

THE RISE OF LIBERALISM AND IT'S CHALLENGES TO MUSLIMS' 'AQĪDAH IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract	<p><i>This paper discusses the rise of Liberalism in Malaysia considering religious perspective. It explores the historical background of liberalism in Malaysia and its challenges to Muslims' 'aqīdah implicated by the liberal groups who subscribes to liberal interpretation on the fundamentals of Islam. The author employs descriptive and textual analyses methods in analyzing the data gathered related the philosophy, meaning, origin and ideas of liberalism that found its' root in the Western rejection of religion and tradition. The findings reveal that the philosophy has penetrated the Malaysian society mainly around education, economic and religion. Regarding its threat on Muslims' 'aqīdah it is found that the challenges brought by this philosophy towards the sanctity of Islam in particular, and other religions in general, are real. Liberalism marginalized religion and spirituality for the sake of defending human rights and freedom. However, at the extreme, the liberal group went beyond the accepted norms and values upheld by the society.</i></p> <p>Keywords: <i>Challenges, 'Aqīdah, Liberalism, Religious, Malaysia.</i></p>
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INTRODUCTION

The objective of this research is to explore the real meaning of liberalism, its history, and its challenges to Muslims' 'aqīdah in Malaysia. The philosophy of liberalism is among the widely spread and controversial philosophy that is receiving global attention today. Liberalism in general refers to an ideology emerging in the West with its political, economic, scientific, and religious aspects. Its common characteristics in all these fields are the critical quest for liberty, freedom, and growth in the capacity and power of individuals and societies to achieve more satisfying ways of living. Having its origin in the Western bedrock, this philosophy is a product of modernity in the series of struggle against religion and tradition. Malaysia, without exception, has long been exposed to this philosophy. Since the beginning of this century, there has been visible support for liberalism from certain groups which has led to public and intellectual debates. As a result, this philosophy is threatening Muslims' 'aqīdah. This article therefore hopes to provide an intellectual insight from the perspective of Islam in understanding liberalism and the way it challenges Muslims' 'aqīdah in Malaysia. In addition, since Malaysians are living in a multi-religious society, the penetration of liberalism in the Muslims mind will indirectly affect non-Muslims' understanding of Islam and interreligious relation in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts qualitative methods which involve collecting and analysing data. In collecting the data, the research ventured into the philosophical ideas and theoretical

foundations of liberalism. The methodology employed are historical and conceptual analysis which depends entirely on library research. In describing the meaning of liberalism and its history in Malaysia, both primary and secondary sources would be relied upon.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Meaning of Liberalism in Religious Perspective

The etymology and definition of liberalism varies as philosophers, ideologists, politicians as well as sociologists offered its definition from their respective background of specializations, and there is no specific definition, as it loads hundreds of meanings rooted from different scopes.

First and foremost, it is essential to deliberate the origin and the meaning of liberalism. The term 'liberalism,' comes from Latin 'liber' which means 'free,' refers originally to the philosophy of freedom (Ludwig Von Mises, 1985). Mises stated that the meaning was retained until early eighteenth century and gradually evolved in recent decades, whereby liberalism may have extended compared to its earlier meaning. He added that the so-called philosophical socialists in the United States had used the word and monopolized it in their welfare and governance programs in the sense that liberalism refers to political issues and agendas (Ludwig Von Mises, 1985). The Modern Catholic Encyclopaedia explains that liberalism is a philosophy that consists of some features in the philosophies of humanism, rationalism, nationalism, idealism, and romanticism. A closer examination on these philosophies traces some common characteristics with the philosophy of liberalism, which is the importance of values and goodness of human beings that uphold the primary of individuals hence its anthropocentric orientation as expound by the famous Greek Sophist; Protagoras of Abdera (l.c. 485-415 BCE) in his famous dictum "Man is the measure of all things" (Michael Nill, 1985).

It is ironic that throughout history, liberalism found its root in politics within the Western context. However, from time to time, it has subtly entered religion, and in this case, Christianity, being the dominant religion in the West, was made susceptible to the values promoted under liberalism. Grescham Machen deliberated clearly on how liberalism entered Christianity, thus bringing a new interpretation in the understanding of the traditional doctrines to the extent that the doctrine of Messiahship of Jesus and his Resurrection were radically reinterpreted (Duncan Howlett, 1995). Duncan Howlett stated that religious liberalism generally refers to a movement in religion, which was prominent in the nineteenth-century Christianity, and became dominant in Protestantism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He added that it was an attempt to incorporate or to assimilate the thought pattern of the modern Western culture into the traditional Christianity (Duncan Howlett, 1995). In the eighteenth century, liberalism flourished into the stream of religious sceptics and created more controversial issues in religions particularly on the later part of the nineteenth century. An example of the controversial issues brought by the liberalism is on the style of Scriptural hermeneutics or also regarded as the interpretation of the Bible within the Christians' view. Instead of considering the Bible as a collection of factual statements, the liberal Christian scholars viewed the Bible as a compilation within a historical or cultural context, documenting the authors' beliefs and feelings on God (John Warwick Montgomery, 1970).

Much has been offered on the definitions of liberalism, however, to put it in the simplest manner, liberalism is a philosophy or ideology that has an origin in the modern Western philosophical thought that proposed freedom of thought from the tradition and religion in the name of scientific study via rational and empirical methods and approaches. the philosophy of liberalism has been claimed as -the product of Enlightenment and widely known as the Age of Reason. The philosophy of liberalism has impacted Christianity in the sense that it challenges the traditional understanding of Christianity and propagated for more freedom in reinterpreting its teaching. One of the significant challenges brought by liberalism in Christianity is the new form of belief system in disguise of Christianity that destruct the Christian faith and manipulate several religious terminologies. The philosophy

of liberalism has disparaged the role of God as The Creator of this world because of the modern liberal religion that is rooted in naturalism, a philosophy of nature that denies the existence of supernatural order, God and His power, and the connection God has on the origin of Christianity.

The Rise of Liberalism in Malaysia

Until recent years, there have been little number of studies on liberalism in Malaysia, and this resulted in limited sources and references for the researcher in the discussions of the historical part.

Abdul Rahman claimed that Muslims in Malaysia were made exposed to the Western ideologies and modern philosophies such as liberalism, socialism, and Marxism, from their oversea studies in European countries (Abdul Rahman Haji Abdullah, 1998). The Western educational system has provided them with the ideas and understanding of absolute human rights and total freedom from religious teachings. They were introduced with the modern epistemology, philosophy, politics, and governance that promote egalitarian concepts of society in the name of democracy. Democracy seemed to be the most attractive system of governance in replacement of monarchy and tribalistic orientation that hampered some of the Muslim's countries.

Azmi Ariffin postulates that learned Muslim Malays were impressed with the ideas of democracy and try to emulate the ideas in the Malaysian context. Democracy has paved the way for nationalism that promotes loves for the nation in replacement of one's ethnic, racial, and religious identity. It seems for that reason that the Malays decided to follow the steps of the West on democracy, including the ideas of other ideologies like nationalism and liberalism to apply to political and social affairs in the Malay land, which is now known as Malaysia (Azmi Ariffin, 2016). Perhaps, the Malays' admiration towards the system of governance in the West, in particular democracy, could be the main reason for their exposure to the philosophy of liberalism. As the internet technology advances, the philosophy of liberalism has been greatly discussed in many Malaysia's popular webpages. Liberalism has been rooted from the beginning of Malaysia's formation struggles for freedom in economics and politics. It appears that according to Rusnisuri Abdul Rashid and Nor Faradiana Rosli, in Malaysia, liberalism brought the issue of freedom of expressions in the early time of its advent to this country (Rusnisuri Abdul Rashid & Nor Faradiana Rosli, 2014).

The history of the philosophy of liberalism in Malaysia is much related with some contributing factors that made this philosophy gain more attention and support by some groups of Muslims in Malaysia. According to Mohamad Kamil Ab. Majid, there are two main factors, firstly, the world advancement of technology as communication tools like the mass media and internet that enable access to all sorts of foreign philosophies and ideologies. The impact of globalization to the pattern of human thought is undeniable, resulting in the easy accessibility of any information on the philosophies and became a main medium to spread ideas and teachings. In short, the strong impression of globalization witnessed the existence of some prominent individuals and Muslim NGOs in Malaysia, which were influenced by the philosophy of liberalism rooted from the West. Liberalism has been preached as the most excellent kind of philosophy that addressed the need of human rights in this modern time. The second factor that contributed to the formation of liberalism in Malaysia is the existence of many international organizations aiming in giving the fund and donation to encourage the dispersion of liberalism in Malaysia. Mohamad Kamil Ab. Majid assumed that the NGOs that have been funded from the Western organizations, such as Asia Foundation, Ford Foundation and Konhraf Adenour Foundation, were bound to support the liberal ideas presented by them (Mohamad Kamil Ab. Majid, 2011).

In addition, it is claimed that the exposure to modern thought and Western philosophies and ideologies by those who studied in the West has been instrumental in spreading liberalism in Malaysia. In addition, they seemed to admire the fanciness of the political system of democracy introduced in the Western education. Interestingly the liberal

concept is imbued in every democracy system in this world. As a matter of fact, liberalism is an obligatory and prerequisite feature in a successful democracy (Marc F. Plattner, 1998). Hence, it proves the compatibility of liberalism and democracy in American ideology and political theory (Robert B. Thigpen, 1986). The radical changes brought by liberalism in the context of state governance are a shift from theocracy to democracy which significantly means from God-rule to human-rule. However gradually, the ideas penetrate religious issues. For instance, the liberal group in Malaysia demanded for the right of conversion for Muslims who apostate from Islam. Constitutionally, this is in fact illegal and against the spirit of the constitution. History proves that liberalism attempt towards liberating human beings from any religion and belief.

There is a claim that liberalism is not a foreign ideology for it has emerged in Malaysia since the colonial period. With globalization, there comes the second wave of liberalism that cannot be contained anymore. There are some truths in the claim. However, it is essential to note that ideologies in its diverse forms do not come in vacuum. There is social, cultural, religious, and political baggage that comes together in the package. This requires careful examination to sift the positive from the negative influence that comes along with the ideologies. In the case of liberalism, there have been filtering measures attempted by the genuine leaders and religious leaders of Malaysia; one of them was the enhancement of the process of Islamization which in one way or another helps to restore the national identity and the eastern values of the Malaysian people. It is not a smooth journey, however, as there are allegations that Malaysia is exercising an autocratic form of governance especially when it comes to religious freedom. However, given that the majority population in this country is the Muslim and that Islam is stated as the religion of the Federation in the constitution, the demand made by the liberalist for a religion-free society is in fact against the historical root of this country that found its legal evidence in the Malaysian Constitution.

The Challenges of Liberalism to Muslims' 'Aqīdah in Malaysia

This philosophy is becoming a challenging trap to religion and religions in Malaysia, for it forms a new mode of thought and understanding in society and religion, and thus bring threat to the 'aqīdah of the Muslim society in Malaysia. The most common issues advocated by liberalism are matters pertaining to human right and freedom.

For example, one of the most controversial issues stemmed from this philosophy is the demand to use the word 'Allah' by Sabah Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB), which is a Catholic church. The heated debate on the permissibility of non-Muslims to use the word of 'Allah' had brought about strong reactions from informed and uninformed individuals, scholars, and laymen (Mohamed Ajmal Abdul Razak Al-Aidrus, 2013). It is therefore essential to discuss the arguments brought by both parties, the Christians, and Muslims, regarding the issue to understand it.

The Muslims argued that 'Allah' is a proper name (Bernama Nooh, 2013) and hence cannot be used by the Christians since their concept of God is diametrically opposed to that of Islam (Mohamed Ajmal Abdul Razak Al-Aidrus, 2013). On top of that, the Muslims are concerned that if the word 'Allah' to be used by the Christians in the Bible, it will create confusion among the followers of religions. The issue carries a never-ending polemic and there is no best solution. As a multi-racial and multi religious country, Malaysians be it Muslims or Christians, should be aware of their own limitations and boundaries. The issue of the word 'Allah' is one of the impacts of liberalism, in which some quarters of the Christians in Malaysia subscribed to a liberal idea about the doctrine of God in Christianity. From the perspective of Islam, this issue has been related with the political motive behind it (Stephen Ng, 2013). Unfortunately, the Muslim parties were divided in opinions when responding to this issue and thus created a great debate. A political science professor at Monash University, James Chin, commented that there is a probability that authorities would decide to start holding Malay-language Bibles and other literatures having the word 'Allah' on a large scale or crack down on Malay-language church services. "The idea is to

make use of this as a political weapon to raise strains,” he told Agence France-Presse (AFP). “They (the ruling party) see this as a vote-winner for the next election” (Agence France-Presse in Kuala Lumpur, 2014).

Although it has been said that the issue of the use of ‘Allah’ in the Bible by the Christians in Malaysia is much related with political propaganda, however, it still gives a great impact on the discourse of religious thought in Malaysia, especially on the challenge it brought to Muslims’ ‘aqīdah and Islam in Malaysia. Muslims were against the use for they were under the impression that the use of the word ‘Allah’ is another way of conforming to the pluralistic philosophy. It is assumed that if the permission is given, it may open to more demands to use the word in other religions, and thus violated the Oneness of Allah (tawhīd). It appears that another provocative threat related brought by liberalism in Malaysia to the Muslims’ ‘aqīdah is the question of religious freedom. In this sense, many authorities and teachings of Islam have been questioned. It is in this situation they pointed out their liberal ideas and thought to challenge the Islamic authorities that in their assumption curbed human freedom. For example, one of the indictments made by Interfaith Commission (IFC) was stated to equalise all adherents of all religions in Malaysia (Mohamad Kamil Ab. Majid, 2011).

The call for equality in religions is not without implications. Muslims were suspicious that equality of religion would lead to more serious religious offence, such as religious conversion, and mix marriages between the followers of different religions. The suspicion is not without reason. It is in these situations that another controversial issue arose in Malaysia that gave a kicked up the storm to Muslims and non-Muslims until recent years, which is the case of apostasy of Lina Joy. The issue caught international courtesy as well (Mohamed Azam Mohamed Adil, 2007). She is a Muslim lady who converted to Christianity and demanded her religious status to be recognised by the National Registration Department (NRD). This conflicts with the Malaysian constitution Article 160 which states that Malay is someone who professes Islam as his religion (Federal Constitution, 2010). Lina Joy was a Muslim woman who was brought up as a Muslim by her family under the given name of Azlina bte Jailani. She converted to Catholic after she met a Christian man and wanted to tie the knot with him.

For her to contract a non-Muslim marriage, two things concerning her IC (Identity Card) had to be dealt with administratively. The Registrar of Marriages could not marry a person under the civil marriages registry who has a Muslim name. Certainly not if the term Islam is on one’s IC. Thus, Lina Joy wanted to revoke the word ‘Islam’ in her IC. It has been pointed out that the National Registration Department (NRD) regulations do not contain any provision requiring a person to obtain an order from the Shari’ah Court in the case of a Muslim person wanting to change his or her religion (Cyrus Das, 2008). After many appeals, The Federal Court, by a 2-1 decision (Ahmad Fairuz CJ, Alauddin Mohd Sherif FCJ and Richard Malanjum CJ [Sabah and Sarawak]), dismissed her appeal. The majority answered all three questions in the affirmative while Richard Malanjum dissented, answered them in negative (Hongyi Chen, 2014). It is assumed that the case of Lina Joy was one of the impacts of liberalism to the ‘aqīdah of Muslims in Malaysia, which opened many more followers of these philosophies in fighting for so-called human rights and individual freedom against the Federal Constitution.

Another interesting issue that can be highlighted here and threatening the Muslims’ ‘aqīdah is the effort of legalising Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) rights in Malaysia. The fact that LGBT rights are fundamentally unrecognised in Malaysia is well-known by the people and some other countries. This is a popular and successful agenda advocated by the liberalists in the name of human rights. This culture was nearly strongly promoted in Malaysia when several associations of Malaysian NGOs (incl. Malaysian Bar Council, SUARAM, Empower, PT Foundation, United Nations, and Amnesty International) and individuals proposed ‘Program Seksualiti Merdeka 2011’ (Nur Farhana Abdul Rahman & Khadijah Mohd Khambali, 2013). This programme has been scheduled to take place on November 2 until November 13, 2011, at the Annexe Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, which was said

to be the fourth time since it was first advocated in 2008 (Azhari Zainooddin & Muhamad Aimy Ahmad, 2011). The heedless attitude of the LGBT groups supported by the Bar Council against the condemnation of homosexuality and lesbianism by the Fatwa Committee National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs would be one of the instances in which the liberalist group challenged the rulings made by the authoritative body representing Islam and Muslims in Malaysia. Such an attitude is derived from the belief that the LGBT group is defending the individual right and freedom to choose the gender and sexual orientation. Homosexuality and lesbianism are not only against religion but also contradictory to the eastern values and norms.

It appears that the biggest issue with liberalism is its obsession to anthropocentrism. It rejects the idea of the sovereignty of God and traditional ideas. For that reason, it went in harmony with modernism, a philosophy that discards traditional values and religion. In analysing liberalism in Malaysia, we refer to the popular jargon used which is liberal Islam that provokes the traditional ideas of Islam embraced by most Muslims in the country who relate themselves with ahli al-sunnah wal-jamā'ah. Contextually, the philosophy of liberalism has been perceived by the Western scholars as a promising way to betterment and human development. In the Malaysian context, liberalism has not only become the term of reference for the liberals, but its philosophy has also changed the way a Muslim perceives his traditional way of thinking. The impact of this is the denunciation of the glorious Islamic heritage that shaped the worldview and horizon of Islamic history in Malaysia. One obvious example is from the liberalists' level of acceptance towards the views of Muslim experts or scholars. It is ironic that in the Malaysian case, many individuals whether he claimed to be a liberalist, or charged to embrace the liberal worldview, is not an expert of Islamic disciplines but demand for public recognition of his view.

CONCLUSION

When the Western world entered the Modern Age, it exchanged religion with science, and demanded to liberate man from the clutches of religion and tradition. Likewise with regards to liberalism in Malaysia, if the claim made that it has emerged since the colonial period and can be accepted, it does make sense that the philosophy has a profound effect on the Malaysian society, education, economic and religion. Most importantly, it gives a massive threat to the Muslims' 'aqīdah and thus justifies the reason behind the existence of staunch supporters of liberalism and liberal groups that brought many challenges to society in Malaysia. Islam being the religion of the state of Malaysia, hit by the wave of liberalism which resulted in making the Muslims' 'aqīdah at stake. It is undeniable that the relationship between the liberal groups, the Islamic agencies and Muslims NGOs in Malaysia is constantly at stake. However, the government did play its role to ensure that the clashes did not lead to unnecessary conflict. The gradual measure taken by the Malaysian government in strengthening cyber security acts recently can be regarded as one of the most immediate and strategic measures taken by the government to curb the spread of slander and provocative accusations among the Malaysian people, as well as preserving the 'aqīdah of Muslims in Malaysia.

Nevertheless, compared to other liberal groups in the world like in Indonesia, those in Malaysia are less aggressive in the sense that they can still engage in open discussion and criticism. Surprisingly, there were also none of these so-called liberal organizations in Malaysia that acknowledged themselves as liberal group publicly, unlike the liberal groups in Indonesia like one of the largest liberal Islamic organizations which is Jaringan Islam Liberal/JIL or also known as Liberal Islam Network. This organization had made it crystal clear that it promotes the understanding of philosophy of liberalism as its main objective. Liberalism has been extensively prevalent in Indonesia because of the burgeoning of these liberal organizations, in parallel to Indonesia's state philosophy of Pancasila which embraces humanism, social and religious plurality, democracy and freedom.

It is essential to stress that the challenges brought by this philosophy towards the sanctity of Islam in particular, and other religions in general, are real. Liberalism marginalized religion and spirituality for the sake of defending human rights and freedom. However, at the extreme, the liberal group went beyond the accepted norms and values upheld by the society. For example, the liberalists have demonstrated a sense of disrespectful behaviour towards Islamic religious institutions that in their impression are prejudiced against woman, freedom of religion and the LGBT community. The only way to curb this group from going beyond their limit is with governmental intervention and keeping the public aware of the danger of liberal ideas towards religion, spirituality, and the solidarity of the Malaysian pluralistic society. It is important to ensure that more response should be voice out, to alarm the Muslims on the challenges brought by this philosophy, new and fresh response from Muslims youth's organizations, volunteers' groups, and scholars should be increase to cope with the new and advanced issues related to. The challenges today are very strong and powerful for there are many young generations even from the Muslims themselves who supported the ideas of this philosophy and thus, the need to innovative and fresh response from the young generations are very crucial to preserve the true Islamic teachings from these modern ideologies' challenges.

It is therefore proposed that more effort should be done to generate public awareness and knowledge on liberalism in the hope that they are able to comprehend the negative and the positive impacts (if any) of the philosophy. However, let it be reminded that the support for or against religion should not be overblown out of proportion for this will lead into extremisms and fanaticism of sorts, and many communities have indeed witnessed and suffered through such extremism. Therefore, one should avoid being too liberal or too rigid as Islam has already promoted the middle point, a balanced position, that will ensure a well-balanced life that generates harmony in a life full of diversity.

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