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Islam and Politics in Malaysia: The Realisation of Islam as a State Religion in Sabah

Islam dan Politik di Malaysia: Realisasi Islam sebagai Agama Negeri di Sabah

Sharifah Sara Hasliza Syed Hamid* and Elmira Akhmetova**

Abstract

This paper analyses the process of independence in Sabah and the consequent Islamisation of its population, which caused the amendment of the State Constitution in 1973. The first part of the paper states that the unification of Sabah with Malaya into the Federation of Malaysia guaranteed its independence from the British colonial rule as well as saved it from the communist threat. The next part of the paper suggests that the Islamisation activities were highly associated with the political needs of the government where the Muslim political leaders strived for increasing the number of their supporters in order to maintain their seats as the ruling government in Sabah. Thus, the paper finds the strong relationship between Islam and politics in modern nation-states, and concludes that the rapid growth of the number of Muslims in Sabah later created the quality problem as their religious education was not seen as the priority by the ruling government.

Keywords: Malaysia, Constitution, Islam in Sabah, Independence of Malaya, Islam and Politics, Federation of Malaysia.

Abstrak

Makalah ini menganalisis sejarah kemerdekaan di Sabah dan proses Islamisasi penduduknya yang menyebabkan pindaan Perlembagaan Negeri pada tahun 1973. Bahagian pertama makalah ini menyatakan bahawa penyatuan Sabah dengan Tanah Melayu ke Persekutuan Malaysia menjamin kebebasannya dari penjajahan British serta menyelamatkannya dari ancaman komunis. Bahagian seterusnya menunjukkan bahawa aktiviti pengislaman sangat dikaitkan dengan keperluan politik kerajaan di mana pemimpin politik yang Muslim berusaha meningkatkan jumlah penyokong mereka untuk mengekalkan kerusi mereka sebagai pemerintah di Sabah. Oleh itu, makalah ini mendapati hubungan kuat antara Islam dan politik di negara-negara moden, dan me-

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nyimpulkan bahawa pertumbuhan pesat bilangan umat Islam di Sabah kemudiannya menimbulkan masalah kualiti kerana pendidikan agama mereka tidak dilihat sebagai keutamaan oleh kerajaan pemerintah.

Kata Kunci: Malaysia, Perlembagaan, Islam di Sabah, Kemerdekaan Malaya, Islam dan Politik, Persekutuan Malaysia.

Introduction

A glimpse at the milieu of the state of Sabah is essential for a full understanding of its multi-racial peculiarity. The state of Sabah is the second largest state in Malaysia after Sarawak as it covers an area of 72 500 kilometre square, and located at the north of the Borneo Island and has its land borderlines with Brunei and Indonesia, and it is next to the Philippines.¹ In terms of social settings, Sabah is commonly known as a multi-racial society since the early days of its independence from the British colonial rule in 1963. Its society consists of various ethnicities such as:

The native communities consist of at least 30 different races and ethnicities who speak in more than 50 languages and not least than 80 dialects. The main ethnic groups are Kadazandusun, Murut, Paitan, and Bajau. The other native residents of Sabah include Bonggi, Iranun, Ida'an and Brunei. In addition, the Chinese community is the biggest non-native community of Sabah today.²

The Kadazandusun is accordingly the largest ethnic group in Sabah and forms a one third of the total population. Sometimes they are simply called Kadazan or Dusun. The Kadazandusun communities live in the west coast of Sabah including Kota Kinabalu, Penampang, Putatan, Tamparuli, Tuaran, Ranau and Papar, in the interior territory of the state such as Kuala Penyu, Tambunan and Keningau, and on the east coast such as Sandakan and Lahad Datu.³ The Kadazandusuns are divided into 12 tribes and each tribe's name is associated with their dwellings and old practices of animistic believes that they had practiced before embracing

¹ Selamat Amir, Ishak Suliaman, Monika Munirah Abd Razak and others, "Islam and Muslim in Multi-Religious Society: Realities and Challenges in Sabah, Malaysia," *Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research* 13 (2) (2013): 147.

² Ibid, 147.

³ Noor Aina Dani and Mhd. Amin Arshad, "Teori dan Realiti Perubahan Bahasa: daripada Bahasa Ibunda kepada Bahasa Melayu," *Jurnal Bahasa* Vol. 4, No. 3 (2004): 410-411.

Christianity during the British rule. The tribes use different dialects according to the area they live, but the differences are not an obstacle for their interpersonal communication.⁴

Prior to the arrival of monotheistic religions of Islam and Christianity at the region, the Kadazandusun people were considered the pagans, who believed in animism. In fact, a small number of Kadazandusuns continue practicing paganism until now.⁵ Their traditional creed is influenced by the belief in the forces of nature. The Kadazandusun communities usually educated their children informally about their traditional beliefs of animism such as believing in an extraordinary power possessed by plants, rivers, seas, mountains, caves, trees, rocks, soil and animals.⁶ However, such traditional beliefs have been modified or abandoned after they have become influenced by the monotheistic religious teachings.⁷ During the colonial age they accepted the Christianity, and it became the main religion of the state upon its independence.

In 1960's the Muslims were regarded as the minority group in Sabah since they represented only one-third of the total population of 462,496. The Christianity was the major religion during that time which was the religion of the Kadazandusuns and followed by the pagans and the aborigines in the rural areas of the state.⁸ The survey conducted in 1960 revealed that the number of Muslims in the state of Sabah numbered only 172,324, meanwhile 75,247 individuals identified themselves as the Christians and 206,7040 Sabahians were practicing other traditional religions including the paganism.⁹

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Suraya Sintang, "Penganut Agama Islam dan Kristian di kalangan Masyarakat Kadazandusun di Sabah," *Jurnal Usuluddin*, [S.l.], v. 18 (2003), 60.

⁶ Minah Sintian, "Kepercayaan dan Amalan Masyarakat Kadazandusun dalam Pemeliharaan Alam Sekitar," Paper Presented at *Persidangan Intelektual Kebangsaan Malaysia*, UPSI, January 2013, 2.

⁷ Suraya Sintang, "Penganut Agama Islam," 64.

⁸ Mohd Nur Hidayat Hasbollah Hajimin, Ibnor Azli Ibrahim, and Azizah Kassim, "Migrasi

Dakwah Dan Impaknya Terhadap Perkembangan Islam Di Sabah Dari Sudut Demografi Dan Politik," Paper presented at *The Tenth International Malaysia Studies Conferences (MSC 10)*, University of Malaysia Sabah, 1001-1002.

⁹ Mohd Nur Hidayat Hasbollah Hajimin, Ibnor Azli Ibrahim, and Azizah Kassim. "The Impact of Migration of Philippines Muslim Refugees to the Political Survival of Muslim in Sabah (1963 – 2013)," *Jurnal Sultan Alauddin Sulaiman Shah* Vol 3 Bil 2 (2016), 132.

However, the situation significantly changed in 1970's when the Muslims managed to become the majority religious group in Sabah which led to the declaration of Islam as the state religion. This drastic changes in the fabric of society is directly related to the political instruments utilised by the regime in that period.

North Borneo under the Colonial Rule and Its Independence

Sabah was known as the North Borneo before its independence and appeared as a political unit in June 1882 when the state was governed by the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBC) until 1941. From 1941 for the next three years and eight months, Sabah was ruled by the Japanese Army.¹⁰ In July 1946 Sabah became colonized by the British for another 17 years as the British Crown Colony. Along with Sarawak and Singapore, Sabah gained its independence from the British by joining Malaysia on 16 September 1963, forming the Federation of Malaysia with the Federation of Malaya.

At that time, Malaya had already obtained its independence on 31 August 1957 and Singapore was about to achieve its independence through its incorporation with the Federation of Malaya. It is believed, however, that this would create an issue of racial imbalance as James F. Ongkili stated accordingly,

The development of a bumiputera designation for the Kadazandusun of Sabah can in part be traced to 1960, when the concept of Malaysia was seriously examined by Malayan leaders and British officials. Singapore was to be a part of the envisaged nation, but before making this important decision of accepting Singapore into the Federation, Malayan Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman had to think of a way in which Singapore could be incorporated without the island's large Chinese population upsetting the delicate racial balance in Malaya. Such an upset, were it to occur, would permit the Chinese to dominate Federation politics. This thought hindered the Tunku from initially favouring a merger between Malaya and Singapore. In short it was the fear of a communist take-over in Singapore that alarmed the Tunku, thus motivating him to pursue the idea

¹⁰ Sabihah Osman, "Pembangunan politik Sabah: Satu Penelusuran Sejarah," *Kinabalu: Jurnal Perniagaan & Sains Sosial* 14 (2008), 1.

of a Greater Malaysia Federation which would include the Borneo states.¹¹

Tunku Abdul Rahman's main concern accordingly was related to the proportion of the number of the Malay and the Chinese population in Malaya and Singapore. The census in 1957 revealed that the Chinese population in Singapore exceeded the Chinese population in Malaya, thus it should be found a way to balance the composition of the races.¹² The incorporation of North Borneo has been proposed as a solution. From the British perspective, this was practical to safeguard their interests among the states that had once been colonised and now to be located in the Commonwealth Federation.¹³

According to James F. Ongkili, the Malays of the Federation of Malaya warmly welcomed the incorporation of North Borneo due to the fact that the population in North Borneo also belonged to the same root of the Malay race,

Increasingly in the early sixties, Malayan leaders were acknowledging that the indigenous people of the Borneo territories could be classified as Malays. Malayan ambassador to Indonesia, Senu Abdul Rahman had made a six-day visit to North Borneo in 1960. In his report, he classified the indigenous population of Borneo as Malays. The addition of the Borneo territories was therefore seen as not imperilling the position of the Malays in the Peninsula. The indigenous population the position of the Malays in the Peninsula. The indigenous population of Borneo would help to balance the Chinese majority in Singapore.¹⁴

The incorporation of North Borneo and Sarawak into the Federation of Malaya thus has been considered to be very crucial in order to balance the proportion of the races upon its merger with Singapore.

Besides, the establishment of the Federation of Malaysia was also been considered to be helpful for the people of Sabah and Sarawak to improve their standards of living, and crucial in obtaining their independence. At the same time, Tunku Abdul Rahman felt that this political

¹¹ James F. Ongkili, "The Problems of Kadazandusun Bumipureraism: Promises, Privileges and Politics," *Kajian Malaysia*, Vol. 21, No. 1 & 2 (2003), 197-198.

¹² Aszlan Selamat, "Sabah dalam Proses Pembentukan Persekutuan Malaysia," *Jurnal Kinabalu* Vol. 19 (2014), 171.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁴ Ongkili, "The Problems of Kadazandusun Bumipureraism," 197.

unification shall facilitate the re-establishment of their mutual relationships existed earlier in the region yet had been lost as a result of the colonial developments. The relationship ties were considered inherent and, indeed, intertwined by the blood bonds such as a common race, the *bumiputera* (indigenous race) in the archipelago.¹⁵ The union of North Borneo into the Federation of Malaysia would assist the declaration of its population as *bumiputera*, as had been highlighted by James F. Ongliki, "Thus, with the Malaysia proposal, the Kadazans were posed with a set of choices. They could reject Malaysia and continue to be regarded as natives of British North Borneo or they could join Malaysia and be considered *bumiputeras*."¹⁶

On 27 May 1961, Tunku Abdul Rahman made an important remark at a luncheon of the Journalists Association of Overseas Journalists in Southeast Asia at the Hotel Adelphi, Singapore. In his speech, Tunku proposed that Malaya shall be combined with Singapore, Brunei, Sabah and Sarawak as a federation called Malaysia.¹⁷ He asserted that the unification of three provinces into the Federation of Malaysia will create a strong central government, and, consequently, the provinces will achieve their independence from the British rule. Tunku's proposal was well received by the British government especially its Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan. Macmillan invited Tunku to attend a conference in London in 20-23 September 1961 to further negotiate his proposal.¹⁸

Meanwhile, a consultation was also held in Singapore between the Governor of Sarawak (Sir Alexander Waddell), Governor of Sabah (Sir William Goode) and British Commissioner in Brunei (D.C. White) with British High Commissioner in Southeast Asia, Lord Selkirk, to discuss the proposal. Following that meeting, Lord Selkirk departed to London in July 1961 to report the discussion results to the British government.¹⁹

At the same time, Tunku's proposal had created a distinctive sensation in North Borneo public regarding their future under the possible join of Malaya. The proposal was viewed negatively in North Borneo.

¹⁵ Ibid., 172.

¹⁶ Ibid., 198.

¹⁷ Azharudin Mohamed Dali, "Perlembagaan Malaysia: Penyertaan Sabah dan Sarawak ke Dalam Malaysia." Paper Presented at *Seminar Perlembagaan Malaysia: Di Antara Sejarah dan Tuntutan Semasa*, Arkib Negara Malaysia, 5 Julai 2012, 5.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 6.

The most influential views on the potential creation of Malaysia belonged to President, Donald Stephens. He felt that North Borneo was not ready to join Malaysia yet and the potential unification will not provide anything more than changing its status from being a "British colony" to the "Colony of Malaya."²⁰ Although the United Sabah National Organisation (USNO), one of the influential political parties in Sabah under the leadership of Tun Mustapha welcomed the plan, Donald Stephens (president) and G.S. Sundang (deputy president) who led United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO) and also Khoo Siak Chiew, the leader of Sabah Chinese Association dismissed the proposal to incorporate Sabah to Malaysia.²¹ The opposition was expressed through the United Front which was set up on 9 July 1961. Generally speaking, the disapproval happened due to misunderstandings among the multiracial population of North Borneo regarding the future implications of the plan. The non-Muslims felt suspicious about the purpose of forming the federation while the Chinese were concerned about the potential domination of the Muslim community in politics, administration and economic-political activities in Sabah.²²

The British government sponsored the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association meeting held in Singapore in 1961, which was attended by the members of the Malaysian Solidarity Consultative Committee (MSSC) comprising representatives from Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo, Sarawak and Brunei to discuss the proposal for the creation of Malaysia.²³ The proposal was found the best suggestion for the relevant territories facing the current political developments in international arena such as the growing communist influence, and the unification of tiny territories into one united country shall be the best measure to protect them from that communist threat. As the result of the consultation of the MSSC with the British in November 1961, a commission was formed to review the views of the people of Sabah and Sarawak on the plans of the creation of Malaysia.²⁴ This commission has carried out its work in 1962 by conducting a comprehensive survey in Sabah and Sarawak and the commission's report was submitted in mid 1962. As the re-

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Juhirin b. Kantis, "Trend Pembangunan Ekonomi Sabah dan Keadaan Ekonomi Masyarakat Bumiputera (1963-1970)," *JEBAT* 16 (1988), 82-83.

²² Ibid.

²³ Azharudin Mohamed Dali, "Perlembagaan Malaysia: Penyertaan Sabah dan Sarawak ke Dalam Malaysia," 7.

²⁴ Aszlan Selamat, "Sabah dalam Proses Pembentukan Persekutuan Malaysia," 174.

port of this commission revealed, 71 percent of Sabahans had agreed on the establishment of Malaysia.²⁵

However, there was a debate on the legitimacy of the Cobbold Commission report confirming the voice of the majority of the people in both territories to join the Federation of Malaysia.²⁶ The issue arose when the Cobbold Commission Report was sent to the Prime Minister of Britain on 21 June 1962. The report stated that one third of the population in both Borneo provinces, Sabah and Sarawak, supported the union into Malaysia without any conditions, and was used to actualise the unification.²⁷ Yet, another two-third of population did not support the unification into Malaysia, but they hold two positions: first, to obtain independence and the second group opted for the British to resume governance of Sabah and Sarawak.²⁸ Consequently, Cobbold Commission report decided that the majority of North Borneo and Sarawak residents agreed to incorporate into one federation of Malaysia based on the fundamental principle that guarantees some privileges for natives, and thereby led to the provision of autonomous rights in certain matters to the two regions.²⁹

A Commission of Enquiry was established soon under the supervision of Lord Cobbold, which held responsible for assessing the opinion of the people of Sabah on their further independence through the creation of the Federation of Sabah. The commission submitted a report that emphasised that,

In Chapter 2 of the *Report of the Commission of Enquiry* (hereinafter known as the *Cobbold Commission Report*), which addressed the situation in North Borneo, paragraph 102 states that Islam in North Borneo was a religion practiced by a minority. This statement is significant because it frames the issue concerning the suitability of Islam as Sabah's state religion. The Commission of Enquiry noted that although the Muslim community had requested that Islam be made the religion of the Federation, the Commission

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ A Rahman Tang Abdullah & Saidah Alih, "The Process of Independence of Sabah and Sarawak (1961-1963): Revisiting the Legal Application on the Formation of Malaysia," *JEBAT* Vol. 44, No. 1 (2017), 26.

²⁷ Ibid, 34.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

had also received requests from people of other religions not to make Islam Sabah's state religion.³⁰

It seems that the report mainly highlighted that the people did not like the idea of having the recognition of Islam as the state religion although in the Federal Constitution it is mentioned that, even though Islam was recognized the official religion, non-Muslims have rights to practice their religions without any restrictions. Yet, the people in Sabah refused the idea of the declaration of Islam as a state religion.³¹

In addition, before the establishment of the commission, the British colonial government published a paper entitled *North Borneo and Malaya* where it was highlighted in paragraph number ten that, "North Borneo, which at present has no established religion, would not be required to accept Islam as its State Religion."³² This paper has also been submitted to the Commission of Enquiry, however, it is important to take into account that it was prepared by the British colonial government, thus the extent of its accuracy in representing the voice of people in Sabah would be questionable. At the same time, the Report of the Commission of Enquiry might not also fully represent the wish of people because during that time only a small group of people wanted to recognise Islam as the state religion. Thus, Sabah achieved its independence without recognising Islam as the state religion.

The Intergovernmental Committee (IGC) was formed to manage the constitutional affairs of the federation. It was tasked to examine issues related to constitutional guarantees of the privileges of the residents of both Borneo territories, considering the views of the legislative bodies there. The privileges include religious freedom, rights for education, the representation at the federal level, the rights of indigenous people and the control of immigration, the protection of nationality and state constitution.³³ The committee was headed by Lord Lansdowne, Minister in the Land Office of London, and Tun Razak Hussin as deputy chairman accompanied by the delegates from Britain, Malaya, North Borneo and Sarawak. It was directed to review the recommendations contained in the

³⁰ Mohd. Nazim Ganti Shaari, "'Unconstitutional Constitutional Amendments?'" Exploring The 1973

Sabah Constitutional Amendment That Declared Islam The State Religion," *Kajian Malaysia*, Vol. 32, No. 2(2014), 4.

³¹ Ibid, 3-4.

³² Ibid, 3.

³³ A Rahman Tang Abdullah and Saidah Alih, "The Process of Independence of Sabah and Sarawak," 34.

Cobbold Commission Report which will incorporate the special rights and assurances of the Borneo population in the amendment of the constitution of Malaya.³⁴ After two weeks of the Commission's commencement of their duty in Borneo in August 1962, Lord Lansdowne as the chairman of the IGC assured that Malaya had accepted to apply the concept of having Islam as a state religion in two Borneo territories merging with Malaya based on the proposed Cobbold Commission.³⁵

In response to the report, the North Borneo leadership led by Donald Stephen has drafted a memorandum known as Twenty-Point Agreement which was also accepted by the Sarawak's government. The agreement is a list of 20 points that was drawn on several things that need to be addressed before their unification such as the issues on religion, language, constitution, Head of Federation, name of the federation, immigration, right of secession, Borneanisation, British officers, citizenship, tariffs and finance, special position of the indigenous races, state government, transitional period, education, constitutional safeguards, representation in Federal Parliament, name of the Head of the State, name of the state, and land, forest, local government and others. Among the key points in the agreement, the name 'Malaysia' as the name for a to be created federation was accepted (point 5); as well as the name of Sabah applied to North Borneo as set out in Article 19 and is used extensively in the memorandum to substitute the name North Borneo.³⁶ Twenty-Point Agreement also discussed the matter of religion as it follows,

During the momentous events leading to North Borneo's membership in the Federation of Malaysia, the major political parties of Sabah drew up a document, the content of which they demanded to be protected as North Borneo's constitutional safeguards. This document is known as the Twenty-Point Agreement, Point 1 of which stressed that "there should not be any State Religion for North Borneo."³⁷

³⁴ Ibid., 34-35.

³⁵ A Rahman Tang Abdullah, Abdul Rashid Salleh, Kadir Jaafar & Tan Sri Pandikar Amin Haji Mulia, "Malaysia Agreement of 1963 and Legal Status-quo of Sabah and Sarawak: An Analysis on Historical Issue in Social Media," *Jurnal Komunikasi Borneo Edisi Khas (Konvokesyen ke-19 UMS)* (2017), 89-90.

³⁶ A Rahman Tang Abdullah & Saidah Alih, "The Process of Independence of Sabah and Sarawak," 36.

³⁷ Mohd. Nazim Ganti Shaari, "'Unconstitutional Constitutional Amendments?'" 1-2.

The document was claimed to represent the needs and wishes of the people in Sabah and it emphasized that they refused to declare any religion as the state religion although Islam was declared as the official religion in the Federal Constitution.

Upon the independence of Sabah in 1963, there were only eleven positions offered by the State Cabinet and only seven of them were held by the locals (Sabahans) and, most importantly, only two positions were held by Muslims, Datuk Harris Salled and Tan Sri Mohd Said Keruak.³⁸ During the early years, the cabinet was mainly run by the Christians, and the position of the Muslims in Sabah was quite weak as they were not considered as the cabinet's priority. Besides, the first Head State of Sabah called 'Tuan Yang Terutama' (TYT) after the independence, Tun Datu Mustapha, was of a Muslim origin. Yet, he did not have the direct control of the political affairs in Sabah and his power concerned mainly the religious affairs. Thus, his religious identity did not guarantee any impact on the state affairs, as at that time the government religious council was not been established to assist the TYT to exercise his power in the religious affairs.³⁹ The political affairs in Sabah were control by the Chief Minister, the position was held by Tun Fuad Stephens who was a Christian during that time and he will convert into Islam later.⁴⁰ To ensure the position of the Chief Minister to be held by a Muslim was definitely very crucial to elevate the position of Muslims in Sabah and to guarantee that they will have the direct control of the political affairs of the state.

The Freedom of Religion in the Federal Constitution

There are two different views on the position of Islam in the Federal Constitution. Firstly, according to Mohd. Khalilullah who quoted from L.A. Sheridan and H.E. Groves, the provision on the position of Islam is aimed at giving the country an external Islamic characteristic and also for organising official state ceremonies.⁴¹ This opinion was also endorsed and supported by Mohamed Suffian Hashim, the former Chief Justice of Malaysia, explaining the purpose of the provision as solely for

³⁸ Mohd Nur Hidayat Hasbollah Hajimin, Ibnor Azli Ibrahim, and Azizah Kassim, "Migrasi Dakwah Dan Impaknya Terhadap Perkembangan Islam Di Sabah Dari Sudut Demografi Dan Politik," 1010.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Mohd Khalilullah bin Mohd Zaidy, "Kedudukan Islam dalam Perlembagaan Persekutuan," (UKM, Bangi, 2015), 5.

organizing official state ceremonies such as prayer to be read at the official ceremony like during the inauguration of *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (Head of State/Federation), celebration of Independence Day and others.⁴² The second opinion was given by Hashim Yeop Sani quoted by Mohd. Khalilullah, who argues that the position of Islam in the constitution is very clear and should not be distorted that Islam is the official religion of the state.⁴³

The provision under Article 3 of the Federal Constitution is very important because it clarifies that Islam is the federal religion, but, at the same time, it also gives the rights for the non-Muslims to practice their religion freely. Furthermore, according to the framework of the Federal Constitution, the position of the Malay Rulers as the head of Islam for their respective states is guaranteed, while the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (Head of State/Federation) as the religious leader of the non-monarchical states is also given the trust to preserve Islam at the Federal level.⁴⁴ Wan Hussain, Anisah and Mohamed Anwar assert that it is important to recognise Islam as the official religion of the state because the sovereignty lies in the hands of Malay Rulers as the caliphs of Allah SWT in order to secure the original position of the Malay Rulers as the Head of the respective states.⁴⁵

Accordingly, Malaysia has managed to bring all races including of the Muslim or non-Muslim origins to the success and free them from the colonial grip and communist threats. Hence, when the people of this nation recognise the blessings of this development and peace, the best to uphold the sovereignty and height of Islam as the state religion. Thus, Islam as the religion of the state must be respected and obeyed according to the Constitution. Hence, the government must ensure that all forms of policy and laws contradict with the Islamic principles should be rectified to ensure social harmony with the religion of the state and subsequently in line with the principles of Islam.⁴⁶ Also, although the Constitution provides the religious freedom rights for non-Muslims, this right is subject to the law of morality, public order and public health. Thus, propa-

⁴² Ibid, 5.

⁴³ Ibid, 5.

⁴⁴ Wan Ahmad Fauzi bin Wan Hussain, Anisah Che Ngah and Mohamed Anwar Omar Din, "Islam as the Religion of the Federation: A Study of Legal History," *Akademika* Vol. 87, No. 3 (2017), 182.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 191.

⁴⁶ Haji Mahamad Naser bin Disa, "Islam Agama Negara: Undang-Undang Tertinggi Negara", *Arkib Negara Malaysia* (n.d.), 7.

gating of other religions to the Muslim citizens is also subject to state control and restrictions.⁴⁷

The Rise of USNO and Establishment of USIA

United Sabah National Organisation (USNO), the major Muslim political party was able to win the 1967 General Elections in Sabah and formed the government. This eventually opened the potential for Muslims to elevate their positions in the state politics of Sabah.⁴⁸ For instance, USNO took this opportunity to appoint the ministers and deputy ministers mostly from the Muslims origins after the victory in the 1967 General Elections.⁴⁹ However, the party soon realised that they will not be able to continue their rule because the Muslims were still the minority group in the state of Sabah at that time. This meant that the Muslim politicians were lacking the number of supporters because, even if the entire Muslim population of Sabah would give their support to the party, yet, their number would be not sufficient to win.⁵⁰ Thus, a non-governmental organisation was established in 1969 known as the United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA) which mainly focused on the process of Islamisation of Sabah and also to administer the religious affairs before the establishment of the official religious affairs office. It can be seen here that Islam and politics were inseparable in the case of Sabah as the religion was used by the political party to gain more support of the locals in order to uphold their position as the ruling government in Sabah, and this was achieved with the establishment of the USIA.

Prior to the establishment of USIA, there were other small Islamic associations such as Putatan Islamic Association founded by Datuk Hj Awang Sahari, Tawau Islamic Association headed by OKK Zainal Kerahu and Sabah Islamic Association led by YB Datuk Hj Mohd Kassim

⁴⁷ Ibid, 7-8.

⁴⁸ Mohd Nur Hidayat Hasbollah Hajimin, Ibnor Azli Ibrahim, and Azizah Kassim, "Migrasi Dakwah Dan Impaknya Terhadap Perkembangan Islam Di Sabah Dari Sudut Demografi Dan Politik," 1010.

⁴⁹ Mohd Nur Hidayat Hasbollah Hajimin, Ibnor Azli Ibrahim, and Azizah Kassim, "The Impact of Migration of Philippines Muslim Refugees to the Political Survival of Muslim in Sabah (1963 - 2013)," 132.

⁵⁰ Mohd Nur Hidayat Hasbollah Hajimin, Ibnor Azli Ibrahim, and Azizah Kassim, "Migrasi Dakwah Dan Impaknya Terhadap Perkembangan Islam Di Sabah Dari Sudut Demografi Dan Politik," 1010.

bin Hj Hashim in the state.⁵¹ These leaders took the initiatives to set up a meeting with TYT Tun Datuk Hj Mustapha at his residence in 1968 in Tanjung Aru in order to discuss the issues related to the status of Muslims in Sabah.⁵² The meeting ended with the agreement that the mandate would be given to TYT Tun Datuk Hj Mustapha to organise the first Muslim congress in Sabah, which lasted for three days and ended with the establishment of the USIA.⁵³

Upon the establishment of the USIA, TYT Tun Datuk Hj Mustapha was appointed as its president and other 17 individuals were appointed as the State Assembly's members, ten members among the High Officials and 14 members of local leaders to the board. Just within next six months, they were able to create 22 sections and 376 branches throughout the state.⁵⁴ In addition, they also created small units under this organisation in order to ensure that the administration will run smoothly such as Financial Body, Welfare Body, Educational Body, Zakat Fitrah Body, Islamisation Body and others while their main branch was located at a store in Kampung Air, Kota Kinabalu.⁵⁵

The USIA consequently was able to provide various facilities for the Muslims in Sabah, especially related to providing the basic Islamic knowledge and to propagate the fundamental Islamic teachings in the region. This can be seen through the construction of 68 *madrasahs* and public religious schools, and the importing of religious teachers from the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia in order to teach Islam in Sabah.⁵⁶ Following that, the USIA launched the massive Islamisation programs throughout the state including each city, town and rural areas and, by 1976, there were around 84,075 people who accepted Islam.⁵⁷ The organisation was also successful in spreading Islam among the important polit-

⁵¹ Nur A'thiroh Masyaa'il Tan Binti Abdullah, & Abdul Imam Basirun, "Pendekatan Dakwah United Sabah Islamic Association (Usia) Terhadap Peribumi Di Negeri Sabah: Tinjauan Dari Segi Ekonomi," Paper presented at *Seminar Antarabangsa Dakwah & Etnik 2014: Da'wah & Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Perspective*, University of Malaysia Sabah, 3.

⁵² Ibid, 3.

⁵³ Ibid, 4.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 4-5.

⁵⁷ Mohd Nur Hidayat Hasbollah Hajimin, Iknor Azli Ibrahim, & Azizah Kassim, "The Impact of Migration of Philippines Muslim Refugees to the Political Survival of Muslim in Sabah (1963 - 2013)," *Jurnal Sultan Alauddin Sulaiman Shah* Vol 3 Bil 2 (2016), 133.

ical leaders such as Tun Fuad Stephens and Datuk Ghani Gilong who converted to Islam in 1971. Their conversions to Islam were considered to be very crucial as these leaders belonged to the largest ethnic group in Sabah, the Kadazadusun.⁵⁸

These developments eventually led the family members and friends of the influential political figures in Sabah to convert to Islam. Due to a huge influence of Tun Fuad Stephens and Datuk Ghani Gilong, and their reputations among influential individuals in the state, some other political leaders also decided to convert to Islam and had a great impact on their followers and supporters to accept Islam.⁵⁹ Consequently, within a short period, the two-third of the seat position in the State Assembly became of the Muslim origin. During the 1971 General Election, USNO once again managed to win the election and continued to form the government.⁶⁰ In the same year, a religious council was formed for the first time in Sabah under the governing body known as Majlis Ugama Islam Sabah (MUIS) to be responsible in administering the religious affairs in the state as well as to aid in terms of religious education and economic development.⁶¹

The entire situation eventually managed to elevate the position of Muslims in Sabah as the largest religious group as they represented 260,945 people out of 651,304 of the total population and followed by the Christians with 157,422, Buddhists with 63,313, while the followers of other religions with 94,495 and, lastly, the pagans with 7513.⁶² Consequently, Islam was recognised as the official religion in 1973 where amendment was made to the State Constitution on 25 September 1973 in order to portray the strong position of Islam and Muslims in the region.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper suggests that when the North Borneo achieved its independence through the unification into the Federation of Malaysia, the number of Muslims kept increasing in Sabah and the government successfully amended the State Constitution and declared Islam as the official state religion in 1973. Nevertheless, it should also be underlined here that the main drive of this Islamisation process in Sabah was mainly related to the political motives. It led to the Islamisation of

⁵⁸ Ibid, 133.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 133.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 134.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid, 133.

the important political figures in the government, consequently, the majority of seats were control by the Muslims. Besides, it emphasises that the declaration was to ensure the smooth administration process from the federal to the state government when both constitutions declared Islam as the state religion.

It is true that the government was successful in increasing the number of Muslims in Sabah that consequently located them as the major religious group replacing the Christians. This also guaranteed that the Muslims hold the key positions as the ruling government until today. At the same time, this also benefited the Federal Government as the number of Muslims throughout Malaysia increased up to 60 percent of the total populations, besides ensuring their political control of the state of Sabah. The Islamisation process of Sabah definitely portrays that religion and politics cannot be separated in modern politics and, in this particular situation, can be seen that the rapid Islamisation process in Sabah became problematic as the new Muslim generations in Sabah are mostly poor in quality of understanding and conveying the Islamic principles and values in their daily affairs as the government was mainly focusing on the quantity for their political gain, while the right religious education and teaching of the Islamic values are often neglected.

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