenges from the west, modernisation, globalisation, information technology and external challenges. Supporters of this movement claim that it is a response to the western colonialism and faces the challenges of western modernisation. In reality, the liberalism movement only led to the destruction of Muslims. This is because the liberalism movement including in Malaysia is influenced by modernisation, realism, pragmatism, and secularism. To trace this, the discussion focused on the liberalism movement in Malaysia which covers aspects of secularism, pluralism and feminism (Wan Adli Wan Ramli, 2014).

Liberalism before independence

In the Malaysian context, liberalism refers to the Muslim community in Malaysia which has led to the emergence of liberal Islamic terms. This thought of liberalism is not a new thought. This thought has existed since the beginning either consciously or unconsciously. The seeds of liberalism have emerged earlier among the Malay community in Malaya. The difference is, in the pre-independence era this element of liberalism was not carried by supporters of the liberalism movement as it is today but brought by colonists from Europe.

Tracing the Renaissance period in Europe has led to European powers to sail in search of power. In fact, the period of renaissance has also been associated with liberalism in Europe that led to the fall of the role of the church. This is because renaissance in Europe is a struggle to free itself from the clutches of the traditional power of church power (Wan Adli Wan Ramli, 2014). The history of liberalism thinking in Europe dates back to the days of reform by Martin Luther (1483-1546) and a movement that gave opposition to the church's authority, political power rights, and human rights. This liberalism movement later expanded throughout the western world such as the United States revolution and the French revolution.

The development of this revolution has spread to almost all European powers, leading to the Portuguese occupation of Malacca. The inclusion of the colonialists in Malaya was the beginning of the existence of an element of liberalism in Malaya especially through the system of secularism in the administration. Revisiting the glorious rule of the Malay government, religion and administration are not separated. The Sultan or King will be the head of the administration and the head of the Islamic religion. On the other hand, it has been replaced by the 'ala barat' administrative system which triggered the secularism system in Malaya.

During the early 20th century when there was a conflict between the *Kaum Tua* and the *Kaum Muda* in Malaya, liberal groups also existed among the Malay community but not in a large movement and only a few individuals were involved and hid behind the *Kaum Muda* group. In fact, there was an effort by the Sultan of Perak at that time to distinguish the movement of the *Kaum Muda*, those who used *Islah* thinking a lot with the liberalism group (Roff, 1967).

However, at the beginning of the development of liberalism thinking, this group was less prominent in their identity because supporters of liberalism knew that society in Malaysia was not easy to accept liberalism compared to the society of some other Muslim countries such as western countries, Egypt and Indonesia. In fact, the liberalism movement in Malaysia has a network with the Indonesian liberal movement. Liberalism in Malaysia refers to the discussion of intellectual groups that carry ideas and interpretations that contradict existing beliefs (Mohamad Kamil et al, 2011).

The philosophy of liberalism during post-independence

Malaya finally achieved independence in 1957. However, Malaya was left with the influence of a secular administration by the British colonialists. This is clear when Malaysia's federal constitution has elements of the philosophy of liberalism as found in the British constitution. Researchers take the example of an act on the fundamental rights of freedoms that has been enacted since the formation of Malaysia's first federal constitution.

In items five to thirteen of the Federation of Malaysia, it is emphasised on the fundamental right of freedom which is the right that can be adopted by any citizen (Malaysian Constitution, 2018). The fundamental right of freedom is seen as parallel to the philosophy of liberalism, that is, the people can do anything but on their own responsibility because human beings have a rationale (Abd Aziz A'zmi, 2016). In the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, since it was first enacted in 1948, there have been elements of liberalism in the constitution. This element is contained in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia as a result of colonialism. However, the result of the struggle of the Malay community at that time managed to avoid the secularism element in the entire Federal Constitution of Malaysia and Islam can be upheld as the official religion of the Federation. According to Abd Aziz A'zmi (2016), in the context of Malaysia, liberalism is not the whole negative aspect, but there are also positive aspects especially in the context of the multi-religious and multi-ethnic society in Malaysia. This positive liberalism is seen from the point of view of liberal action which is more open to the context of the multi-racial and religious society in Malaysia and the opening of liberals who refer to liberalism.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are focusing on how the evolution of liberalism have evolved in influencing the Islamic social movements today. Nowadays, many Islamic social movements emerge as a result of various type of thought. This findings also focussing on some movements as an example that have been influenced by the philosophy of liberalism.

The philosophy of liberalism forming new social movement.

Nevertheless, many studies claim that liberalism began to enter the Malay community in Malaysia in the early 1970s especially through the movement brought by Chandra Muzaffar through the National Consciousness Flow organization (ALIRAN) (Fadhlullah Jamil, 2009). Later, in the 1980s, the development of the liberalism movement was more vibrant with the thought and anti-Hadith movement and *Jamaah* Malaysia through Kassim Ahmad (Munif et al., 2013).

Individuals such as Chandra Muzaffar and Kassim Ahmad so bravely carried this thought of liberalism have succeeded in influencing a group of The Malay community in Malaysia. Although the liberalism movement initially received only a small group of support, it became the beginning of the development of a specific liberalism thinking in Malaysia. In fact, the development of liberalism thinking is growing today.

In 1993, the thought of liberalism was developed in the form of a liberal Islamic movement by bringing the concept of feminism by the Sisters in Islam (SIS) organisation. The organisation is led by Zainah Anwar and consists of professional women (Munif et al, 2013). The SIS organisation claims that they bring women's voices so that women are not oppressed and champion the elements of feminism that have become popular in the west. Apart from these three popular establishments, there are also several other organisations that champion the same flow of thought.

Among them are the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS) in 1983, the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) in 1985 and the Institute of Policy Studies (IKD) in 1985 (Earnie Elmie Helmi et al 2018). Apart from being spread through organisations or movements, elements of liberalism are also spread through individuals.

Contemporary liberal Islamic social movements

The Liberal Islamic Movement has been at the heart of the Malay community especially nowadays. The liberal Islamist movement was seen growing in the late 1990s and in the early 2000s. The approach and method of the liberal Islamic movement in Malaysia is seen as trying to use rational thinking in interpreting the verses of the Quran and Hadith in discussing contemporary issues. Among the examples of contemporary liberal Islamic movements are non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Sisters in Islam (SIS), G25, and Islamic Renaissance Front (IRF). The group began to face

contemporary issues among the Malay community in Malaysia today (Ibrahim Majdi, 2017). To understand the movements of this group, put forward their brief background:

1) Sisters in Islam (SIS)

The SIS movement is known to be a feminist movement, a movement that champions human rights, especially women and children. Nevertheless, what makes SIS a liberal Islamic movement is when the SIS movement questions and interprets the argument evidences of the Quran and hadith according to their understanding (SIS, 2019). This is evident on the SIS website when they claim that Islamic law in Malaysia has denied Muslim women rights in Malaysia and is biased because their claims of Islamic law in Malaysia tend to overstate men. In fact, many studies have been done on SIS as a liberal Islamic movement in Malaysia whether from the point of view of organisation, members, influence and from the point of view of thinking. SIS is an association that carries the name of feminist Islam. Those behind the SIS association consist of former top government officials, lawyers, social activists, journalists, and academics (Senem Gurkan, 2018).

Moreover, the activities often carried out by SIS reflect the attitudes and thinking of their liberalism. Among them, SIS criticises religious authorities such as fatwas and religious departments either federal or state. Furthermore, SIS writing tends a lot towards the thinking of liberalism (Munif et al, 2013). While in the methodology of the SIS movement, they try to interpret and interpret the *nas* and *dalil* of the Quran according to a feminist perspective especially when it comes to Islamic family law. SIS also performs its own *ijtihad* according to the intellect and as a result there is an error in the interpretation of the *dalil* evidence (Abdussalam & Musa, 2014). SIS's approach to fighting for women's rights is a good thing. In fact, Islam also gives great recognition to women. However, it is not a license to perform *ijtihad* without authority (Quran 17:36) until it criticises the authority of other religions (Basmeih, 2001). This method also takes place in the G25 movement.

2) G25 Malaysia (G25)

The G25 Group is a movement that was originally made up of 25 influential and experienced people in various fields either from the government or private sectors. The G25 is a competitive group of Malays who play the role of a community organisation that is determined to voice the perspective of the *wasatiyyah* in religious matters. The G25 stressed that the administration should be run in accordance with what is enshrined in the constitution which guarantees its people's fundamental right to freedom of religion and voices their opinions. However, there are some doubts in the actions taken by the G25 movement on a number of issues (G25, retrieved on 16 May 2021).

Among them is the G25's opposition to religious authority in Malaysia, demanding that the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) be abolished and its accounts re-audited. The G25 also sparked controversy when it claimed that *khalwat* was a personal affair and that the *khalwat* punishment should be abolished. In addition, an open letter by the G25 titled "Debate and Discourse on Islamic Law" has questioned Islamic Law which for them is too extreme and violates fundamental freedom rights. In addition, several other issues that are seen as trying to challenge religious authority with the issue of "personal sin", the issue of headscarves, claiming *sharia* courts make the duplication of courts, the issue of religious department raids and many others (Nur Farhana Abdul Rahman, 2018).

They questioned that the actions taken by the religious authorities contradicted Article 11 of the fundamental freedom rights in the Malaysian constitution, namely freedom of religion. They are fighting for this fundamental right in the name of moderation in religion. However, what the G25 movement is fighting for has cast them as a liberal Islamic movement for its conflicting struggle with Islam (Nur Farhana Abdul Rahman, 2018).

3) Islamic Renaissance Front (IRF)

IRF is a social organisation established by Dr Ahmad Farouk Musa, a medical doctor and academician at a local private university. The organisation of this social movement was launched by Tariq Ramadhan who is an academic in the field of well-known Islamic theology in Europe on 12 December 2019(IRF retrieved on 10/8/2019).

If you look at the vision of the IRF movement, the main focus of this movement is to call for the revival of Islam from orthodox and conservative thinking so that the Muslim community can face the problems of the present. Furthermore, this movement claims that they bring *Islah* and *Tajdid* to a modern pluralistic society especially through the discourse of knowledge. To date, IRF is active in organising seminars and discourses as well as publishing books related to Islam (IRF retrieved on 10/8/2019).

However, the IRF is seen as a liberal movement when they often invite figures who are known to carry liberal thinking either from within or outside the country such as Chandra Muzaffar, Mustafa Akyol, Dr Mun'im Sirry, Dr Farid Al-Attas, Zailah Anwar, Farish Noor and several other names. Although the discourse brought by the IRF is seen as carrying a mind-opening title, it is seen that liberal elements exist in the discourse so much that it is seen as very controversial and brings polemics to society.

For example, Dr Mun'im Sirry's statement when he was a panel of the programme organised by the IRF brought a new interpretation of the Quran that contradicts the majority of 'scholars.' Among them is by claiming that the Quran is irrelevant and descending on Mesopotamia (JAKIM retrieved on 10/8/2019). This polemic has sparked a phenomenon of protest among various Islamic parties and NGOs such as the Mufti of Perlis, Dr Asri Zainul Abidin who was on the same stage with Dr Mun'im, mufti, State and Federal Religious Department including the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) through an open letter by the then Director General of JAKIM, Tan Sri Dato Othman Haji Mustafa and objections from government and non-governmental bodies.

The IRF brought about a reform that may not be in line with the teachings of Islam. This is because, Islam in Malaysia adheres to the teaching *Ahli Sunnah wal Jamaah*. Most liberal Islamist movements are trying to bring about other understandings that are seen as contrary to the teachings of *Ahli Sunnah wal Jamaah*. In fact, this liberal Islamic faith is also taken from figures who are known to carry liberal Islamic beliefs either from within or outside the country. These movements are strong supporters of the figure and supporter of liberalism in Malaysia.

DISCUSSION

In fact, this article found that the philosophy of liberalism in Malaysia is not a new issue, but a philosophy that has long existed among the Muslim community in Malaysia. The philosophy of liberalism has also been seen as an evolution among the community in Malaysia since it was first brought by the colonialists to form a social movement in Malaysia which is also referred to as the liberal Islamic movement. This study found that the proponents of liberalism are increasingly highlighting the philosophy of liberalism especially through the liberal Islamic movement di in the name of human rights. Although the philosophy of liberalism has existed at the heart of society in areas of life such as

economics, politics, culture, law and administration in Malaysia, the development and dissemination of this philosophy of liberalism if not acted upon will lead to threats in the form of faith especially among today's Muslim community especially in Malaysia.

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