

Burgeoning of Islamic Cultures and Lifestyles in Malaysia: Conservatism Revisited

Kebangkitan Budaya dan Gaya Hidup Islam di Malaysia: Penilaian Semula Konsep Konservatisme

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Abstract: In Malaysia, the burgeoning of Islamic cultures and lifestyles including the expansion and stringent *shariah* implementation, Islamic fashions and Islamic programs or events are all associated with deepening conservatism. On one hand, it is perceived as a promising development, but on the other hand it is also presumed as a threat to tolerance and moderate values endorsed by Islam. This is simply because conservatism is often misinterpreted as extreme, exclusive, discriminative and oppressive attitudes and actions. But does conservatism really reflect and promote those detrimental values? How does conservatism as a concept that often used in political and social discourse can be used as a tool to explain religious phenomena? Using content analysis, this paper attempts to uncover the concept of conservatism from the theological and philosophical perspectives and discusses the relevance of conservatism and other existing categories of Islamic thought in Malaysia. This paper proposes that conservatism is a philosophy that is against the idea of autonomy of reason without revelation. Conservatism therefore is known as “philosophy of imperfection.” Any negative attitudes or actions are not caused by conservatism, nevertheless, they are due to the sole dependence on imperfect human reason that is unaided but revelation. This finding has revisited and redefined the existing concept of conservatism and other categories of Islamic thought according to Malaysian context and consequently explains the by-product of the burgeoning of Islamic cultures and lifestyles in Malaysia. Future research should focus on empirical method to assess conservatism and its effects on Malaysian society.

Keywords: Islam, cultures, conservatism, thought, Malaysia

Abstrak: Di Malaysia, kebangkitan budaya dan gaya hidup Islam termasuklah pengembangan dan pelaksanaan *shariah* yang ketat, fesyen-fesyen dan program-program atau acara-acara berbentuk keislaman semuanya dikaitkan dengan peningkatan konservatisme. Di satu sudut, ia dilihat sebagai perkembangan yang menggalakkan, namun di satu sudut yang lain ia dilihat sebagai satu ancaman kepada nilai-nilai toleransi dan kesederhanaan yang dianjurkan oleh Islam. Ini adalah kerana konservatisme sering disalahtafsirkan sebagai sikap dan perilaku yang ekstrim, eksklusif, diskriminatif dan opresif. Namun adakah konservatisme benar-benar mencerminkan dan mempromosikan nilai-nilai yang memudaratkan tersebut? Bagaimanakah konservatisme sebagai konsep yang kerap digunakan dalam wacana politik dan sosial boleh digunakan sebagai alat untuk menerangkan fenomena agama? Dengan menggunakan kaedah analisis kandungan, makalah ini cuba untuk mendedahkan konsep konservatisme daripada perspektif teologi dan falsafah serta membincangkan perkaitan konservatisme dan konsep-konsep pemikiran

Islam yang sedia ada di Malaysia. Makalah ini mencadangkan bahawa konservatisme adalah sebuah falsafah yang menentangi kekuasaan akal tanpa bimbingan wahyu. Oleh yang demikian, konservatisme dikenali sebagai “falsafah ketidaksempurnaan.” Sebarang sikap-sikap atau tindakan-tindakan yang negatif bukanlah disebabkan oleh konservatisme, namun ia disebabkan oleh pergantungan semata-mata kepada akal manusia yang tidak sempurna yang tidak dibimbing oleh wahyu. Penemuan ini telah menyemak dan mendefinisi semula konsep konservatisme sedia ada dan kategori-kategori pemikiran Islam yang lain bersesuaian dengan konteks Malaysia dan seterusnya menerangkan kesan tidak langsung peningkatan budaya dan gaya hidup Islam di Malaysia. Kajian akan datang sepatutnya menumpukan pada kaedah empirikal untuk menilai konservatisme dan kesannya ke atas masyarakat Malaysia.

Katakunci: Islam, budaya, konservatisme, pemikiran, Malaysia

Introduction

The increasing Islamic awareness among Malaysian Muslim society today is visible through the adoption and practice of Islamic lifestyles and cultures. For instance the more ‘Islamic’ way of dressing especially among Muslim women such as the wearing of *hijab* (headscarf), among Muslim women, *jubah* and *arbaya* (Arabic long dress); and the replacement of Malay words with Arabic words in greetings and daily conversation such as *Assalamualaikum* for greeting, *iftar* for *buka puasa*, *solat* for *sembahyang*, *Eid Mubarak* for *Selamat Hari Raya* and many more. There are also proliferation of Islamic programs and Islamic elements in the electronic and social media and in the national events for instance the *Qari Junior*, *Qur’an* hour, *Da’i* and many more.

The Islamic development and empowerment are not only identifiable in the lifestyles of the Muslim society in general but they are also evident in the practices of the religious institutions such as Shariah Courts, Islamic Religious Departments and National Fatwa Council.

For instance, the recent demand to amend the Shariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965 (Act 355) also signifies that Malaysian Muslims are becoming more Islamic. The amendment seeks to increase the penalties of the Shariah Courts for instance from three years’ jail to a maximum of 30 years, from RM5000 fine to RM100000 fine and from six lashes to 100 lashes. On February 18th 2017, approximately 20000 attended Himpunan 355 rally led by PAS as a support to the proposed amendment to increase punishments for *shariah* offences (Ida Lim & Yiswaree Palansamy, 2017).

The increasing Islamic awareness among the society and the expansion of *shariah* implementation in this country somehow are perceived as undermining the rights of non-Muslims and other minority groups.

Some of the Shariah Courts’ ruling for instance seemed providing unfair treatment for the non-Muslims. In the case of the rights of burial for Moorthy Maniam or his Muslim name’s Muhammad Abdullah was handled by the Shariah court since the High Court refused to hear the application of his widow, Kalliammal Sinnasamy who claimed her late husband was a Hindu during his lifetime (Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid & Muhamad Takiyuddin Ismail, 2014).

The practice of moral policing is also one of contested dimensions in Malaysia. Particular dress code (e.g. men are required to wear collared shirts and long pants while women are required to cover their shoulders and wear skirts that fall below the knees) that is enforced at government buildings and centers such as Road Transport Department has raised concerns among Malaysian citizens (Sumisha Naidu, 2015).

Other than dress code, number of raids led by the Islamic religious departments was considered as unnecessary moral policing and invasion of personal privacy. The recent controversial case involving a married couple that was wrongly accused of committing *khalwat* or close proximity in a budget hotel room and being arrested by Federal Territories Islamic Religious Department (JAWI) despite had presented their marriage certificate to the JAWI enforcers (Ida Lim, 2017).

The repression of unorthodox Islamic groups, people of other faiths and minority groups such as people of different sexual orientation are also often

being associated with religious totalitarianism (Fauzi Abdul Hamid, 2013). This is evident with few fatwas issued by the *muzakarah* of the National Fatwa Council related to these matters. Among the religious movements that have been issued as *haram* including the *Al-Arqam, Rifaqah* Corporation Sdn. Bhd (later version of *Al-Arqam*), *Syiah* and *Tariqat Naqsyabandiah Al-Aliyyah Syekh Nazim Al-Haqqani*.

Other than movements, some cultural practices are also prohibited for example *Yoga* and other cultural practices and traditional arts that consist of *khurafat* or superstitious elements. The *muzakarah* also decided that the nomenclature “Allah” is a sacred word specific to Islam and Muslims, therefore it should not be used or identified with religions other than Islam. *Pengkid* (a woman who dressed, acts and have sexual instincts like a man) and *mak nyah* that has undergone surgery for gender transformation are also illegal based on the decision of the *muzakarah* (JAKIM, 2009).

All these reflections of exclusive attitudes and discriminatory measures as practiced by the religious institutions are associated with the increased level of conservatism among Malaysian Muslim society. Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid (2014) for instance has attributed the failure of Islam Hadhari to Islamist conservatives comprised of UMNO ultraconservatives, religious bureaucrats and a burgeoning Islamist civil society that has tainted the originally moderate Islam Hadhari into a conservative dogma. In the subsequent discussion, in order to explain the phenomena, the concept of conservatism will be explored through the philosophical and theological lens. Apart from this, the relevance of the existing typology of Muslim thought in Malaysian context will also be discussed.

Conservatism Revisited

In the discussion of the influence of Islamist conservatives on the failure of Islam Hadhari, Ahmad Fauzi and Muhamad Takiyuddin (2014:160-161) have outlined five characteristics of Islamic-based “religious conservatism”

possessing a great desire to adhere to the original teachings of the Qur'an and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad; displaying absoluteness and intolerance in decision-making; exhibiting patriarchal attitudes towards women; having a fixation with the jurisprudential aspects

of Islam as if they were more important than the scripture itself; and, finally, demonstrating rigidity with respect to law and punishment at the expense of inner Islamic consciousness and missionary considerations

Chandra Muzaffar (2011:20) has depicted conservatism as

...obsessed with scriptural details, that negates reason and reflection, that is opposed to distinguishing the contextual from the perennial, that refuses to admit fresh currents of thought, that denies the need for interaction with other religions, that encourages, if unwittingly, static, fixed attitudes and beliefs which in reality repudiate universal truth.

Based on these characteristics, conservatism can be understood as an attitude since it is associated with absoluteness, intolerance, patriarchal attitudes, obsession, refutation and rigidity. Few scholars however, have characterized conservatism as an ideology rather than an attitude or action for instance Karl Mannheim (1986) and Noel O'Sullivan (1976). According to O'Sullivan (1976), ideology related to an attempt to provide an explicit and coherent theory of man, society and the world.

As an ideology, Mannheim (1986) has defined conservatism based on few attributes. Among them are: strives for societal conservation, counter-utopian and anti-revolutionary, supports collective bodies such as church and state and against liberalism. The French Revolution brought along the ideas that human reason and will are potent and sufficient to create new social order, operated within the framework of liberty, equality and fraternity. This revolutionaries' ideas, according to the conservatives were against the imperfect nature of man and repudiated the role of revelation. This total or radical change is the type of change that was opposed by the conservatives and not ‘change’ per se. For this reason, conservatism is known as a “philosophy of imperfection” (O'Sullivan, 1976).

The challenge to the revolutionary theorists that supported the autonomy of human reason had also been raised by Edmund Burke. Among Burke's counter arguments were: Both Church and State were inseparable spiritually (not mechanically) since both were derived from God; human conscience was

guided by prescription, presumption and pre-judgement; life was not only meant to be free but it must also have meaning (that can be found in tradition, folklore and myth); the authority of a government lies on virtuous principles and not on a social contract; ancient wisdom that contained collective intellect were safeguarded and transmitted by culture and principles are learned through the understanding of nature and history. Theological vision of conservatism therefore envisaged that a just and fair state and society can only be achieved through God's order and not solely on human reason that deemed imperfect (Stanley Ayling, 1988).

Indira Falk Gesink (2010) has defined the conservatives based on the Arabic root word, *hafaza* which means protection of something. The conservatives therefore are known as the protectors (*muhafizun*). This definition is contrary to the reformers (*muslihun*) and modernists (*muhaddithun*). The root word of conservatism itself is 'conserve' which is synonymous with preserve, maintain and sustain. Conservatism therefore can be equated with preservation. If these definitions and the aforementioned philosophical concepts of conservatism are to be applied within Islamic context, conservatism can be understood as 'protection' or 'preservation' of the original Quranic and the Prophetic traditions.

Preservation in this sense means the application of these revealed sources as a guidance to human reason and will. This consequently negate the autonomy of human reason and will in governing the state and creating the social order.

The Relevance of Typology of Muslim Thoughts in Malaysian Context

Various scholars Muslim and Western alike attempted to classify the complex and discursive Muslim thought into different categories. Some scholars like William E. Shepard (1987), Tariq Ramadan (2004), Clinton Bennett (2005) and Abdullah Saeed (2006), have come out with a typology that delineate the range of Islamic thought and ideology. The categorizations or typologies have efficaciously identified the Islamic thought with different labels ranging from fundamentalist, modernist, secularist, progressive, conservative, neo-traditionalist and traditionalist.

Other than those types, the authors have also proposed even more complex types such as accomodationist, neo-traditionalism, rejectionist

traditionalism, moderate secularism (Shepard, 1987), scholastic traditionalism, *salafi* literalism, *salafi* reformism, liberal or rationalist reformism (Ramadhan, 2004), legalist traditionalists and political Islamists (Saeed, 2006). It can be argued that any label or typology constructed is not absolute but relative to certain subjects or areas. In delineating the trends of modern Islamic movements, Bennett (2005) concedes that even though the 'progressive' might differ from the 'traditionalist' in the areas such as separation of religion from politics, the status of women and freedom of expression, both might be proponents of a redistributive economic system. This convergence of thoughts in certain areas is what Bennett coined as the centrist tendency.

Mansor Moaddel and Kamran Talattof (2000:3-4) have outlined the features of the modernist and fundamentalist that some of them do not seem really fit Malaysian landscape. The modernists for instance

...accepted an evolutionary view of history with the West being at the pinnacle of the world civilisation, reformulated Islamic methodology in a manner congruent with the standards of 19th century social theory, affirmed the validity of the scientific knowledge, even though it was not based on Islam, favoured democracy and constitutionalism, and de facto separation of religion from politics; and formulated a modernist discourse on women by rejecting polygamy and male domination.

The fundamentalists on the other hand rejected the notion of social evolution and portrayed the west as having an aggressive political system, exploitative and materialistic economic institutions and decadent culture. Rather than attempting to reform and modernize Islam, they aimed at Islamizing virtually all social institutions. They rejected the separation of religion from politics, defended Islamic political hierarchy in society, and male domination and polygamy in the family.

The typology of trends of thought invented by Ramadan (2004) is perceived as more appealing to the western audience since he demonstrates his much reliance on western context. For instance, one of the tendencies identified is 'Scholastic Traditionalism.' This tendency is

...characterized by a strict and sometimes even exclusive reference to one or other of the Schools of jurisprudence (the Hanafi, Maliki, *Shafi'i*, *Hanbali*, *Zaydi*, *Ja'fari*, among others), thus allowing no criticism of the legal opinions established in the School in question (Ramadhan, 2004:24).

According to him, this movements can be found in the West especially in the United States and Great Britain among Indo-Pakistani groups and in Germany among the Turks. Likewise, in his description of another trend like '*Salafi* Reformism,' he again refers to the existence of the groups in the West for instance he mentions that:

Most groups within the *salafi* reformist trend that exists in the West grew out of the influence of reformist thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who found a wide audience in the Muslim world (Ramadhan, 2004:26).

These proposed modernist/fundamentalist paradigms therefore might not be feasible and can hardly be applied in Malaysian context. Other than the issues of 'subject/area-oriented', the development of typology of thought also faces the contextual issues. Azmi Aziz and Shamsul Amri Baharudin (2004) for instance posit that it would be unfair to simply generalize Malaysian Islam as 'fundamentalist' or 'extremist' or even 'violent.' Fundamentalism in Malaysia cannot be equated with militant groups as has been identified in other countries since Malaysia and those countries had went through different experiences. It should be noted that, Malaysian Islam has been molded by the process of accommodation and adaptation with different civilisations such as Indian, Chinese and European and had experienced two colonial systems (i.e. Dutch and British). The concept of 'fundamentalism' as understood here in Malaysia was related to the observation of fundamental Islamic values such as the Islamic dress code (e.g. *hijab* for women) and *halal* food consumption.

Kamarudin Salleh (2012) also underscores that the trends of thought in Malaysia are definitely different from the originally proposed concepts. For instance the political approach of the modernist such as Said Ahmad Khan, Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh which includes the supremacy of law and separation of religion from politics did not

reflect Malaysian context.

Conclusion

The present phenomena of swift burgeoning of Islamic cultures and lifestyles apparently a promising future for Islam in Malaysia. Among the phenomena are: The way of dressing among Muslim women that is more '*shariah* compliance;' the mushrooming of Islamic events and programs in the electronic and social media for instance the *Qari* Junior, *Qur'an* hour, *Da'i*, *al-Kuliyyah* and many more; and the use of Islamic or Arabic greetings and speeches replacing the Malay one in daily conversation such as *Assalamualaikum*, *Eid Mubarak*, *Ramadhan Karim*, *iftar*, *solat* and many more. However among these developments, the expansion and stringent *shariah* implementation by religious institutions are perceived as a threat to the tolerance and moderate values endorsed by Islam. As examples, court rulings that seemingly undermined the rights of the non-Muslims and minority groups and violation of personal privacy. The current trend of Islamic developments is often associated with increasing level of conservatism.

In the previous discussion, there are few misconceptions related to conservatism have been identified. Firstly, conservatism is an ideology rather than an attitude since it involves the formation of theory of man, society and the world. Therefore conservatism is not directly associated with exclusive attitude, absoluteness, rigidity and many more. Secondly, theologically and philosophically, conservatism acknowledges revelations and God's sovereignty in keeping the world's order. This stance is totally against the revolutionary and liberal ideas that believed in the potency of human reason and will. Conservatism as an ideology holds that without the guidance from revelation, human reason alone will lead to the injustice and oppression. This is simply due to the imperfect nature of human being. For this reason, conservatism is also known as the "philosophy of imperfection." Any undesirable events that happen in our society today hence cannot be considered as 'conservative' since the real concept of conservatism means preserving God's commands as accentuated in the revelations. The independence of human reason and detachment from revelations that led to discrimination, oppression and authoritarianism.

Previous discussion also reveals that, the existing concepts and typology of Muslim thought be it conservatism, modernism, fundamentalism need to

be revisited, adapted and redefined based on local context and realities. The discussion also implies that one cannot simply put a label or categorize people as conservative, fundamentalist or other concepts before we truly understand the meaning of the concepts and the socio-cultural and historical background that molded particular society.

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