

INCULCATING THE ESSENCE OF 'WASATIYYAH' IN MUSLIM SOCIETY: THE STATE PROMOTION AND MUSLIM INTELLIGENTSIA RESPONSES IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

Unlike many Middle Eastern countries which face drastic changes and upheaval from mass riots which express undesirable protest against the established status quo, the Malaysian government's response to da'wah movements since the early developmental stage of the Islamic resurgence in the 1970's to 1980's can be categorized into three responses, namely, confrontation, cooptation and accommodation. Recently, in June 2011, the government launched its official slogan of "Wasatiyyah" or moderation to revitalize its legitimacy for the purpose of gaining support from the Malay-Muslims by applying the Islamic concept of moderation in handling the challenge of religious extremism and Islamic resurgence at the national level, as well as championing this issue in the global arena. This paper discusses the concept of moderation in Islam or wasatiyyah as elucidated by al-Quran and as-Sunnah, as being the primary sources, Islam, and compares them with the slogan of Wasatiyyah as promulgated by the Malaysian government. This paper also analyzes the establishment's or ruling party's campaign to popularize the concept of moderation and strengthen its role to represent the Muslims' aspiration for the country against its traditional competitor, Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), which is typically known for its so-called "extreme demand to implement the Shari'ah laws", namely Hudud Laws, and establish an Islamic state. The concept of moderation introduced by the government has been described through various government official institutions, new media of mass communication or social networks and websites. As expected from the beginning of its pronouncement, PAS response to the state campaign of this religious slogan is predictable. In response

to this commonly well-known concept in Islam, Wasatiyyah or the concept of moderation, has been extensively discussed and has become the main topic in seminars, colloquiums and conferences by Muslim intelligentsia and scholars. This study employs content analysis of leaders' speeches in newspapers, official reports, government websites; and secondary sources, uses methods of observation and interview to evaluate the slogan used by the state, and examines feedback from the opposition and intellectuals. Reactions of Muslim intelligentsia and scholars may reflect psychological support of this knowledgeable group of people for the established regime which could influence the majority's acceptance.

Introduction

On June 10th, 2011, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato' Seri Najib Tun Razak, in opening the Convention of *Wasatiyyah* in conjunction with The Islamic Millennium in the Malay Archipelago, had insisted that Islam as brought over to the Malay society over a millennium ago was characterised by the simplicity of the da'wah approach by Muslim scholars and preachers. Concurrently, he declared "the Wasatiyyah Approach" which has been used by the government as a principle in the struggling issues pertaining to the development of Islam and Muslims in Malaysia, as the path pioneered by the past Islamic preachers in the Malay World.

The current development and campaign of Islam by the Federal State Government has led to the participation of the Islamic political party, PAS, in discussing the concept of *wasatiyyah* from their perspective as a response to the state-driven campaign led by ultra-Malay nationalist party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). This Islamic development and focus of the state campaign on the subject of Islam has also sparked discourses among Muslim scholars and intelligentsia in studying the history of the arrival of Islam in the Malay world, especially in the context of Malaysia and its relation with the principle of moderate approach offered by Islam as a method of propagating Islam. In addition to discussing and expanding discourse on this concept, this effort also

invited criticisms from PAS and Islamic NGOs on the state's purpose, intention and sincerity in announcing this Divine attribute, value and spirit in Islam which is seen and understood as merely an effort to gain public support, in particular of Malay-Muslims. Thus, this paper aims to discuss the concept of moderation as offered by the primary sources of Islam and compare it with the state's understanding of the concept and how it is being translated into practice. Responses of the Muslim political party and intellectuals must be considered to analyze the debate of the *wasatiyyah* issue which is believed to be a polemic for the political agenda of the ruling party in preserving their status quo.

The Concept of Moderation in Islam

The term and concept of moderation is not new in Muslim society in general and the Malays in particular. As a divine religion and divinely prescribed way of life, Islam serves as guidance for all people, races and nations. It is also a religion that meets human needs at all places and for all times. Among the more prominent and important characteristic of Islam is that it is a religion of moderation or *wasatiyyah*.¹

Wasatiyyah is derived from the Arabic term *wasat* which means just, middle, moderate or equilibrium between two opposite things and to be fair or just. According to Ibnu Manzur, an African scholar, Arabic lexicographer and writer of the best-known Arabic dictionary *Lisan al-Arab*, 'wastu' means in between, but if the word is pronounced as *wasat* it may describe three meanings: the middle path, the best or the chosen, and just.² It also means balance, not extreme or rigid, and not careless (concerned) in action and in giving rights to the right person.³ However, Ahmad Omar Hashem, a

¹ Sheikh Ezzat, *Moderation Is the Way of Islam*, (UK: Markaz al-Thaqafi al-Islami, 2012), 1. http://www.iccuk.org/downloads/Moderation_Is_the_way_of_Islam.pdf.

² The author's name is Jamaluddin Muhammad Bin Mukram Bin Ali Thabit al-Ansari, and known as Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab*, (Beirut: Darul Shadir, 1955-1956), 427-430. See also, Ali Muhammad al-Sallabi, *Al-Wasatiyyah Fi al-Quran al-Karim*, (Jordan: Darul Nafais, 1999), 15-16.

³ Abdullah Md. Zin & Khairil Annas Jusoh, *Pendekatan Wasatiyyah dalam Menghayati Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Kasturi Jingga Corporation Sdn. Bhd., 2011), 50.

Professor and President of the Azhar University, mentions that the concept of *wasatiyyah* can be described and reviewed from two different perspectives; linguistic and idiomatic. Its linguistic significance means anything that stands in the midst of two extremes. The idiomatic, on the other hand, implies the existence of balance between two extremes so that neither of them outweighs the other. This means neither exaggeration nor negligence nor excess of limits nor being in default. Accordingly, *wasatiyyah* signifies pursuing the best, fairest and most perfect.⁴

According to Yusuf al-Qardhawi, being moderate means to be in the middle position, and being balanced means to have a firm mind uninfluenced by either extremes, such as being too strict (*ifrat*) or too lax or liberal (*tafrit*).⁵ In other words, Islam stands as a balance in the middle between materialism and spirituality; between reality and imagination; between mind or reason and emotion; between individuality and community; between change and stagnation (consistency). At the same time Islam also forbids Muslims from extremism.⁶

Moderation in Islam applies to all aspects of Muslim existence in this worldly life and in the Hereafter. Moderation in Islam is neither subjective nor determined by rational thought alone. While thoughts, traditions and current practices are factors that may be taken into account when discussing moderation in Islam, it is determined based on its primary sources, which are the Holy Quran and the Sunnah. Al-Quran as the primary source of Islam mentions the meaning of *wasatiyyah* as middle as in *Surah al-Furqan* (25): 67 “Those who, when they spend, are not extravagant and not niggardly, but hold a just (balance) between those (extreme).”⁷ This verse describes the importance of prudence in spending money and

⁴ Ahmad Omar Hashem, *Moderation in Islam*, (United Printing Publishing & Distributing, n.d.), 1-2.

⁵ Wan Hussein Azmi, “Kesederhanaan Dalam Islam Dalam Konteks Malaysia,” paper presented at the *Seminar Antarabangsa Mengenai Perpaduan Ummah (International Conference on the Unity of the Islamic Ummah)*, Dewan Muktamar, Pusat Islam, Kuala Lumpur, 1987, 1.

⁶ Sheikh Ezzat, *Moderation*, 2.

⁷ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, (Maryland, USA: Amana Corporation, 1992), 904-905.

property. But even in charity, in which Muslims give their best, it is not expected that they should be extravagant. They should certainly not be niggardly, but they should remember everyone's rights, including their own, and strike a perfectly just balance between them.⁸ Islam has also ordered Muslims to be moderate in consuming food and drink. "And eat and drink but do not waste extravagantly, certainly He (Allah) does not like the extravagant." (Surah al-'Araf, verse 31). On the point of moderation in food consumption, it has been proven through scientific discovery that the Quran and the Prophet's ﷺ advice through his Sunnah served as precursors to the principles of modern nutrition in what modern diet therapists called "mindful eating" technique. According to this practice, the mind changes one's attitude towards foods and transforms the way one cares and feeds for bodily needs.⁹ This finding is evidence that the practice of moderation in food consumption will lead to healthy living.

Moderation in Islam does not stop at the manner of eating, dressing, but encompasses all aspects of human behaviour, interactions, and in the matter of religious obligation and worship. A good example of moderation can be seen in the hadith of the Prophet ﷺ who made sure that he and his Companions always behaved moderately. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ once asked a Companion: "(Is it true) that you fast all day and stand in prayer all night?" The companion replied that the report was indeed true. The Prophet then said: "Do not do that! Observe the fast sometimes and also leave (it) at other times. Stand up for prayer at night and also sleep at night. Your body has a right over you, your eyes have a right over you and your wife has a right over you." – (*Sahih Al-Bukhari*, Volume 7, Hadith 127).¹⁰ The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ also used the term 'middle' to refer to moderate and balance way of life in his words.

⁸ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning*, 905.

⁹ Islamweb Staff, "Food for Thought: Prophet Muhammad's Recommendations Regarding Food," Editorial & Translation Department, Islamweb.net, 16 May 2013, 3.

<http://www.islamweb.net/ver2/engblue/ebooks/en/Prophet%20Muhammads%20Recommendations%20Regarding%20Food.pdf>

¹⁰ See, M. Muhsin Khan, (trans), *Sahih Bukhari*. (Bangladesh: Islamic Foundation, 2009), 1165.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: “Do good deeds properly, sincerely and moderately... Always adopt a middle, moderate, regular course, whereby you will reach your target (of paradise).” – (*Sahih Al-Bukhari*, Volume 8, Hadith 470).¹¹ The above two hadith clearly describe how Islam adopts a moderate course in all actions including the practice of religion, particularly, in developing a Muslim’s spiritual and practical life.

Description of the practice of moderation in religious deeds in Islam is explained according to the principle of ethics. In the field of *Ibadah*, moderation in devotional acts is the ability to worship Allah between hope (*raghaban*) and fear (*rahaban*) as stated in Surah al-Anbiyaa, chapter 21 verse 90. This chapter describes the ability to persist on a limited scale of sincere obedience to Allah. The Prophet’s hadith quoted the above verse (*ayah*) rather than practising on an unlimited scale that which cannot be sustained. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: “The good deeds of any person will not make him enter Paradise (i.e., no one enters paradise only through his good deeds).” The Prophet’s Companions asked: “Not even you?” The Prophet replied: “Not even myself, unless God bestows His favor and mercy on me. So be moderate in your religious deeds and do what is within your ability. None of you should wish for death, for if he is a doer of good, he may increase his good deeds, and if he is an evil doer, he may repent to God.”¹²

The characteristic of moderation in Islam is clearly contained in the Holy Quran in that the Muslims are represented as the model of the moderate *ummah*. The Holy Quran describes the Islamic nation as the moderate people. Moderation in this case does not only mean “the quality of being moderate and avoiding extremes,” or “to be within limits that are not excessive,” but moderation is always considered as an excellent and praiseworthy quality.¹³ In relation to this statement, al-Quran mentions that “Thus We have made of you an *ummah* justly balanced that ye might be witnesses over the nations and the

¹¹ M. Muhsin Khan, *Sahih Bukhari*, 1442.

¹² *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Volume 7, Hadith 577. See also, “Moderation,” 29 April 2013, 1, http://www.islamawareness.net/Hadith/htopic_moderation.html.

¹³ Md Asham Ahmad, “Moderation A Virtue of Islam,” *The Star*, 16 November 2010, 1.

Messenger a witness over yourselves” (Q 2:143). Muhammad Rashid Ridha in his *tafsir* explains that the verse means with the guidance of Allah, He made Muslims as the moderate nation.¹⁴

As the most moderate nation, endowed by Allah SWT with the most perfect laws, clearest methods and easiest obligations, the Islamic Nation has become the best chosen of all nations. As al-Quran states: “He has chosen you, and has imposed no difficulties on you in religion; it is the religion of your father Abraham. It is He Who named you Muslims, both before and in this (Revelation); so that the Messenger may be witness for you and you be witness for mankind” (Surah al-Haj, verse 78).

Being the moderate nation means that the Muslim community is “the best nation,” “the most excellent in virtue,” and Islam by being “the moderate” indicates this religion is moderate and the best of all religions. Muslims have a huge responsibility since they are appointed by God as the witnesses against mankind. This implication has a far-reaching impact. To be a credible witness means a Muslim needs to know and embrace the truth, to have the courage to tell the truth, and to defend it against its enemies among the ignorant, liars and pretenders. A witness should not hide the truth or choose to be indifferent, because an act of indifference is antithetic to moderation. This act also betrays ignorance, cowardice and insincerity or in short, it is injustice. Justice, on the other hand, demands that what is true and right should be consciously promoted and defended, and what is false and wrong should be rejected and eliminated.¹⁵

The scholar of Islamic exegesis explains “the moderate nation” here as a just nation, not extreme in either the worldly affairs or the hereafter, but tries to keep a balance between the two. Al-Quran mentions in Surah al-Qasas verse 77 that Allah urges Muslims to not be extreme in religious practices as a preparation to the end of life and ignoring the world affairs. “But seek, with the (wealth) which Allah has bestowed on thee, the home of the Hereafter, not forgetting thy portion in this world, but do thou good,

¹⁴ Muhammad Rashid Ridha, *Tafsir al-Manar*, (Beirut: Darul Ma’rifah, n. d.), 126; Ali Muhammad al-Sallabi, *Al-Wasatiyyah Fi al-Quran al-Karim*, (Jordan: Darul Nafais, 1999), 22.

¹⁵ *The Star*, Nov. 16, 2010, 1.

as Allah has been good to thee, and seek not (occasions for) mischief in the land: for Allah loves not those who do mischief.”¹⁶ Islam allows man to enjoy his earthly life without forgetting his spiritual purposes and orientation. It also stresses on the necessity of balance between the needs of physical or material life and that of the spiritual. As Islam stands for life’s fulfillment, it does not deny the worldly and material life. Spiritual boosting can be attained by living piously through the journey and challenges of life and not by relinquishing the world. In fact, Islam strikes a balance between material, moral, and spiritual dimensions of life. Hence, man is to devote all his energies to the construction of life on a healthy moral and spiritual foundation.¹⁷

The term *wasatiyyah* can be used interchangeably with the word *al-hikmah* (wisdom) or the word *al-‘adalah* (justice). The concept of *‘adl* or *i’tidal* is the practical active establishment of a just equilibrium. It is the ability to harmonize the inward (*al-batin*) with the outward (*al-zahir*). It is not easy for humans to locate the just equilibrium without the guidance of revelation (*wahy*).¹⁸ In order to achieve this, harmony has to be struck between the mundane and the spiritual realm. It is essentially for this reason that excesses in the commission or the omission of all acts have been curtailed. Islam teaches that man’s success lies neither in asceticism nor in materialism, that man should neither shun nor renounce the material, nor be enslaved and motivated by it. Islam advocates a just balance between the two extremes. It adopts a balance between the spiritual development of an individual and his material needs.¹⁹

Based on this discussion, the term *wasatiyyah* implies justice, middle, intermediate, moderate, balance, excellence, the best quality

¹⁶ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning*, 982.

¹⁷ Fatimah Abdullah & Amira Adnan, “HAMKA’s Concept of Moderation an Analysis,” *Journal of Islam In Asia*, 2 (2011), 358.

¹⁸ Omar Hasan Kasule, “Moderation, Balance, and Just Equilibrium in Preventive Medicine,” paper presented at National Seminar on the Islamic Concept of Preventive Medicine jointly organized by IKIM and the National University of Malaysia (UKM) at IKIM Main Hall on 22-23 June 1999, 1.

¹⁹ Omar Jah Jr., “Moderation: The Right Epistemology for the 21st Century Crisis,” paper presented in the 24th World International Congress on Islamic Unity, February 19-21, 2011.

and wisdom. Moderation in Islam involves all aspects of a Muslim life, including this worldly life and the Hereafter. In fact, Islam emphasizes the balance between the physical (material), moral, and spiritual (religious) dimensions of life. As the best nation entrusted with responsibility as Vicegerent on the earth, Muslims should definitely be equipped with the best attributes to become witnesses of other peoples.

Wasatiyyah as the Malaysian Government's Slogan Representing Muslim Aspiration in Malaysia

Efforts of the Malaysian Government led by the Malay-based ruling party, UMNO, to promote the concept of *Wasatiyyah*, has become a polemic regarding their sincerity, commitment and intention to uphold Islamic development of the country. PAS leaders, for example regard UMNO's use of the term which is of purely Islamic content, with suspicion, and dispute the way or method of its implementation in the construction of national policy as contradictory to Islamic policy.²⁰ In this case, Nik Muhammad Zawawi Salleh, Information Chief of PAS Spiritual Leadership Council, accuses UMNO's use of the *wasatiyyah* concept as not a genuine slogan being full of contradictions to the Prophet's practice or tradition. On the other hand, UMNO tries to improve its commitment on the subject of Islam through defining this concept to be in line with Islamic principle and practice.

In order to strengthen UMNO's promotion of the *wasatiyyah* approach, Najib Tun Razak, Prime Minister of Malaysia through the government agencies and Religious Ministry has enthusiastically publicized the moderation approach. He is assisted by a number of pro-government Muslim scholars who work with him in describing, inspiring and instilling the content of this concept to harmonize it with Islamic principles as well as with his famous national slogan, 1Malaysia towards nation building and unity.

In providing a foundation based on the concept of *wasatiyyah* from the state's perspective, Dato' Seri Najib described *wasatiyyah*

²⁰ See Nik Muhammad Zawawi Salleh, Information Chief of PAS Spiritual Leadership Council, statement in *Harakah*, 15 March 2012.

as grounded on the basis of what was taught and modeled by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ through the historical chronology of Islam, namely, the spirit of the Medina Constitution and the Treaty of Hudhaibiyah, and the balanced moderation shown by the Four Caliphs (*Khulafa al-Rasyidin*) and his Companions.²¹ His statement provides an overview on the standard criteria for the foundation of the *wasatiyyah* concept proposed by the state. A significant element of this concept is the moderation that was practiced by the Prophet ﷺ throughout his lifetime as a model to be followed. Indeed, the understanding of moderation must take into account the spirit of the Islamic Constitution of Medina and The Treaty of Hudhaibiyah as a source for the formation of nation building, in particular, in the context of Malaysia as a multiethnic country. In addition, this concept was also blended with the just balance demonstrated by the Rightly-Guided Caliphs of Islam. Therefore, the idea of the *wasatiyyah* concept pronounced by the Malaysian Government is theoretically justified on the basis of the Prophet's tradition and his Companions' model of life.

Datuk Seri Dr Abdullah Md Zin, the Prime Minister's Religious Advisor, further defined the *wasatiyyah* technically, as "an approach towards building human capital, society and Malaysian nation in the holistic manner based on a moderate and balanced practice of Islam to produce an excellent individual and society."²² Abdullah in his book, "*Pendekatan Wasatiyyah dalam Menghayati 1Malaysia*" (translated in English as *The Wasatiyyah Approach in Embracing the 1Malaysia Slogan*) categorized "the moderate nation" as the balanced nation in three aspects explicitly, for physical (*Jasadiyah*), spiritual (*Ruhiyyah*) and intellectual (*Aqliyah*) needs which are inter-related. Additionally, his assertion has been supported by a number of Quranic verses, for instance, in al-Maidah verse 77, which explains the act of fanaticism and extremism as going astray from the right path. In advocating his point to this claim, Abdullah also refers to Yusuf al-Qaradhawi's Arabic term

²¹ Najib Tun Razak, "Setinta Rasa," in *Pendekatan Wasatiyyah dalam Menghayati 1Malaysia*, Abdullah Md. Zain & Khairil Annas Jusoh (Kuala Lumpur: Kasturi Jingga Corporation Sdn. Bhd., 2011), 13.

²² Abdullah Md. Zin & Khairil Annas Jusoh, *Pendekatan Wasatiyyah*, 50.

'*al-ghuluw*' which means farthest and '*at-tasydid*', which means excessive, mentioned in his famous work, as—*Sahwah al-Islamiyah* which was published in 1984. Yusuf al-Qardhawi is considered as a moderate Muslim scholar, an Egyptian Islamic theologian and the most influential scholar living today. He is perhaps best known as the founder of the *wasatiyyah*, the centrist school of Islamic thought.²³ He has had a prominent role within the intellectual leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Egyptian Islamic movement that has had an enormous influence on various local Islamic movements in Malaysia, especially amongst ABIM and PAS and their followers. By borrowing and using the term used by Yusuf Qardhawi, it may hopefully reduce criticism of the terminological foundation of the concept from the state's opponents and activists of Islamic movements. Moreover, Abdullah added that all the attributes of extremism are prohibited in Islam, as they diverge from moderate, just and balanced qualities.²⁴

On review of Abdullah's book, one may suggest that this work does not lag behind explaining the state's interpretations of the Islamic concept of *wasatiyyah* as a mechanism to back up their campaign against religious extremism and fanaticism. This is marked in Abdullah's description of the terms fanatic and extreme as attributes of obsession and extremism in holding onto a principle or stand, which is usually related to religiosity.²⁵ In the global context, it may refer to different schools of thought. Extremism in this case, according to Abdullah, signifies two types of groups, the extremely tight or rigid religious group and the extremely lax or liberal religious group. The first group type refers to someone's act that upholds his opinion or opinions of his teacher or *jamaah* (group) as stagnation and narrow mindedness in thoughts of a person who cannot see an issue in a rational manner. Based on Abdullah's point of view, this attitude claims that he himself or his teacher or group is the best and

²³ Helfont, Samuel, *Yusuf al-Qardhawi, Islam and Modernity* (Tel Aviv: The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2009), 41.

²⁴ Abdullah Md. Zin & Khairil Annas Jusoh, *Pendekatan Wasatiyyah*, 51.

²⁵ Refer to *Kamus Dewan*, fourth edition, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2007), 383, 406.

the only right one in any position, in comparison to others as the wrong side. Based on his observation, it is not surprising that these groups boldly blame others who have different views from them as ignorant and unwise individuals or even as rebellious (*fasik*) and disobedient. Abdullah then, illustrates characteristics of fanaticism though many signs for example, uncivil attitude in regard to using abusive and vile words. Abdullah later suggests that this attribute should not be used in da‘wah (preaching) for the reason that it is in violation and transgression of the words of the Prophet ﷺ who stated “Allah loves gentleness in all affairs.”²⁶

Second, the extremists usually harbour prejudice with cynicism towards another party but hide the good of others while they love to exaggerate the mistakes of others. Even worse, they make accusations, blame and punish the other side, in contrast to giving advice and teaching. Furthermore, amongst the signs of fanaticism in religion are groups who label others as unbelievers (*kafir*), except for those who hold the same principles with them or join their group. Abdullah in his statement considers these symptoms as dangerous and which could lead to the act of legitimizing the shedding and taking of the blood and property of others, respectively. This group is regarded as ‘*the khawarij*’ who were apostates (*murtad*) and opponents (*kufur*) of faith in the early history of Islam. The group, according to Abdullah, is dishonest and hypocritical in behavior and had been defeated in their thoughts and understanding on the real obligations and necessity in religion. The other sign is the attribute of choosing the militant and radical approach with the use of arms in destroying anything assumed as devastation to human life (*batil*) or try to transform the evil by using the power of arms. Abdullah in his opinion on this group sees that this phenomenon could be called as “*neo-zahiriyyah*” school of thought or a group who always busy themselves with trivial and insignificant matters and reveal the rigid and inflexible views in fatwa. Leadership and scholarship factors contribute to shallow religious understanding, rejecting renewal (*tajdid*) and practice of interpretation by Muslim scholars (*ijtihad*) in determining Islamic rules (*hukum*).²⁷

²⁶ Abdullah Md. Zin & Khairil Annas Jusoh, *Pendekatan Wasatiyyah*, 53.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

The second type of extremist group is the religious liberal who always proclaims controversial ideas as a result of modernist thoughts in the 21 century. The proclamation of controversial and sensational ideas in society is due to the belief in individual freedom and rights in practicing religious faith. The form of this thought does not recognize the absolute Divine source of the Holy Quran as Divine revelation; instead, it is advanced that rationalism must be used in comprehending religious text. According to this view, al-Quran was only the cultural product revealed to Muhammad who then had screened these texts and expressed the “spirit of revelation” in his intellectual speech and linguistical ability. This thought is similar to the view of archaic western orientalist thought, for example, of Goldzihar, Joseph Schact and N.J. Coulson who had defamed the Islamic Syariah as a created legacy by Muslim scholars in the past. As the orientalist claimed that the Syariah was only systematically managed since 300 years after the death of the Prophet ﷺ, so that it was not impossible for this discipline to be not free from various deficiencies, shortcomings and flaws as it was affected by human desires since the jurists wrote the discipline. Abdullah claims that the group is obsessed in discussing the Syariah issue relating to its objectives (*maqasid syariah*), extensively opening to the practice of *ijtihad*, questioning gender equal rights, vilifying and rejecting the hudud laws as obsolete and timeworn practice, and proposing free thinking. The liberal religious thought seems to be influenced by the philosophy of Western thought and its epistemological framework until they become fanatical practitioners obsessed with Western academic methodology which strongly holds onto rationale tradition.²⁸

Muslim thinkers have agreed on the cause of Muslim backwardness as attributable to a misunderstanding of Islam. Other phenomena that can be seen are the lack of balance in the way the extremists think and act, that of being extreme and rigid, or being very liberal, careless and unlearned in the subjects of religion. The moderation and balanced approach was practiced by the early generation during the lifetime of the Prophet's ﷺ and his Companions. Based on this understanding, the state appealed for a

²⁸ Ibid., 57.

moderate and balanced practice between the physical and spiritual needs or the worldly and hereafter is the reason that moderation is crucial towards national unity and sustainability in human life. Consequently, this will determine the success of the individual, family, society and the country at large. This declaration would seem to represent the official stance of the state on the concept of moderation parallel with the Islamic point of view, constructed with assistance of the Prime Minister's Religious Advisor, Dato' Seri Dr. Abdullah Md. Zin, Tan Sri Dr Mohd Yusof Nor, and other government religious scholars and offices such as Foundation of Islamic Da'wah of Malaysia or *Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia* (YADIM) of the Department of Islamic Development (*Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia - JAKIM*). Many articles and writings on the subject of *wassatiyyah* have been published by YADIM in its periodical magazine "*Dakwah*" and can be accessed or downloaded online through many official websites hosted by YADIM.²⁹ Meanwhile, the Prime Ministry Department has also launched its official website known as <http://ummatanwasatan.net/> in conjunction with the *wasatiyyah* concept, though it discusses different subjects. YADIM in one of its websites cited clear statements of the Prime Minister which may be translated as follows:

"The Wasatiyyah approach is based on the true teachings of Islam in everything he did and managed to bring a positive impact to the country." "Global Movement of the Moderates will save us from sinking into continuing ruin, despair and humiliation. It is time for us to practice leadership to bring hope and restore honor and dignity for all." "We must go back to the basic and high moral confiscated from us. We must choose moderation over extremism, choose negotiations over confrontation. We must choose to work together and not against each other. It should be a priority and

²⁹ <http://www.dakwah.com.my/v1/> (for articles in magazine), <http://www.yadim.com.my/> (YADIM's official websites), <http://www.wasatiyyah.my/>, and <http://www.terangbulan.net/> as alternative sources which purposefully focus on the topic of *wasatiyyah*.

not just put to our side.” “This is a clear example of when moderation can be achieved in each faith to overcome extremists who want to hijack the universal values of our religion. This balance leads to moderation or wasatiyyah according to Muslims tradition for peace and justice.”³⁰

The state points out that the *wasatiyyah* practiced historically in the Malay Archipelago was built on the fact that Islam arrived in this region in peace and harmony through the Muslim traders and preachers. Islam had contributed to the written language and scientific thought and knowledge development of Malays. As a result of integrated principles of as-Shafie and the Sunni schools of thought³¹ as well as local cultures, it had formed a unique approach in the practice of Islamic faith and understanding of the religion. This approach was especially used as a preaching methodology by Sufis and preachers who had also taken into account sociocultural and socioeconomic status of their target groups.³² This would also explain why Islam managed to spread itself from the lowest sections of society upwards, and why the ruling courts and royal houses finally allowed themselves to come under the sway of this new faith from abroad.³³ The state claims of *wasatiyyah* practice in the history of Islam in the region are supported by the government academics. In the *Wasatiyyah* Convention organized by the Islamic Science University of Malaysia (Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia) and Nadi Dialog Malaysia, Muhammad Mustaqim has proved this crucial historical religious episode by reporting that there was an intended

³⁰ For further explanation, see, <http://www.wasatiyyah.my>.

³¹ *Ahlu Sunnah wal Jamaah* are those who committed with the prophet's traditions and way of life.

³² The Prime Minister's speech presented in The launch of the *Wasatiyyah* Convention in conjunction with the First Islamic Millennium in the Malay Archipelago, at Pullman Hotel, Putrajaya on 10 June 2011. See, Najib Razak, *Gerakan Kesederhanaan Global*, (Kuala Lumpur: Global Movement of Moderates Foundation, 2012), 67; Abdullah Md. Zin & Khairil Annas Jusoh, *Pendekatan Wasatiyyah*, 64-65.

³³ Farish Noor, "Rethinking the Islamization of the Malay World," Research and Reports, *IIS Newsletter* 27 (March 2002), 18.

troop's mission to Java in 674AD by the Umayyad Caliph under the leadership of Muawiyah bin Abi Sufyan (661-680AD).³⁴ But this mission had been cancelled due to the coexistence, understanding and peace practiced in the region under the patronage of the Princess of Sima.³⁵

The Prime Minister's speech at Pullman Hotel, Putrajaya on 10th Jun 2011, explained that the manifestation of *wasatiyyah* and its philosophy in the way of implementing it has been translated in the development of nation building in Malaysia, with the multiracial ethnic groups residing under the flagship Muslim leadership. About 60 per cent of Malaysian population are Muslim, whereas the other 40 per cent profess other religions. In fact, even with the existence of complex differences, Islam is recognized as the official religion in the Federal Constitution, and in the State Constitution with a strong and established position in the Shari'ah laws of the country. Even though Islam inherits the special privilege and pre-eminent status of legislation and administration, this does not discriminate and underestimate the practice of other religions. In managing ethnic relations and religion in Malaysia, since independence the government chooses to steer its nation-building philosophy on integration rather than assimilation. Integration means that differences are respected, preserved and then celebrated in line with the Islamic principle by which there is no compulsion in religion and diversity as the foundation to know each other is a blessing for the country.³⁶

³⁴ Muhammad Mustaqim Mohd Zarif, "Satu Milenium Islam di Nusantara: Tinjauan Sosio-Sejarah," *Konvensyen Wasatiyyah Sempena 1 Milenium Islam di Nusantara*, at Putrajaya organised by Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia and Nadi Dialog (NADI) collaboration with JAKIM, 9-11 June 2011, 1-19.

³⁵ This claim has been mentioned by many western and local historians, see, S. Q. Fatimi, *Islam Comes to Malaysia*, (Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1963), 69; Abdul Rahman Abdullah, *Pemikiran Umat Islam di Nusantara: Sejarah dan Perkembangannya Hingga Abad ke-19*, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1990), 34; Abdullah Ishak, *Islam di Nusantara (Khususnya di Tanah Melayu)*, (Kuala Lumpur: Bahagian Hal Ehwal Islam Jabatan Perdana Menteri, 1992), 30; Muhammad Mustaqim Mohd Zarif, "Satu Milenium," 17.

³⁶ The Prime Minister's speech presented in The launch of The *Wasatiyyah* Convention in the conjunction of First Islamic Millennium in the Malay Archipelago, Pullman Hotel, Putrajaya on 10 June 2011. See, Najib Razak, *Gerakan*, 63-77.

The idea for applying the concept of moderation has been initiated by the Prime Minister through the Global Movement of the Moderates in late 2010 and mid 2011 in a series of his speeches in different seminars, which also introduced the concept of Islamic moderation, *wasatiyyah*. But earlier than this formal form of moderate movement, the term *wasatiyyah* as an approach was first mentioned by the Prime Minister, Dato Seri Najib Tun Razak in the Gathering Between Scholars (*Ulama*’) and Leaders (*Umara*’) held on February 5th, 2010 at Putrajaya International Convention Centre . The PM in this special gathering which brought together the two important groups in Islamic society suggested that Muslims should practice and actualize the *wasatiyyah* approach as the best practice in Islam.³⁷ The general concept of moderation was later introduced in his visits overseas. In the Prime Minister's speech at the 65th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York, he explained the idea to form the Global Movement of the Moderates in addressing global challenges to ensure peace and fairness, equitability and sustainability and to address the challenges of terrorism and extremism. This idea then received positive reactions from the world leaders.³⁸ Consequently, he detailed the proposal in his speech at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (OCIS), England on May 16th, 2011. And in December 2011, his idea on fostering the importance of moderation was accepted and listed in the Joint Statement of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), in Perth, Australia. In his assertions at OCIS, England, the Prime Minister suggested that we should inculcate the *wasatiyyah* spirit around the world, especially in dealing with violence and injustice in Palestine, and in attempts to resolve the global economic crisis.³⁹

³⁷ Abdullah Md. Zin, “1Malaysia: Konsep Wasatiyah dan Keadilan Sosial di Malaysia,” in *Menjana Negara Sejahtera dan Bahagia Menjelang 2020*, (Kuala Lumpur: Biro Tata Negara Jabatan Perdana Menteri, n.d.), 63.

³⁸ Najib Tun Razak, “Setinta Rasa,” in Abdullah Md. Zain & Khairil Annas Jusoh, *Pendekatan Wasatiyyah*, 8.

³⁹ The Prime Minister's Speech presented at Conference of Moderation and Civilizational Understanding, Centre of Islamic Studies, Oxford on 16 May 2011, 14-37.

In his campaign to steer this movement, the Prime Minister urges the building of a new, more progressive vision of the need for synergy between the East and the West, to work together to face the challenges of terrorism. This call was made when he delivered a speech at the East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii on November 12, 2011. On January 17th, 2012, Malaysia officially launched the Global Movement of the Moderates, with the support and participation of 350 delegates from over 70 countries, to spearhead the moderation effort internationally coordinated through the Global Movement of the Moderates Foundation. The Foundation serves as the starting center for consolidation and dissemination of information and campaign materials to all who wish to participate in the fight against extremism, including governmental and non-governmental organizations. Meanwhile, the Malaysian Institute of Wasatiyyah was launched to function as part of the Prime Minister's Office, promoting efforts on moderation and balance in all aspects covering the respect of democracy, rule of law, education, human dignity and social justice.⁴⁰ In his speech at the conference, Najib discussed various issues of moderation, including dealing with extremism, terrorism and financial extremist acts that cause difficulties and suffering. To encourage more scholarly participation, Najib also created the Chair of the *Wasatiyyah* functioning under University of Malaya, which is located at the city center of Kuala Lumpur.⁴¹

In actual fact, the idea of simplicity or moderation presented by Dato 'Seri Najib is not new to Malaysians and UMNO leaders because it had been recommended by his predecessor. Tun Mahathir had put forward the importance of tolerance and moderation in Islam as the example set by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Similarly, tolerance and moderation shown by the early leaders of the country, managed to create national unity and political stability, which is the result of consensus and mutual understanding among all races since the country gained independence. In fact, as a result of Islamic tolerance and moderation in practice, the non-Muslims support Muslims to enable them to achieve the country's higher level of

⁴⁰ *Berita Harian*, January 18, 2012.

⁴¹ Najib Razak, *Gerakan*, 97-117.

growth and success. This attitude proved fruitful and a source of pride for Muslims in Malaysia.⁴²

PAS's Response to the State's Concept of *Wasatiyyah*

Najib's campaign to popularize the Islamic concept of *Wasatiyyah* has received diverse reactions, appraisal voices, and not least, some critiques. PAS, as the main Islamic political party and a traditional opponent to UMNO, criticized the state's promotion of the *wasatiyyah* slogan and saw this campaign as contradictory to the Prophet's tradition. According to PAS, this slogan is merely cosmetic in nature invented by UMNO itself, as a product of the state policy which does not tie with Islamic policy. Therefore, according to Nik Muhammad Zawawi Salleh, Information Chief of PAS Spiritual Leadership Council, the Prime Minister cannot use the *wasatiyyah* term, as the ruling party UMNO does not fulfill the two moderate (*wasatiyyah*) methods used by the Prophet ﷺ in managing and ruling the government. First, *wasatiyyah* as practiced by the Prophet ﷺ comprised of the rules, state laws or policies which treat all nations and religions based on the principle of justice, while the state failed to uphold justice in the country. Second, the moderation that was ever practiced in Islamic society is established on the decisive method of Islam dealing with some matters which can be discussed and the others which may not be compromised, especially relating to some Islamic policies. Thus, according to Nik Muhammad Zawawi, the PM should understand the *wasatiyyah* concept referring to the Prophet's traditions which never existed in the UMNO-steered administration, or even if these traditions do exist, they are merely partially applied.⁴³

PAS President, Dato Seri Hj Abdul Hadi Awang in his response to the *wasatiyyah* concept launched by the Prime Minister, viewed it as not more than a slogan to replace the previous slogan of

⁴² Refer to Tun Mahathir's Keynote Address presented in University of Al-Azhar, Cairo, Egypt on 10 May 1998. See also Hashim Makaruddin (ed.), *Islam dan Umat Islam: Ucapan Pilihan Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, Perdana Menteri Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: Institut Terjemahan Negara Malaysia Berhad, 2003), 46-56.

⁴³ Salmiyah Harun, "Wasatiyyah Najib Tak Sama Dengan Cara Rasullullah," *Harakah*, March 15, 2012.

Islam Hadhari. From his point of view, the term *wasatiyyah* should not be translated according to its literal meaning, because it does not convey the actual meaning of *wasatiyyah*. Instead, this term should be supported by the Prophet's ﷺ tradition to transmit the message of Islam in promoting good and leaving evil. He said that many people intentionally misuse this concept without truly aiming to implement the message for the chosen *ummah* and applying Islam in its holistic form, even though the power is in their hands since more than half a decade in office. According to him, moderation is not practising Islam without passion or extremism, leading to the surrender and abandonment of the Shari'ah (Allah's rules), permitting what is wrong or prohibited in Islam, and vice versa, but rather, it is the proper and complete practice of Islam encouraging good behavior and forbidding evil.⁴⁴

The correct interpretation of *Wasatiyyah* in Abdul Hadi's views is that it must be understood with the Prophetic reality and the true teaching of Islam, so that Muslims become the just and chosen nation with their strong faith, submission and their good character to be exemplary to the rest of mankind. *Wasatiyyah* according to the Quran and Sunnah must be followed by fixed, firm and dedicated attitudes, not as a political slogan. He sees the *wasatiyyah* introduced by the state as if it has been immersed in the collapse of symptoms that are not able to be repaired through "renewal" (*Islah*) due to the wrong principle and the lame concepts used and followed by new problems that come one after another. In concluding his critical comments on the state purpose of introducing the *wasatiyyah* concept, Abdul Hadi explains that the meaning of moderation in Islam is not to inculcate Islam in a selective and incomplete manner.⁴⁵ He gives an analogy to reflect this attitude by saying that those who build the mosque but pray

⁴⁴ Abdul Hadi Awang, "Konsep al-Wasatiyyah," *Harakah*, February 1st, 2012; Salmiyah Harun, "Laksana Konsep Wasatiyyah Secara Menyeluruh," *Harakah*, March 13, 2012.

⁴⁵ See also Kelantan's PAS of Chief of Information, Dr Muhammad Fadzil Hassan's statement on the selective practice of Islam by UMNO. He advised Muslims not to confuse with the Arabic term used, as the UMNO's leaders were seen far from following the Islamic teaching outlined in the Quran. Aslani, "Wasatiyyah Ala UMNO Amal Islam Secara Terpilih," *Harakah*, November 28, 2011; *Harakah*, February 1, 2012.

in an incomplete way, develop an Islamic bank but forbid the elimination of interest (*riba*'), are the same as those who encourage incomplete goodness but increase the rise of devastation. Therefore, they are not qualified to demonstrate the model of Islamic moderation or *wasatiyyah* and are not qualified to be witnesses in this world and the hereafter. Abdul Hadi's statements clearly declare that the state does not aim at implementing what is meant by *wasatiyyah* in the true sense as it is merely another political slogan.⁴⁶

Since the polemic of the *wasatiyyah* concept has been intensely discussed at the national and international level, the PAS official newspaper, *Harakah* also highlighted this issue in a number of its articles. An article, dated Feb 19, 2013, entitled "*Fahami Wasatiyyah Sebenar*" (Understanding the True Meaning of *Wasatiyyah*) written by Abdul Muizz, discussed a few meanings which encompass this concept as listed by Yusuf al-Qardhawi, such as the just nation, the consistent nation, the best chosen nation and the strong nation. By giving a few examples of sarcastic remarks that refer to the government, the author has pointed out that today, many people love to quote the term introduced by the Qur'an without referring to the Qur'an and Islamic teachings, and thus selecting only what fit their desires. He also states that they proudly publicise the term moderation, but they are actually the masterminds who extremely reject religion. In a mocking tone, the author also denounces the government whose acts he considers do not reflect the true spirit of *wasatiyyah*. When after they celebrated the birth of the Prophet ﷺ, they welcomed in the following few weeks the famous Korean artist 'Psy' with his Gangnam Style. They are obsessed when reciting the Quran, but at the same time passionately deny implementing the Qur'an. Religious lectures are broadcast from the television stations, but the remaining air-time is full of hedonism campaigns. Islam is only the official religion from the author's view, yet solutions are sought from other sources.⁴⁷

The inconsistency in implementing the *wasatiyyah* concept in the real life of UMNO leaders, their family and the state administration has drawn the attention of PAS leaders, NGOs and

⁴⁶ *Harakah*, February 1, 2012.

⁴⁷ *Harakah*, February 19, 2013.

opposition parties. Popular and hot issues give rise to criticisms of the Prime Minister daughter's engagement ceremony which cost about RM409, 767 based on a bill sent to the Prime Minister's Office and this amount is considered as costly and extravagant. This disclosure by the NGO, namely *Teras Keupayaan Melayu*, has surprised the public, because based on common values, the state leadership should act and lead by example, and the *wasatiyyah* pronounced by him did not reflect the reality.⁴⁸ The PAS Youth Wing (*Dewan Pemuda PAS*) saw that even though the Prime Minister could well afford to spend extravagantly, still he should not be proud of this costly ceremony as many other people live in deprived conditions as a result of high living costs.⁴⁹ *Teras Keupayaan Melayu* (TERAS) also condemned the Chief Minister of Malacca who spent a great amount of money for his son's wedding ceremony which seems to contradict their words when applying the concept of *wasatiyyah* and the state famous Malaysia slogan "the people first, performance now." These attitudes show that the State leaders are insensitive to the people's feelings and this is a sign of the current government failure in managing the public welfare.⁵⁰ *Harakah* in its October 18, 2012 edition highlighted the Report of the Chief of General Auditor 2011 which stated the existence of leakage in the figures, proving the peak of BN's failure to properly manage the country's wealth. This report shows additional evidence of the government's contradiction with the practice of the *wasatiyyah*.⁵¹ Other issues which gain the attention of PAS official newspapers are the act of blocking Kelantan oil royalty and the high cost of "A Million Youth Gathering 2012" which both deny the full commitment of UMNO in the understanding and practice of the *wasatiyyah* concept stressed in al-Quran and Sunnah.⁵²

In response to mounting criticisms and questions by the PAS President in the Parliament, Najib emphasized that the *wasatiyyah*

⁴⁸ "Penulis Terbit Buku Khas Pertikai Wasatiyyah Najib," *Harakah*, May 18, 2012; *Harakah*, March 13, 2012.

⁴⁹ "Wasatiyyah: Majlis Bertunang Anak Tikam Najib," *Harakah*, March 14, 2012.

⁵⁰ Mohd Azmi Abdul Hamid, "Kahwin Mega: Inikah Contoh Wasatiyyah," *Harakah*, October 6, 2012.

⁵¹ "Audit Bercanggah Dengan Prinsip Wasatiyyah," *Harakah*, October 18, 2012.

⁵² *Harakah*, January 20, 2012; May 28, 2012.

campaign was introduced as the forefront to the 1Malaysia Slogan. The government also tries to prove that they are serious in fulfilling the *wasatiyyah* concept of government. Consequently, the *wasatiyyah* serves as “guiding principle” to the 1Malaysia Slogan, “People First Performance Now.”⁵³ The state also denies an accusation of the opposition that the *wasatiyyah* concept publicized by Najib is only a rhetoric for political agenda that sounds good but lacking in initiatives to strengthen the Islamic position in the country. The state believes that it has improved Islamic affairs in many aspects and consistently (*istiqamah*) implements moderation at the national and international level. With the Malaysian government’s role in the local and global arena, this effort could indicate the government’s high commitment in the development of Islam.

Muslim Intelligentsia Responses to the State Concept of *Wasatiyyah*

Since the pronouncement of the *wasatiyyah* as the guiding principle to nation-building and government transformation programs, this concept of moderation in Islam has increasingly received special attention from local Muslims intelligentsia. Muslim scholars’ reactions on the *wasatiyyah* concept initiated by the Prime Minister, Datuk Najib Tun Razak can be traced generally in their writings, statements and academic works which precisely discuss their thoughts. Their writings and views on this concept have contributed to the increasing literature and this also leads to the intellectual discourse on the *wasatiyyah* concept in Malaysia.

Diverse points of views amongst Muslim scholars can be seen in the discussion of *wasatiyyah* literally (language) and technically (term); as well as from the aspect of implementation by the government. In terms of language, Emeritus Prof. Dato’ Paduka Dr. Mahmood Zuhdi Abdul Majid, Dean of Kuliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) defines *wasatiyyah* as derived from an Arabic word ‘*wasat*’ which means intermediate or in the middle. But in term of its conceptual

⁵³ The Prime Minister’s speech presented in The launch of The *Wasatiyyah* Convention in conjunction with the First Islamic Millennium in the Malay Archipelago, Pullman Hotel, Putrajaya on June 10, 2011, 74.

meaning, Mahmood elaborates *wasatiyyah* as the middle, moderation, the balance, just, equality, superiority and excellence as is mentioned in Surah al-Baqarah verse 143:

“Thus have We made of you an Ummah justly balanced, that ye might be witnesses over the nations and the Messenger a witness over yourselves.”

Mahmood and Abdul Hayei also define the root word ‘*wasata*’ as the middle place that is located midway between two extremes on left and right of it.⁵⁴ For example, Mahmood describes that the attribute of being generous is considered as a praiseworthy attribute for the reason that it is located between being lavish and miserly, being brave is situated between the blindly brave and the coward. These definitions have been previously mentioned and discussed by a number of Middle East Muslim scholars such as Ibn Manzur,⁵⁵ al-Zabidi,⁵⁶ al-Asfahani,⁵⁷ Faris.⁵⁸ Even though these definitions have been given by previous Muslim scholars, they still draw criticism.⁵⁹ Al-Shamri for example, criticizes this definition as from his point of view, there is no halfway between good and bad due to the use of the term *wasatiyyah*, which is only noticed in two situations.⁶⁰ First, the situation which is in between two equally bad positions, such as the attribute of being generous between miserly

⁵⁴ Mahmood Zuhdi Abdul Majid, “Wasatiyyah Sebagai Strategi Menangkal Ekstremisme di Malaysia,” *Dakwah*, 14 March 2013, 1; Abdul Hayei Abdul Shukor, *Tafsir Pedoman Muttaqin*, Vol. 2, (Putrajaya: Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, 2011), 13.

⁵⁵ Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab*, 456.

⁵⁶ Muhammad Murtada al-Husayni al-Zabidi, *Taj al-‘Arus min Jawahir al-Qamus*, Vol. 5 (Beirut: Dar al-Sadr, 1966), 238.

⁵⁷ al-Raghib al-Asfahani, *al-Mufradat li Gharib al-Quran* (Egypt: Maktabah al-Anjilu, 1970), 819.

⁵⁸ Abu al-Husayn Ahmad Faris, *Mu‘jam Maqayis al-Lughah*, Vol. 6 (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1979), 108.

⁵⁹ Mazlan Ibrahim et al., “Wasatiyyah Discourse According to Muslim Scholars in Malaysia,” *Advances in Natural and Applied Sciences* 7/1 (2013), 7, 6-14.

⁶⁰ Thair Ibrahim Khudayr al-Shamri, *al-Wasatiyyah fi ‘Aqidah al-Islamiah* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 2005), 20-24.

and lavish. Islam absolutely rejects the two extreme characteristics, as described by the Quran in Surah al-A'raf verse 31:

“O children of Adam! Wear your beautiful apparel at every time and place of prayer: eat and drink: but waste not by excess, for Allah loveth not the wasters.”

Second, the situation whereby it is located in the middle between two conflicting positions (good and bad). The meaning of *wasatiyyah* in this circumstance is a metaphor against the bad rather than good. For example, when someone is in the position of the middle of being miserly and lavish, this means that he/she is stingy or ungenerous. There is a tendency that he/she has the bad attribute of being ungenerous rather than its opposite. This possibility is what is meant by the supporters of this view including al-Shamri.

Based on the above description, Mazlan Ibrahim et.al suggests that the features of *wasatiyyah* characterized by Abdul Hayei and JAKIM (Malaysian Department of Islamic Development) need to be reviewed.⁶¹ They elaborate the reason for this refinement referring to JAKIM's definition of *wasatiyyah* which stresses on balance, justice and diversity to prove that Islam is able to organize its society and establish the highest level of human civilization through the principle of unity in diversity.⁶² Mazlan and his colleagues also point out that if JAKIM means that the balance in faith lies between the straight and the lost, then it is wrong because it indicates that there are other beliefs which are better than Islam. Otherwise, if the *wasatiyyah* means between religious belief in many gods and the belief that does not recognize the existence of god, then this characteristic is considered true.⁶³

In relation to this example, Dr Zulkifli Mohamad Al-Bakri, the Spiritual Leader of MURSHID (*Multaqa' Asatizah & Duat*), member of Terengganu's Fatwa Council, and Panel of Syariah and Akidah Study of JAKIM, emphasizes that the faith of monotheism is just and modest, as it is placed between two extreme ideologies

⁶¹ Mazlan Ibrahim et.al., “Wasatiyyah Discourse,” 7.

⁶² Refer to Abdul Hayei Abdul Shukor, *Tafsir Pedoman Muttaqin*, 3.

⁶³ Mazlan Ibrahim et.al., “Wasatiyyah Discourse,” 1-14, 7.

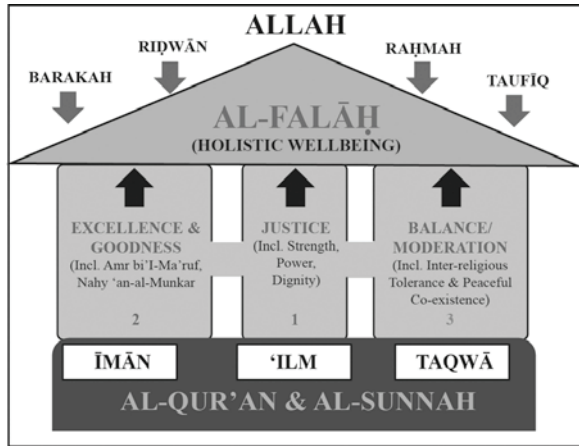
of multi-god faith and faith with no god. This view is also cited from Imam al-Sha'rawi to support the argument.⁶⁴ Zainal Kling (2011: 1), in contrast, views that the word '*wasat*' literally means the middle may change to the just, the best, selected (in quality), the most refined (in arts) and honor.⁶⁵ As in speech, 'the '*wasat*' for something is the best, just and the best selected. Thus, it can be summarized that the term *wasatiyyah* in its literal meaning according to Malaysian Muslim scholars refers to the middle, moderation, the balance, just, equality, superiority and excellence, the best and honour.

The technical meaning of *wasatiyyah* gives room for Malaysian Muslim scholars to interpret this term according to the perspective of Islam referred to in the Quranic text and the Prophetic tradition. M. Kamal Hassan, a Distinguished Professor of the Institute of Islamic Thoughts and Understanding, (ISTAC), IIUM has justified the main attributes of *wasatiyyah*, in the context of the Quranic expression "*ummatan wasatan*," which refers to the Islamic Community or Nation having the attributes of justice, excellence and balance in order to serve as Allah's trustworthy "witness over mankind" in this world and the Hereafter (Q. 2: 143).⁶⁶ He says that it can be translated as "justly balanced quality" or "justly balanced nature" of Islam and the Islamic community. But the more popular translation of the term, however, is "moderation." He attempts to simplify the intellectual discourse on the concept and to convey its holistic and inter-related nature as follows:

⁶⁴ Zulkifli Mohammad al-Bakri, *Wasatiyyah Konsep dan Pelaksanaan*, (Kuala Lumpur: Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia, 2011), 101.

⁶⁵ Zainal Kling, "Konsep Wasatiyyah: Perspektif Sains Sosial" (The Wasatiyyah Concept: the Perspective of Social Sciences), paper presented at *Konvensyen Wasatiyyah Sempena 1 Milenium Islam di Nusantara* at Putrajaya organised by Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia and Nadi Dialog (NADI) collaboration with JAKIM, 9-11 June 2011, 1.

⁶⁶ M. Kamal Hassan, *The Need to Understand Al-Wasatiyyah: As Part of IIUM Mission of Islamisation* (Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Islamisation (CENTRIS), IIUM, 2013), 7.



Picture 1: The Structure of al-*Wasatiyyah* designed by M. Kamal Hassan

The above picture illustrates that it is important for Muslims to understand the holistic structure of *wasatiyyah* and the organic unity of the qualities of justice, excellence and balance or moderation in order to strive for comprehensive civilizational goodness and excellence as a Divinely prescribed condition to carry the great status and title of “the witness unto mankind.” In response to the current initiatives taken by the government to popularize the Islamic concept of *wasatiyyah*, he does support this concept as it is guided by the primary and secondary sources of Islam. But he proposes that the government should emphasize on the matter of justice and excellence towards the integrated and comprehensive efforts in implementing the spirit of the *wasatiyyah*. The government focus and understanding should not concentrate only on the subject of balance, but disregarding the other two important components, namely excellence and justice.⁶⁷ This sincere and constructive criticism must be taken into consideration and positive action by the government as ruler and

⁶⁷ Interview session with Tan Sri Prof. Dr. M. Kamal Hassan on 28 May 2013 at The International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), IIUM, 24 Persiaran Duta, Taman Duta, Kuala Lumpur.

leader in regard to the best model to civil society as well as the best *ummah*.

This idea of *wasatiyyah* which is coined from the Quranic texts “*ummatan wasatan*” is supported by Ismail Ibrahim who further expands this concept to mean a just and the best nation, the best system, the balanced nation, nation which acquires the world and the hereafter, nation with self-esteem and excellence.⁶⁸ Amongst popular interpretations of *ummatan wasatan* by Muslim *mufassirin* are the just and the best nation as elaborated by *Tafsir Pimpinan Rahman*, an effort by the Prime Minister’s Department which can be translated into English as below:

*“Ummatan wasatan means the just and selected nation, and also means the middle-nation, which is the middle in his entire disposition, is not extreme and is not excessive in his faith, morals and practice as well. Everything is positioned in the middle, seen and learned and undertaken together, covering matters of both the worldly and hereafter. Every person who stands in the middle would take cognizance and deeply concerned of things going on around him. Then his judgment and knowledge of the bad and good of these things are just, true and valid. Thus so, he rightly testifies to people dissimilar to him.”*⁶⁹

Attention given by the government to popularize the term “*wasatiyyah*” prompted a group of young moderate scholars to define the concept and the perspective of *wasatiyyah*. This group of young scholars known as *Muslim Scholars and Preachers Gathering (Multaqa Asatizah & Dua’at - MURSHID)* consists of independent

⁶⁸ Ismail Ibrahim, “Konsep Wasatiyyah: Perspektif Islam,” paper presented at *Konvensyen Wasatiyyah Sempena 1 Milenium Islam di Nusantara* at Putrajaya organised by Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia and Nadi Dialog (NADI) collaboration with JAKIM, 9-11 June 2011, 1-2.

⁶⁹ See, Prof Dato’ Ismail Ibrahim’s speech entitled “Wasatiyyah Tonggak Kesatuan Ummah” (Wasatiyyah as a Principle for Unity of the Islamic Ummah), in the conjunction of *Maal Hijrah Celebration 1434H*, (Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, 2012, 1-24, 3.

preachers and famous religious personalities, who are actively involved in da'wah activities, and often appear in the electronic media, radio and television stations, that show their continuing support for such spiritual programs lately. This group is also involved in organizing a series of *wasatiy* conferences and seminars on various issues and subjects concerning *fiqh al-wasatiy* (the moderate Islamic jurisprudence) in faith (*Aqidah*), politics, economics, and social as well as on women. Amongst those prominent in MURSHID are Ustaz Dr Zulkifli Mohamad Al-Bakri (as a *Mursyid* of the *Liqā'*),⁷⁰ Ustaz Dr. Zaharuddin Abd Rahman (Chairman/Moderator of the *Liqā'*), Ustaz Dr Abdul Basit Abdul Rahman, Ustaz Dr. Zahazan Mohamed, Ustaz Hj Mohammad Nidzam Abdul Kadir, Ustaz Hj Aizam Mas'ud Nullify, Ustaz Hj Abdul Jamil, Ustaz Dr. Khairuddin Aman Razali, Ustaz Imam Muda (Young Preacher) Asyraf Mohd Ridzuan, Ramadhan Fitri, Ustaz Elias, Dr. Maszlee Malik, Ustaz Mokhtar, Ustaz Dr. Ahmad Wifaq, Ustaz Syed Mohd Norhisyam and many others. As an initiative to contribute to enhancing people's understanding of the *wasatiyyah*, MURSHID attempts to define and propagate it. A consensus made by MURSHID and collectively agreed upon is that *wasatiy* is an integrated positive attribute in all aspects of Muslim life, in term of belief, practices, spiritual, individual and group, while the term '*ghuluw*' as its opposite value means extremism in religion which would harm the individual and group. The basis for this statement is in Surah al-Baqarah verse 143 as mentioned by previous scholars. This argument is also supported by the hadith: "Avoid extreme (*ghuluw*) in religion, because they have been destroyed before due to extremism in religion (Reported by Ibn Majah and An-Nasaie with *sohīh sanad*)."⁷¹ The statement made is parallel with that of *the International Association of Muslim Scholars*.⁷¹ This group actively discusses several issues on Islam and gives their opinions and statements in economics, social, faith and even in politics based on Islamic intellectual tradition.

⁷⁰ As spiritual leader of MURSHID gathering. *Liqā'* is an Arabic term which means a circle or gathering of religious discussion.

⁷¹ MURSHID Members, "*Konsep Wasatiy*," May 26, 2011, 1. Murshid official Statement which can be accessed at <http://murshid.my/sample-page/>.

In contrast to MURSHID, the *Malaysian Intellectual Association*, (*Pertubuhan Ilmuan Malaysia* - ILMU) is the non-governmental organization (NGO) which consists of young scholars in UMNO. Young scholars of ILMU often appear in public representing the young scholars' wing of UMNO. Among the most prominent figures, is Ustaz Dr. Fathul Bari Mat Yahya, son of former Perlis Mufti Datuk Mat Hussin Jahaya. He is frequently invited to give talks and speeches on Islam. Even though he is quite flexible in participating in open debates organized by various organizations, he is still seen as devotedly defending the party in matters related to Islamic issues. Fathul Bari is also well-known as a young Muslim scholar who vocally expresses his opinion on leadership and *wasatiyyah*. He urges leaders to carry out the trust given by the people responsibly and justly. He also emphasizes that leaders must always place priority on the protection of religion, life, lineage and honor, wealth, and common sense. Although he is recognized by his knowledge in Islam, nevertheless he is often accused of being swept away, (in Malay it is called "*hanyut*") when he joined UMNO in 2010.⁷² In answering other accusations and misconceptions about his stand on UMNO, Fathul Bari also admits that UMNO-BN is the best platform for scholars of religion. According to him, Islamic scholars are never hindered to spread the teachings of Islam. He claims that UMNO-BN treats all people equally, even a number of religious leaders or scholars who are clearly pro-opposition are given the space and opportunity to spread religious knowledge as well as propagate their da'wah in television shows.⁷³ In the 13th General Election held on May 5 2013, Fathul Bari Mat Yahya contested in the State Legislative Assembly (*Dewan Undangan Negeri* - DUN) at Sanglang, Perlis, but he lost the seat to PAS candidate, Mohd Shukri Bin Ramli merely by 121 votes. Other than Fathul Bari, ILMU was joined by Dr. Fadlan Mohd Othman as its chairman, while the Syura members of ILMU are Ust. Dr. Sulaiman

⁷² See Dr Asri Zainal Abidin's statement on Fathul Bari in Salmiah Druhamad Drahsin, "Bukti Jelas Ulama UMNO Hanyut, Asri Jawab Fathul," *Sinar Harian*, October 25, 2012, 1. Dr Asri is a former Mufti of Perlis and Associate Professor of Universiti Sains Malaysia (Malaysian Science University).

⁷³ "BN Tak Pinggir Golongan Agama." April 23, 2013. Archives of News, April 18, 2013. *Sekretariat Ilmuan Malaysia*.
<http://ilmuanmalaysia.com/bn-tak-pinggir-golongan-agamawan/>.

Nordin, Ust. Dr. Azwira Abdul Aziz, Ust. Dr. Fadlan Mohd Othman, Ust. Dr. Fathul Bari Mat Jahya, Ust. Ahmad Fauzan Yahaya, Ust. Idris Sulaiman, Ust. Asrie Sobri, Ust. Rasul Dahri, Ust. Riduan Rajendra, TH. Isemaail Basri and others.⁷⁴

Another scholar who supports the state campaign on *wasatiyyah* and shows his tendency towards the ruling party is Assoc. Professor Dr. Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki. He is a young expert in Islamic economics and a former President of Malaysian National Muslim Students Association (PKPIM), a Muslim students' platform before joining the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM). He is now Director of Foundation of Islamic Da'wah (YADIM). In his view, the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) launched by the PM is now starting to bear positive results. Thus, he urges all organizations to welcome and support the *wasatiyyah* approach used to navigate the transformation agenda of the government in economic development.⁷⁵ Asyraf in his special column in the pro-moderate daily newspaper, *Sinar Harian* comments on the public outlook and appraisal towards using the *wasatiyyah* concept as an excuse to exempt a person from actualizing the best action, until he or she tends to slacken or neglect Islamic rules and principles. Therefore, this understanding should be corrected because it deviates from the teachings of religion. *Wasatiyyah* should be understood as not for slackening religious principles, as it is the balance between two extremes.⁷⁶

In pursuing the effort to promote moderation in the local and global context, the Prime Minister (PM) has gone round the world since late 2010 to convince other countries that Malaysia through her vast historical experience has practiced this concept of *wasatiyyah* since long ago. He claims that moderation practiced by people in this region also allows the expansion and rise of Islam and its noble values in this country. For example, the Prime Minister in his speech at the United Nations General Assembly in 2010 said that the

⁷⁴ "Identiti," *Pertubuhan ILMUAN Malaysia*, accessed on April 12, 2013, 1. <http://ilmuanmalaysia.com/tentang-kami/>.

⁷⁵ Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki, "Prestasi Ekonomi Serlah Wasatiyyah," *Sinar Harian*, March 27, 2013, 1.

⁷⁶ Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki, "Wasatiyyah Bukan Longgarkan Agama," *Sinar Harian*, January 16, 2013, 1.

equilibrium achieved in Malaysia is an example of moderation or *wasatiyyah* in the Islamic tradition of mutual justice.” The Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Anthropology of the National University of Malaysia, Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, in his comment on the Prime Minister’s speech which stresses on moderation and marginalizing extremism, explains that the return to moderation is not only rational and logical but also imperative. Shamsul also praised the PM and his efforts to popularize the concept of *wasatiyyah* and moderation, hence Malaysia is now the champion and driver of a very significant niche in global politics. He added that if adopted globally, Malaysia could re-define and transform the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and lead its new form, as the Global Movement of the Moderates (GMM).⁷⁷

Shamsul also comments on the term used in the different context of audience, locally and globally. From his point of view, the government should drop the use of the word *wasatiyyah* in the global context and retain the term “moderation” for two reasons. First, the use of the term “moderation” is already known globally as a universal value. However important the term of *wasatiyyah* is politically for the domestic audience, it does not make “advertising sense” for “moderate” to compete with *wasatiyyah* since the world endorses the English version of moderation. Second, whatever the “Islamic” political mileage lost or gained, the stark reality is that the government needs to stick to “moderate” because globally it is known as GMM, not GWM. In relation to this, Shamsul’s comments on the suitability of the term used in local and global context may have a basis to avoid confusion on these two terms as *wasatiyyah* may require certain characteristics compared with the universal and Western understanding of moderation. Even though the promotion of moderation and *wasatiyyah* at the same time may contribute pro and cons to Islam, Shamsul prefers the used of the word “moderation” as it is popularized as GMM globally. The GMM, in his opinion, is more than just *wasatiyyah* for it is an integration of relentless top-down effort and imaginative bottom-up activism, of ideas,

⁷⁷ Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, “Malaysia has a gift for the world,” *New Straits Times*, December 16 2011, 1.

practices and commitment, by Malaysians for Malaysia and for the rest of the world to share.⁷⁸

In conjunction with the promotion of *wasatiyyah* and moderation, Shamsul also touched on the serious action plans that need to be done by the government. First, the PM's selected thinkers have to elaborate the concept of "equilibrium" or moderation as well as *wasatiyyah*; second, to determine the methods taken by the Malaysian government which thus far have helped to achieve moderation and *wasatiyyah*; third, to identify the practical steps rolled out to build and sustain it; fourth, the exercise of monitoring, in the intermediate, short and long term, results of the practical steps towards achieving it; fifth, evaluating the success, failures and the unintended consequences; finally, how to put all these in a useful comprehensive package, for instance, from the kindergarten to the university level, as a procedure to be applied in all societies, globally.⁷⁹

In response to this new concept in the context of Malaysian society, the term *wasatiyyah* needs to be understood comprehensively. Most scholars agree that the term needs to be defined and understood by the people, to avoid the misconception not just about Islam and the government's purpose and intention to popularize this Islamic concept in Malaysia. Ismail Ibrahim suggest that *wasatiyyah* must be understood in a specific context, appropriate to the modern world of today's scenario which faces diverse crises and rise of radical and extremist groups.⁸⁰ Similar to Ismail, M. Kamal stresses on the importance of an extensive description of this concept because without a sound and proper explanation based on authoritative and scholarly sources, more confusion may also ensue is really meant by "justly-balanced quality," "moderation" and *al-wasatiyyah*.⁸¹

⁷⁸ *New Straits Times*, December 16, 2011, 2.

⁷⁹ Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, "Malaysia has a gift for the world," *New Straits Times*, December 16 2011, 2.

⁸⁰ Ismail Ibrahim, "Konsep Wasatiyyah: Perspektif Islam," paper presented in the *Konvensyen Wasatiyyah Sempena 1 Milenium Islam di Nusantara*. Putrajaya: Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia and Nadi Dialog (NADI) collaboration with JAKIM, 9-11 June 2011, 11.

⁸¹ M. Kamal Hassan, *The Need to Understand Al-Wasatiyyah*, 7.

The *wasatiyyah* concept has its role in nation-building. Some scholars view the importance of *wasatiyyah* to create the sense of belongingness, togetherness and the spirit of tolerance especially in the context of the multi-ethnic society in Malaysia. Prof Datuk Zainal Kling's response is that the *wasatiyyah* subject is important to be understood by the people on how it can be best practiced in multi-racial Malaysia and by presenting the concept on the global stage. He views the PM's bringing the Islamic-based concept to the global arena as being highly significant as Malaysia can help rectify misconceptions about Islam.⁸² According to Khadijah Mohd Hambali, et al., a lecturer in the Department of Aqidah (Faith), University of Malaya, the practice of *wasatiyyah* in the context of multi-religious background and cultures in Malaysia has been successfully founded, formed and developed with peace and prosperity. It is rooted deep in the practice of mutual interaction, social cohesion, tolerance and mutual understanding practiced amongst people in Malaysian society as recommended by the coming of Islam in this region.⁸³ Dr. Zulkipli al- Bakri too, supports Zainal's and Khadijah's ideas, but from a different viewpoint of human relations. Muslim and non-Muslim interrelations, in Zulkipli's point of view, can be explained from the perspective of Islamic principle. He explains that in a situation where non-Muslims live together with Muslims, certain concepts need to be clarified because they reflect Islamic values and principles. The attribute of justice, balance, tolerance, non-extremist are of the *wasatiyyah* values which need to be clarified and understood by the government as the ruler, political parties, the NGOs and people at large.⁸⁴ In relation to this, the discussion of Islamic tolerance and justice towards non-Muslims must be explained precisely. Perhaps it may provide an insight to a

⁸² "Seminar on "wasatiyyah" and its link to Malaysia," *New Strait Times*, November 23 2011.

⁸³ Khadijah Mohd Hambali et.al, *Relevansi Pendekatan Wasatiyyah dalam Hubungan Umat Beragama di Malaysia dan Indonesia*, (Kuala Lumpur: Department of Akidah and Islamic Thoughts, Academy of Islamic Study, University of Malaya, 2012), 11.

⁸⁴ Zulkifli al-Bakri, "Wasatiyyah Suburkan Toleransi," *Wacana Wasatiyyah*, October 12, 2012, 1.

certain extent into what Islam means and how Islam practices *wasatiyyah* in a mixed Muslim and Non-Muslim community.

The *wasatiyyah* approach is claimed to be the guidance for the national policy, including as an approach used in handling security and defense issues. When discussing the concept of *wasatiyyah* and the act of government in defending the country, Fathul Bari blasted those who were mocking and politicizing the issue in Lahad Datu, they were not just hits against the government and the defense forces. He explains that they should be fair in dealing with the issue and that the people need to understand this issue with knowledge and unite in defending the country.⁸⁵ However, Mahmood Zuhdi believes that the government's decision in defending Lahad Datu can be considered as *wasatiyyah* due to the government's action in launching an offensive against the intruders in Lahad Datu after efforts to resolve the conflict peacefully and avoid bloodshed were ignored. It is evidence of the government's consistency in practicing the *wasatiyyah* approach, while the government's stand in rejecting the ceasefire demand until the intruders surrender unconditionally, is considered appropriate and not against the law.⁸⁶

It is undeniable that some scholars are in favor and support government endeavors in the campaign to promote the *wasatiyyah* by looking at its positive impact in the national and international level, but some scholars tend to criticize this effort due to a few reasons. Amongst the criticisms of Muslim scholars in Malaysia is the implementation of the *wasatiyyah* concept as a national policy. Dr Abd Halim Muhammadi,⁸⁷ a former Associate Professor of the National University of Malaysia and ABIM activist argues that the current concept of *wasatiyyah*, often voiced out by Dato' Seri Najib, has not revealed any systematic structure in its implementation even up to now. Here, the so-called "*wasatiyyah*" still has not revealed any significant changes in terms of specific organized policy for the

⁸⁵ Ustaz Fathul Bari Mat Jahya, "Pengertian Wasathiyah," *Astro, Fiesta Mesra Belia 1Malaysia*, April 11, 2013.

⁸⁶ "Lahad Datu: Govt Practises 'Wasatiyyah' In Addressing Intrusion," *New Straits Times*, March 8, 2013.

⁸⁷ Personal interview with Dr. Abd. Halim al-Muhammadi on June 12, 2013 at Kampung Teras Jernang, Bandar Baru Bangi, Selangor.

development of Islam in Malaysia. He also doubts the ability and capacity of Dato' Seri Najib to be seriously concerned in applying Islam into practical action, unlike Tun Abdullah and Tun Mahathir who showed their vision, determination and success in the development of Islam. As for the term used and the campaign in promoting *wasatiyyah*, he evaluates this development from two aspects. First, the PM is trying to show that he is capable of and can pronounce the Islamic word. This argument is based on the term used, for instance *wasatiyyah* and then *Islah* which are coined in the Quran and the hadith. Second, the PM tried to take that sentiment used by the Islamic organizations such as, ABIM and to prove the UMNO approach as the Islamic approach and *wasatiyyah* was used to brand the party approach.

Siddiq Fadzil, a former Associate Professor of the National University of Malaysia and a former of ABIM President, who is now President of *Wadah Pencerdasan Umat Malaysia* (WADAH), acknowledge *wasatiyyah* as a main characteristic of Islam.⁸⁸ So, it should be demonstrated in all spheres of human life: economics, social, politics, education and others. Siddiq Fadzil also disputes the government claims that they are the first who pronounced and introduced the *wasatiyyah* concept, when in fact, this approach had been proclaimed and used by ABIM in the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁸⁹ It is proven that *Risalah*, the official ABIM magazine no. 2/85 published in August 1985 cited articles and sayings of Yusuf al-Qardhawi to grasp the importance of *wasatiyyah* or moderation in ABIM. One passage that describes the attitude and approach of ABIM in operating its preaching and educational (*tarbiyah*) activities is as follows:

“In the context of our preaching (*da'wah*), we should take a moderate trend (middle way, that is not reckless (hasty) and loose or lax (*taksir*), and not too extreme. This is because the '*al-khatu 'l-iqtidal*' is a right

⁸⁸ Siddiq Fadzil, *Islam and Melayu: Martabat Umat dan Daulat Rakyat*, (Kajang: Dar al-Hikmah, 2012), 85-88.

⁸⁹ Interview with Dato' Siddiq Fadzil on October 9, 2012 at Dar al-Hikmah College, Sungai Ramal Dalam, Kajang, Selangor.

direction, because it represents moderation in Islam
'*wasatiyatu 'I-Islam'*.'"⁹⁰

Above all, the claim of the *wasatiyyah* pronouncement is that *wasatiyyah* itself is one of the main attributes of Islam. Siddiq Fadzil personally disagrees when UMNO, their scholars and leaders claim that *wasatiyyah* belongs to them.⁹¹ Hence, nobody can claim that he/she or any group originated and introduced the *wasatiyyah* concept. Thus, based on his argument, Siddiq points out the fact that the term *wasatiyyah* is an attribute of Islam which traces its roots to al-Quran and the Prophetic tradition and that the term "*ummatan wasatan*" refers to the attribute of Muslims who are regarded as the best nation.⁹²

Siddiq Fadzil also critiqued the purpose of implementation and the way the *wasatiyyah* concept was introduced by the government. He sees that the success of the *wasatiyyah* implementation is subject not only to the ability to meet people's well-being in various fields but also to evade the socio-economic disparity in people's lives. With such commitments in implementation, these purposes are supposed to gain people's support for their accomplishment.⁹³ However, from Siddiq's point of view, these purposes of *wasatiyyah* do not fit in with the current efforts of the government. For instance, not to mention, the Prime Minister's anxious expression when delivering his speech in the *Wasatiyyah* Convention at Putrajaya on June 10th-11th, 2011, which should be taken in consideration, Siddiq quotes Najib as follows: "Why are corruption, maladministration, mismanagement, and inefficiency often marked in an Islamic country's management when we know that the teachings of Islam as contained in al-Quran and the Sunnah of His Messenger offer a clear

⁹⁰ *Risalah*, no. 2/85 (August, 1985), 3.

⁹¹ See the statement of the Chief Minister of Johor, Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman said that the *wasatiyyah* approach which by hold and practiced by UMNO allowed the party to share aims and mission with all components parties in the National Front (*Barisan Nasional*- BN) and other parties in the endeavors to develop this country. "Wasatiyyah UMNO diterima Semua Kaum". *Berita Harian*, April 29, 2013.

⁹² Interview with Dato' Siddiq Fadzil on October 9, 2012.

⁹³ Siddiq Fadzil, *Islam and Melayu*, 85-88; Mazlan Ibrahim et.al, "Wasatiyyah Discourse," 11.

guideline.” Siddiq then answers that we should rectify our affairs first before we can give guidance to human beings as Muslims. This statement shows that he is seriously committed to fight the factors which contribute to the obstructions for Muslims, for instance corruption, inefficiency and others. In term of actualizing the true concept of *wasatiyyah*, Siddiq does emphasize on the principle of “leadership by example,” as the country’s leader should be exemplary. He says: “What do you mean by *wasatiyyah*? Does *wasatiyyah* mean not wearing hijab? Thus, *wasatiyyah* is that simple. Wasteful, for the party, for banquets; wasteful, in the many times of going shopping abroad. Is this the meaning of *wasatiyyah*?.”⁹⁴ As in the explanation above, Siddiq is concerned with the subject of Islamic ethics, integrity, leadership and accountability in politics because these are factors leading to the downfall of human civilization in history.

In assessing the development of Islam and the emerging issues relating to Islam which are taking place in Malaysia, especially response and counter reactions to the government-political party (refer to UMNO-PAS), we have to see them through some aspects. First, the development of Islam in Malaysia was driven through support from various parties, the government, the Islamic political parties, the NGOs and civil society. Although some people see no impact of the pronouncement of *wasatiyyah* on the development of Islam in Malaysia, but only rhetoric to tackle the rise of radical Islamic groups, however, if we look at this issue from different perspectives, this concept has successfully developed thinking about the holistic nature of Islam which stands based on justice, excellence and balance.

The opinion which said that the introduction of this concept by the ruling party, UMNO is to compete with its rival, PAS may also have its basis and reason. This is seen from the situation and actions of both parties which often counter-reply in response to issues related to religion to champion the interests of Islam and Muslim in the country. Several issues such as, criticism and appreciation of the concept of *wasatiyyah* by the government, the use of the word Allah for translation purposes and by non-Muslims, *Amanat* (the message) by Haji Hadi and the *takfir* issue are issues which catch the attention of

⁹⁴ Interview with Dato’ Siddiq Fadzil on October 9, 2012.

both Muslim-Malay parties in Malaysia. However, even though these issues frequently lead to conflict and sharp hostility between the two sides, nevertheless they are easily abated and do not lead to serious tension as to require a party to take up arms. The political dynamics in the development of Islam in Malaysia shows that issues on Islam always receive high priority, special attention and concern that are earmarked in the list of the government and political parties and other non-governmental organizations in representing the aspirations of the Malay-Muslim community.

In dealing with various issues related to the development of Islam, the role of the opposition is very critical in the Malaysian political and social context. The opposition such as, PAS and the Islamic NGOs appear to act as a pressure group or the main force and as examiner and balancer (*check and balance*) in the Islamic development activities run by the government. From the perspective of the opposition and Islamic NGOs, UMNO and The National Front (*Barisan Nasional*) have been given the mandate by the people to govern. So, the existing government led by UMNO from their point of view, should serve not only to improve the progress of Islam, but have to strive in adopting the spirit of *wasatiyyah* based on what is determined by the sources and teachings of Islam. Therefore, the responsibility of UMNO and the BN government is to fulfill the people's trust and their promise as best as they can, be fair to all, including to ensure that the *wasatiyyah* concept is applied in accordance with the true teachings of Islam.

If the opposition and Islamic NGOs act as a “pressure group” and “the checker and balancer,” intellectuals on the other hand, serve as the first referees, experts and input providers to intellectual discourse of Islamization. In the case of promoting Islam as a subject of the government policy, such as the *wasatiyyah* concept, experts are involved in the process of instilling the worldview content, and designing the structure and mechanism of implementation. Second, they also act as preachers who are actively involved in propagating activities, in the sense of providing a better understanding of Islam to the Muslim community in their publications, writings and academic activities. If there is a discrepancy and confusion in understanding the true meaning of the term used by the government or in dialogues

at the community level, the role of scholars is vital in this situation. For that reason, it is their responsibility

to react and to correct such misunderstandings due to their expertise and the people's expectations based on their knowledge towards the community. Discussions and exchange of views among experts who have taken part in the *muzakarah* (experts' discourse) organized by the Malaysian Institute of Islamic Understanding (*Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia - IKIM*) must be continued to foster people's awareness of Islam and increase understanding of this religion in the society. Such discussions may promote a harmonious dialogue in different disciplines of knowledge and amongst experts in the development of Islam. Any resolution of this discussion should be disseminated to the community through a variety of channels in the mainstream electronic or print media.

Conclusion

In short, the *wasatiyyah* concept according to Muslim scholars in Malaysia should be properly understood not just from the perspective of moderation and middle way, but also comprehensively in reference to its extended meaning as justice, balance or equilibrium, the best, excellence, honour and etc. In general, the *wasatiyyah* concept proclaimed by the government has been explained in the written works (book and articles in seminars and newspaper) and in official speeches in accordance to what is cited in the Quran and hadith. Muslim scholars in Malaysia do not argue and question on the definition of *wasatiyyah* as they also contribute in defining the concept in a comprehensive manner. Similarly, in the objective of its introduction, some experts see that it may benefit Muslims and enhance the progress of Islam in Malaysia and marginalize extremism in many aspects. But some scholars are critical in evaluating the proper strategic plan, the structure and comprehensive implementation in strengthening the concept of *wasatiyyah* in the government policy.

The intelligentsia, who possess a high level of academic and intellectual quality, and their sincere critique and comments on certain aspects of *wasatiyyah* plan, should be taken into consideration by the government for the betterment and improvement of the national policy

involving Islam and its propagation. Therefore, the government should review their strategic planning and see the way the *wasatiyyah* concept can be applied, be implemented and be enforced as an approach to strengthen the function of Islam as the way of life for Muslims. At the same time, Islam may also function as a bridge in nation-building in the multi-ethnic society in Malaysia.

In the context of discussion on the concept of *wasatiyyah*, the ruling party or the government, the opposition and NGOs, as well as the intellectual Muslims should be equally responsible and see this Islamic concept with a positive outlook for the sake of enhancing the progress of Islam in Malaysia. As in the case of the introduction of Islam Hadhari, this concept should be applied in a comprehensive manner, towards perfection and with a strong commitment by the government leaders and people in the interest of human benefit, for the sake of public justice and spiritual well-being of Muslims and non-Muslims alike in Malaysia.