A BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT IN A MALAY-MUSLIM COMMUNITY: A CASE STUDY PRESENTATION

Dr. Muhammad Ahmad
Dr. M. Nasri Md. Hussain
Noor Hashimah Dolah GBB

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the city of Kota Bharu, the capital city of the Malaysian state of Kelantan. It is the only capital city in Malaysia that is known as Bandaraya Islam. From the observer's point of view Kota Bharu is special for its continuous improvement by the state Government that propogates Islam as a way of life - in the case of Kota Bharu, this is also translated into the development of human capital. The philosophical pillar of the state's development is based in the concept of Tawhid. The process of such transformation into deeper Islamic doctrines in Kelantan is seen as significant and almost always picked-up in research interviews. Islamic mosaics in the life of this city are also indicated from direct observation and academic and popular literature. The concept of 'Developing with Islam' has been relentlessly promoted in the past 18 years and is an important factor that gives the Islamic image to this state. It was also observed that part of the city are developed with emphasis on the landscape under the concept currently known as the LanskapKerohanian Islam (Islamic-spiritual-based landscape). The symbols of Islam in the Islamic city of Kota Bharu are found to be widespread e.g. along roads, shopping complex, wet markets and open spaces. The efforts of the State Government to adhere to and promote Islamic values in this state are seen as dominant factors that allow for a conducive and continuous process of Islamization.

INTRODUCTION

Kota Bharu, the capital city of the Malaysian state of Kelantan was chosen for the field site of this topic. During the study data from Malay businesspeople in field were collected in real time. In this research a Malay-Muslim society with a special consideration on the respondent's background was examined.

THE PORTRAIT OF ISLAM IN KELANTAN DAR AL-NA’IM

Since 1990 the state government has been trying to govern the state according to the principles of Islam. With this in mind, the state introduced a development policy called MembangunBersama Islam (Developing with Islam). This development policy reaffirms the Islamic ethos that the Holy Qur’an and the Sunnah (tradition) of Prophet Muhammad as the highest and authentic references as far as Islamic way of life is concerned. The main philosophical idea is to establish Tawhid (the Oneness of God) in daily practice. Every single plan of the development policy should adhere to the principles of the development policy. In short, the philosophical approach toward the state’s development can be categorized into three concepts:

1. ’Ubudiyyah - Referring to the essence that man is the vicegerent of Allah in this world. Man is created to worship Allah, therefore the whole of his body and soul must be kept in the obedience of Allah. Consequently, the administration of the state must be realized through the concept of ’Ubudiyyah.

2. Maslidiyyah - Referring to the sense of accountability and integrity, in which, a job is a responsibility and must be fulfilled as a duty towards Allah. For every action, a man is to be accountable and will be asked about it on the Day of Judgement.

3. Itqan - Referring to the quality at work. This will include qualities such as hardworking, commitment and focus. It also includes continuity at work without any failure such as the feeling of taking for granted.

The concept of ‘Developing with Islam’ was the important factor that gave the Islamic image to this state in general and to the city of Kota Bharu in particular. Dinsman (Othman) admits the importance of the Municipal council to establish the Shari’ah in the state. He further admits; ‘...We conclude that Kota Bharu is an Islamic city because here we see the obligations to Allah are fulfilled and administrated by the City Council. We see that all the infrastructure and public facilities are developed in a way to usher people to the remembrance of Allah and to stop

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themselves from doing what Allah forbids. We can see that this city always maintains its cleanliness, far from being a place of sin, Mungkar and injustice..." 

Islamisation policy in the state leadership has changed the phenomenon in which public entertainments have been taking place. Respondent (TR-30) reported;

"...Sure! There are a lot of changes leaning to Islam. The chief minister was adamant in eradicating Khurafat, i.e., superstitious notions in the society. Take Mak Yong (an ancient dance-theatre form incorporating the elements of ritual, stylized dance and acting, vocal and instrumental music, story, song, formal as well as improvised spoken text) and, Woyangkali (shadow puppetry), the mantras in those activities. In the old days, there were mantras before any performance. Many names were invoked but all these names have nothing to do with Islam..."

Asked on the reaction from the Kelantanese he said; "...Local performers were angry initially, the policy hurt their income, of course. They have been living that way for so long. In time, they adapted and found ways to bring their work closer to Islam. I think they are not too bad at the moment..."

Kota Bharu is the only capital city in Malaysia known as Bandaraya Islam. In Malaysia the title “city” (Bandaraya) given once population of place reaches 500,000 or more. This is not the case in Kota Bharu that has a population of less than half a million people. However, the State Government names it Bandaraya without linking the name to the standard qualification. It is more towards image building rather than to qualify its status as a city. In the following section the author will discuss the Islamic image of this place. This will be done by looking from the angle of how the Islamic culture runs amongst the people and the environs.

Visual images of Islamic quality can be seen in various forms in the city; symbols, giant billboards, architecture, posters etc. In many ways, the name that it carries i.e. Bandaraya Islam goes along in parallel with the state’s administration policy.

Not far from the central bus station leading to a well known beach, Pantai Cahaya Bulan, there is an open area which is famously known as Padang Bus or Dataran Rehal. It is within a walking distance from the Muhammad Mosque and located just in front of the state Museum. The name Padang Bus (Field for busses) is given for its function; chartered buses are usually parked in this space especially during school holidays and weekends. Dataran Rehal (Rehal Square) is its alternative name, which was derived from the replica of Rehal. The entrance has to gigantic arches known as Pontu Gerbang Sultan Ismail Putra (The Sultan Ismail Putra Gate). They are crafted with Kelantanese Malay traditional motifs blended with Qur’anic verses carved in gold-coloured Arabic Khat (calligraphy).

On the right and left hand sides of these arches are several pillars standing 10-12 meters high, each with an opened image of the holy Qur’an on a Rehal. Immediately underneath the opened Qur’an is the word “Ku’ra” written in Arabic calligraphy, also in gold colour. Apart from that lamp posts stand high with the name of Allah and Muhammad crafted in green colour of Arabic calligraphy, which are very attractive especially at night. This landscape is illustrated to express a meaning inter-alia “...the important message to call people to appreciate the Qur’an and to hold it firmly as a guidance.” In addition, another part of the city is developed with emphasis given on the landscape, currently known as the Lanscape Kerohanian Islam (Islamic spiritual landscape). The site was formerly known as Tanah Serendah SekehanBunga (The garden of flower blossoms).

Indeed, the difference of Kota Bharu as compared to other cities in Malaysia can be felt and clearly seen. The combination of structures, architecture and the culture of Islam is significantly abundant and is presented in many forms. What is particularly important is the attention paid to religious elements. As the case in many advertisements, popular figures (film stars, comedians, television personalities) are used to promote advertised products, most of whom, however, are women. In Kelantan, all the figures are pictured in attires conforming to the Islamic dress codes; in many cases, this involved the head scarf or the Hijab. In other states, similar personalities, promoting similar products, in similar poses, are often pictured without head-scarf.

Apart from giant billboards, arches and banners, most of which promote and uphold two of the most frequently written names i.e. Allah and Muhammad, the verses of the Qur’an are also written or carved in many types and colours of Arabic calligraphy. Included are also the pictures..."
of the Sultan (the King) and Raja Perempuan (the Queen). In general, all things that promote the idea of the Islamic State follow a certain protocol. The emblem of the State is usually placed at centre top. Otherwise, it is replaced by various references to the King e.g. “Daudat Tuanku”, “Raja TonggakkedadanBangau” (The King is the pillar of the nation) and “YaTuhanKaLenjutanUstia al-Sultan dan Raja Perempuan Kami” (May Allah bless the life of our King and Queen). Basically, all articles point to the expression of the people’s love for the religion and the King. All of these are blended very well in yet various forms of the culture of the people. Other Islamic articles include words depicting the names of Allah and advices.

In many places locals do not usually bother about knowing the directions of north, south, east and west or the state of the weather. Because of this, finding the direction of the Kaabah, which is essential for prayers can be a continuous problem especially for travellers who just arrived. In the city of Kota Bharu the direction of Kaabah are found in many places in this city. Generally they are found in hotel rooms throughout Malaysia but uniquely in Kota Bharu, they are found in many open places, even on open soccer pitches. For example, the direction of the Kaabah was shown by an arrow symbol in Padang Bandaran (municipal court). This is because the Jannah (congregation) prayer has been held here especially on certain occasions when the chief minister is present. Moreover SolatHajatt prayer to fulfil one’s need) for the purpose of the state administration became familiar since PAS came into power. But the most attractive example of the Kaabah direction structure can be found in front of the MPKB-BRI (Kota Bharu-Islamic City Municipal Council) building. Here the direction of Kaabah is a structure built with an attractive traditional Malay carving, with an arrow pointing towards the direction of the Kaabah. Just below the arrow are digital monitors on each face of the square-shaped column indicating date and time as well the times for the five daily prayers. Nik Abdul Aziz the Chief Minister of the state has given serious consideration about the importance of daily prayers for Muslims in this state. He once said; “It has been part of culture for people in this region to pray and ask from Allah when they are in need.” With this in mind it is not difficult to understand why the Chief Minister emphasises the importance of prayers. Medan SelerabaLahKubuh i.e., a famous food court, in its opening ceremony on the 1st of June 2004 for example was started with the Jannah prayer and the speech from the Chief Minister afterwards.

There is a certain feeling, or at least, a noticeable change in the atmosphere within the PasarSitiKhadijah, whenever the Azan (the call for prayers) is heard. A particularly noticeable change takes places during Maghrib (the early evening prayer). There is a food court just outside the market called Medan SelerabaLahKubuh (the BuluhKubuh Food Court). In the morning, the place is used as an open market where villagers come in to sell all sorts of vegetables, fruits and groceries. It turns into a food court sometimes around 5pm. Fifteen minutes before Maghrib prayer time, officers from the MajlisPerbandaran KotaBharu-Bandaraya Islam will come to make a patrol. Using a loud speaker, an announcement is made that all activities are to stop in respect of the Azan and Maghrib prayer time; this will be a break of half an hour. This is usually given in the general order as follows;

“...A’izubillahiminazhauhainirajjatinBismillahirrahmanirrahim, good afternoon brothers and sisters who are coming from far or from nearby area of Medan SelerabaLahKubuh. And good afternoon to all traders who are running businesses this afternoon...Please be informed that now you are advised to halt your work temporarily prior to Azan for the incoming Maghrib prayer. It is wise for everyone to take a short break preparing for the prayer and to the remembrance of Allah...” It was observed that people from outside of Kelantan were a little confused with the announcement, especially for those who have just arrived.

Changes from the old regulations to the present ones did not come into place without argument. Respondent (MP-02) said; “...It was not easy when imposed for the first time in 1990. It is not a problem now. We inform tourists politely. We implement this regulations for Maghrib prayer only. As you know, Maghrib is very short and we take it as an obligation for them not to be carried away and miss the prayer altogether. ...They (the traders) have to obey this regulation; if any of them are found to be multiple offenders, their license will not be renewed”

His view was supported by respondent (MP-05) who used to be in charge of the Implementation Division of MPKB-BRI: “...Yes, there was a little problematic at first. It got better after sometimes, as all things do. People made a little fuss here and there but I think the situation is ok now...”

The respondent (MP-05) further commented that although the regulation has been implemented, some people are still reluctant to observe their prayers seriously “…Yes, we know there are people who do not perform prayers, do not fast, but we have our limitations. We do not take actions on offence related to prayers, there is no regulation for that. We do take actions on non-fasting offenders because this is under the enforcement of the powers of the Shariah court...” His experience also showed that most offences only involved small cases such as not wearing Hijab, late renewals of licenses and selling goods outside of their allocated premises.

Further observation showed that Azan is dearly respected particularly among Majhrirby the big stores such as MYDIN7 and The Store18. Both were observed to be giving respects as they should. MYDIN store, for example, stops business activities when Azan was aired through loud speakers. Cashiers at the checkout counters were observed to temporary stop working and only continue with their work after they recite AzanDo’a. Prior to the Azan an announcement was made, clearly heard from the loud speakers; “...Muslim brothers and sisters, the Azan should be aired shortly for ‘Asr prayer for zone one of Kota Bharu and similar area of zone times. All counters are now temporarly closed during the

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13 When the Islamic party took control of Kelantan among the important changes in the administration was to put in guidelines on official programmes. The programme should be stopped prior to the time for prayers or should be started after finishing prayers. See, Drimmean (2000) SepakatTahbatEmbanbudangBesuana Islam Kelantan di BawahPimpinanUlamak, Kota Bharu: PusatKajianStrategik, p. 57
16 MYDINCurrently has 40 outlets nationwide inclusive of two Hypermarkets, 24 Emportmants, one Superstore, seven Mini Markets and six Convenient Stores. The stores are located all over the KlangValley, Terengganu, Kota Bharu, Seremban, Nilai, Johor, Alor Setar, Melaka, Penang, Puhang and Kelantan. The two Hypermarkets are located at USJ, Subang Jaya and Kuala Terengganu. See http://www.mydin.com.my/mydinecatalogue/exchange2/22.html (4/12/2008)
17 The Store Corporation Berhad is a leading operator of supermarkets, departmental stores and hypermarkets in the country. It is the only Malaysian retailer with outlets established in every state of the Peninsular Malaysia, with 53 supermarkets & departmental stores operating in the name of The Store ‘under the legal entity The Store (Malaysia) Sdn. Bhd. The Store Group also operates hypermarkets through its wholly-owned subsidiary Pacific Hypermarket & Departmental Store Sdn. Bhd. See http://www.tstore.com.my/profiles.htm and http://www.tstore.com.my/bod.htm (4/12/2008)
Azan…” Shortly after the Azan has finished there was another announcement telling the customers that counter operations are resumed. It was observed that supermarket such as The Store in this city went a bit further by broadcasting the recital of the Qur’an and Islamic songs from Malaysian Nashid group before and after the Azan.

There is also a clear segregation of sexes for many activities including providing separate check-out counters for ladies and men at supermarkets. It is noted that in big stores checkout counters for women are labelled Perempuan (Ladies) or Lelaki (men) with the signage of man and woman wearing Songkok i.e., velvet cap and Tudung i.e., Muslim woman head cover, respectively. However the regulation only applies during busy hours where hundreds of people are queuing to make payment. Outside peak hours customers can still pay at any counter they feel convenient.

CONCLUSION

The efforts of the State Government to adhere to and promote Islamic values in this state are seen as dominant factors that allow for a conducive and continuous process of Islamization. The concept of ‘Developing with Islam’ has been relentlessly promoted in the past 18 years and is an important factor that gives the Islamic image to this state.

REFERENCES