

THE PRACTICE OF WASATIYYAH VALUES IN MALAYSIA: CHALLENGES AND CONSOLIDATING STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Wasatiyyah is an important element that ensures a plural country achieves stability and harmony in addition to being able to move forward and face the challenges of the current world. This article aims to discuss the importance of Wasatiyyah values in Malaysia, the challenges and strategies that should be pursued to ensure that Malaysians practice Wasatiyyah values in their everyday lives. It is not a new policy distinct from the government's previous policies, rather it complements the existing approaches to further strengthen unity to ensure stability, as well as higher levels of progress and development for the people and the country. Findings indicate that the two main principles of Wasatiyyah, which are balance and moderation, need to be consolidated from time to time.

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Introduction

Malaysia is a country with a multi-ethnic population. The extent of the relationship between these various ethnic groups will determine the stability and prosperity of the country. Any ethnic group that is predominant in the government in a country like Malaysia faces a huge challenge. Every policy and initiative undertaken needs to be aligned with the interests of all the ethnic groups, especially the majority ethnic group. The Malaysian government should ensure that the country moves on the right path in a progressive and dynamic manner. Hence, the approach taken must always be thoughtful, discrete, and efficient. This demands that the government should be concerned and responsive to every current issue that arises. This study discusses the values and practices of the Wasatiyyah concept when Malaysia was under the administration of the Dato' Sri Najib Razak-led government between 2009 and 2013.

Wasatiyyah

Wasatiyyah is an intermediate and moderate approach by taking all the good values and rejecting all the negative values. In the Malaysian context, wasatiyyah is a concept or approach that has been a priority for leaders and people in this country for a long time. In his keynote address at the Global Moderation Movement Conference in Kuala Lumpur on 17 January 2012, the then Prime Minister Dato' Seri Mohd Najib Tun Abd Razak (2012), a Malaysian politician who served as the 6th prime minister of Malaysia from April 2009 to May 2018. He had emphasized this by saying;

“Here in Malaysia, moderation has always been our chosen path. It is a testament to how we gained our independence from the British back in 1957; how we restored our relations with Indonesia in 1965; and how we helped build ASEAN in 1967, recovered from the tragic events of May 1969, engaged with China in 1972, and forged the ground-breaking ASEAN security and economic communities in 1993 and 2009. Each was a significant moment for our country, and all were gained through reasoned discussion and debate”

Najib also affirmed the government's commitment to the principles of wasatiyyah in efforts to build a pluralistic society that is united and living harmoniously during his era in government through the 1Malaysia concept. 1Malaysia is a concept that aims to foster unity among multi-ethnic Malaysians, based on several important values that should be observed by every Malaysian. It is not a new policy distinct from the government's previous policies, rather it complements the existing approaches to further strengthen unity to ensure stability, as well as higher levels of progress and development for the people and the country. The wasatiyyah principles is one of the elements in the core principles of unity that is believed to make the concept successful. This affirmation is accompanied by efforts to discuss the principle through dialogue and academic platforms, such as organizing conventions, conferences or symposiums on the wasatiyyah concept in the capital. In addition, the government opined that commitment and hope for the success of this concept can be realized through Najib's initiative to officially establish the Wasatiyyah Institute on 17 January 2012 (Utusan Online, 2012).

Basically, establishing of the Wasatiyyah Institute under the Prime Minister's Department and promoting the wasatiyyah concept by the government is consistent with the emphasis on this concept found in Nursi's thinking. Nursi (1878–1960) was a prominent Muslim scholar who wrote *Risale-i Nur*, a work of Qur'anic commentary. He was known as *Badi'uzzaman*, which means "miracle of the age". This indicates that the importance of the wasatiyyah concept to the socio-cultural reality of this country has been clearly understood by the government. In short, the wasatiyyah concept is the basis for the 1Malaysia concept and this concept is the government's formula for ensuring that the country's aspirations, namely Vision 2020, are achieved (1Malaysia Booklet, 2012).

Therefore, in order to consolidate the institute, it is necessary to build a network of strategic alliances with similar institutes in other countries so that knowledge and experience can be shared. Likewise, international figures famous for their stance on moderation should made as references and used as models of this concept. Al-Qaradawi, John L. Esposito and Fethullah Gulen are examples of figures that deserve attention. This effort is in line with the government's desire to educate the people on how to love a simple and balanced way of life through guidance and instructions as well as the sharing of expertise by world renowned figures in the art of moderation. Creation of a 'Wasatiyyah Chair' at the University of Malaya is another indication of the government's seriousness in sharing expertise between local and foreign experts and subsequently wishing to see these ideas implemented in the context of building

harmonious inter-ethnic relations in this country. This implementation is important since all the elements of the wasatiyyah concept can be applied in the form of practical actions and not just in the form of mere conceptual thoughts (<http://mynewshub.my>).

Besides that, networking with local and foreign IHL (Institutes of Higher Learning) should be carried out so that a series of discussions and consensus on the concept can be strengthened over time. It might be necessary to establish wasatiyyah centers in some major universities as a first step. These centers can support the Wasatiyyah Institute by simultaneously or periodically implementing programs planned by the institute. Since there exist certain compatibilities and similarities between wasatiyyah and civilizational dialogue, it might be possible to create some form of collaboration between the Wasatiyyah Institute and the Institute of Civilizational Dialogue.

The following discussion looked more closely at the compatibility and consistency of the Malaysian wasatiyyah and al-Nursi wasatiyyah concepts and how the concepts can be further augmented.

a. Balance

According to Ismail Ibrahim, the national development agenda is based on the wasatiyyah concept, which aims to achieve progress in this world and the afterlife. When commenting on verses 200 and 201 of Surah al-Baqarah, he concluded that:

“The two verses mentioned above formulate an agenda for the 'middle ummah', which actually, besides other verses, shows that an example of a balanced and integrated life in this world and in the afterlife should be used as a measure for all forms and patterns of Muslim life in order to embrace happiness, namely the happiness in this world and in the afterlife. Alhamdulillah, Muslims in this country are a good example of this 'middle ummah', namely in all areas of life in this world and the afterlife that we strive for. Our attitude and behavior related to developing and practicing religion is also a constructive practice, far from negative symptoms, such as violence” (<http://www.dakwah.com.my>).

The nation building agenda is the government's aim. World progress is important to ensure a comfortable lifestyle for the people and indirectly, lead to a harmonious and prosperous country (www.Imalaysia.com.my). The government's current programs also lead to the same goal, such as the NKRA (National Key Results Areas) and NKEA (National Key Economic Area). Initial efforts show that Malaysia is on the right track to become a developed country (Ignatow, 2011).

Although the efforts are noble, however, the weaknesses and shortcomings that exist to some extent cause the people to become prejudiced against the government's seriousness in positively developing the country. The main weakness that is evident and the subject of public discussion is the leakage of national funds through projects that basically involve the interests of the country and the people. One example of a large national project that disrupted the government's fervent efforts is the Port Klang Free Zone (PKFZ) project that occurred in 2001 (<http://www.bharian.com.my>). The next incident is the National Feedlot Center project (PFN), which according to the Auditor General's report, showed weaknesses and deficiencies in the management of the project that warrants serious attention by several enforcement agencies. The PFN project is a cattle breeding project undertaken by the National Feedlot Corporation (NFCorp), which is a joint venture between Agrosience Industries Sdn Bhd and the Malaysian government. This project is worth RM250 million and involves public funds given in the form of soft loans (Berita Harian, 2012).

The wastage of national funds due to the weaknesses inherent in both projects mentioned above is exorbitant. Although not all government projects are problematic like this, these projects involving hundreds of millions of ringgit in national funds still have huge implications on the country's development plans. Moreover, if the funds are channeled to the poor in the country, surely many will benefit from it.

Among the suggestions for dealing with the problem of leakage and abuse of government funds are:

- i. The best long-term solution is through education. Religious and moral education that emphasizes on the importance of integrity and its impact on society and the nation should be implemented in the early stages of the education process. At the secondary and higher education level, subjects or courses should be introduced in efforts to expose students to various forms of practices perpetrated by offenders that contradict the principles of integrity and law (in this world and afterlife), which will increase students' understanding and awareness. Since the question of integrity is so strongly related to basic religious and moral values, this study believes that religious and moral subjects must be made core passing subjects at the Primary School Examination (UPSR), Middle School Assessment (PMR) and Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM).

ii. Avoid elements of cronyism when awarding projects and a project should preferably go through an open tender process because there is no room for corruption in the latter case. In addition, the successful party in the tender process has more rights and authority to implement the project. A crony relationship provides a 'feeling of invulnerability' to the project implementers because they have a strong 'back up' to defend them. The open tender process is also in line with the government's desire to deal with chronic corruption that has resulted in losses of approximately RM10 billion a year. Therefore, NKRA believes that corruption is one of the issues that needs immediate attention (<http://www.pemandu.gov.my>).

iii. To establish an efficient monitoring committee that has the power to block the operation of a project in its early stages if there are any foreseeable problems. In short, a mechanism that can identify problems and overcome them at an early stage is essential for avoiding greater losses in the future. The Port Klang Free Zone (PKFZ) project is a clear example of losses incurred due to the lack of monitoring and action at the early stages. The effectiveness of this committee will increase if it forges cooperation with the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC). Hence, recommendations by the Anti-Corruption Advisory Board (LPPR) that a copy of the property declaration statement of all cabinet members and their immediate family members that has been submitted to the Prime Minister's Department should also be forwarded to the MACC is an appropriate move (Khazi, 2012).

The government is trying to prove the seriousness of its efforts by not only emphasizing on the issue of worldly progress, but also on the importance of meeting the demands of the afterlife. In fact, Islam has experienced positive developments since the country achieved independence. Formation of a public administration machinery as well as a corporate world body based on the comprehensiveness or universality of Islam has been carried out in stages. Rise of the Malaysian race based on a religious axis and a pure value system is slowly moving forward in tandem with the increasing awareness of Islam among the community (Arief and Mokti, 2006). One of the policies that has contributed to this awareness is the application of Islamic values that was introduced since 1985. Among the goals of this policy are:

- i. Instil the spirit of love for sacred Islamic values
- ii. Respect the good and despise the evil
- iii. Eliminate negative attitudes when carrying out a task
- iv. Produce high quality services

- v. Train oneself with discipline
- vi. Safeguard one's trustworthiness with dedication

In addition to the policy of assimilating Islamic values, the government is also trying to introduce a more serious Islamic policy through the Islamic Hadhari approach introduced earlier by Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in 2004. This approach is aimed at the construction and development of civilization promoted by Islamic values and focuses on efforts to improve the quality of life through the mastery of knowledge as well as human, health and physical development (Ramli, 2009).

In the current context, establishing a media company with a religious concept, like *AlHijrah*, is an effort that should be praised and supported by all parties. This refers to programs that are prepared and used as reference materials as well as to improve the community's knowledge about Islam, especially the Muslim community. The existence of *AlHijrah*, alongside IKIM (Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia), which has been operating for two decades, has contributed to the development of Islam and the spread of a better understanding about Islam to the general population in this country.

However, there are some weaknesses that need to be urgently and wisely rectified. Although Islamic-based mass media programs have developed well, programs containing excessive elements of entertainment in the mass media, whether print or electronic, need to be addressed immediately. This type of entertainment contributes a sharp increase in social ill symptoms that the country is currently facing. Therefore, something in the nature of alternative entertainment that takes into account Sharia principles need to be sought and expanded.

Some of the suggestions to overcome this issue are:

- i. The government needs to provide encouragement and extend help as well as facilities to those who want to open an Islamic mass media company so that this form of broadcasting can compete with the quality and influence of ordinary mass media companies that have been established in the country for a long time. Islamic mass media companies need to come up with better quality, creative and innovative programs because with the existence of more mass media companies of this type, society will have more alternatives and opportunities to seek entertainment and beneficial education. In short, IKIM

and AlHijrah are still inadequate and need new broadcasting partners who support Islamic broadcasting principles.

ii. Clear guidelines need to be given to all broadcasting companies to ensure that the programs are capable of developing the minds of the community and not just act as mere entertainment. The government needs to be firm and give warnings or take legal action on any party that violates the guidelines to ensure that all broadcast programs, whether on television or radio as well as displays or print media content are in line with the government's wishes to produce citizens who have a first-class mindset in line with the first-class infrastructure that is provided by the government. One current issue is the government's serious stance on the screening of horror films that contain elements of polytheism and superstition until Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (<http://mstar.com.my>).

iii. The programs should aim to provide solutions or at least help reduce problems currently being faced by the country and the Muslim community. For example, issues related to alleged apostasy involving hundreds of thousands of Muslim individuals (<http://www.malaysiakini.com>). Although this issue is serious, there is no scientific or legal debate in the media, especially the electronic media, on this issue. Hence, if this issue is not dealt with discretely, it will leave a negative perception in society's mind by concluding that religious institutions, including the Islamic Development Department of Malaysia (JAKIM), Mufti's Department and so on are not playing their role. This response is expected because a Muslim majority country that has various privileges, such as constitutional provisions and the people's loyalty, still faces a serious problem with apostasy. Whereas in the West, Islam is reported to be growing exponentially, despite not accorded any privileges compared to Malaysia (Asri, 2010).

b. Moderation

Moderation is also an important element outlined in Malaysia's wasatiyyah concept. The government opposes any form of subversive activities that might lead to chaos or destabilize the country. It also welcomes advice and criticism from all parties regarding the course of administration as a noble effort or a form of a check and balance mechanism. However, pertinent remarks and criticisms need to be delivered

discretely through various channels that have been identified. In this context, the importance of the dialogue stage as a mechanism for channeling reprimands and criticism in an appropriate mechanism that should be understood by all parties, both the government and the public. For example, dialogue-themed programs on television are increasing in number and gaining support. The Hujah program (TV9), Dialog (TV1), Bicara (TV AlHijrah) and so on have their own fan-base and influence.

This situation indicates a strong relationship between wasatiyyah and dialogue. Dialogue can be considered the core of the wasatiyyah concept, especially those involving evaluation or monitoring of the government's day-to-day administration. Dialogue is also an important instrument in strengthening friendly relations between various ethnic groups. This was confirmed by Najib himself when he attended the Thaipusam festival in Batu Caves where he emphasized that efforts to foster understanding and awareness between different ethnic groups are through discussion, dialogue and education (Kosmo, 2012).

The concern and awareness of a dialogue's importance in this country by all parties, especially the government, is a positive element and needs to be supported. However, the dialogue scenario did not produce the expected effect, in fact negative outcomes, such as discord and hostility, between the parties during the dialogue became apparent and more acute. For example, the dialogue between Bersih 2.0 and the Election Commission (SPR), which led to the Bersih demonstration on 9 July 2011. Not to be forgotten is the dialogue that brought together Dato' Shaberi Cheek and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in 2008, which did not lead to any significant effect on the welfare of the people or the country. This shows that there are weaknesses in a dialogue that need to be addressed as best as possible (Adabi, 2012). This study believes that this problem is based on the country's education system, which needs some well-planned improvements.

In addition to dialogue, the government is also trying to provide equal rights to all parties regardless of differences in religion, culture or ethnic background. Justice does not mean equality, but rather putting something in its place or allocating rights to those who deserve it. Implementation of justice began since the country was on the verge of independence and it intensified after independence. Drafting of the Malaysian Constitution, which focused on the agreement of all ethnic groups in the country, has numerous objectives such as acting as a social contract, serving legal justice that transcends race and religion, creation of a consensus and political cooperation between various ethnic groups by providing justice and rights to the majority and minorities, formulation fair economic policies based on the objective of stimulating growth and equally distributing the economy gains to correct the

economic imbalance between the various ethnic groups, formulation of a national education policy that translates the desire to democratize education, seeking unity and building holistic human capital, formulation of a unity policy to form a united Malaysian nation and other policies and approaches developed by the government over time (Ramli, 2009).

In the current context, justice remains the basis of government programs initiated for the people. Government programs that channel various forms of assistance to the people are efforts that portray the government as being transparent and not marginalizing any ethnic group. Government assistance is provided to all ethnic groups who are entitled to it without practicing any form of discrimination. Among the assistance provided are 1Malaysia People's Aid (BR1M), 1Malaysia People's Housing (PR1MA), 1Malaysia People's Welfare (KAR1SMA), 1Malaysia Book Vouchers (BB1M), 1Malaysia People's Shop (KR1M) and 1Malaysia People's Menu (MR1M) and so on, which are all meant for the low-income segment of the population affected by the increase in the cost of living. This is consistent with the 1Malaysia slogan 'people first'. This effort is also expected to strengthen racial unity so that no party feels marginalized or ostracized due to their non-Bumiputera status. This indirectly indicates that the government understands the position and rights of all ethnic groups and tries to fulfill these rights as best as possible (Ramli, 2009).

Nevertheless, the biggest challenge faced by the government is the excessive demands from either the Malay or non-Malay groups. Excessive claims that deny constitutional provisions continue to occur, especially when it involves the interests of a race-based political party. Chinese-based organizations, for example, often object to the agenda of building a Malaysian nation that shares the same identity, especially elements of the agenda that involve educational and cultural policies (Tee, 2011). Likewise, in matters concerning religion, there are parties that interfere with the Syariah and Civil Committee (JTSS), which is body responsible for reviewing and changing the Islamic and civil legal system to make it more Malaysian (Afandi, 2003). In a similar vein, the Malaysian Consultative Council for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS) strongly opposed the proposal by Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) to implement Hudud law in Kelantan (Ibrahim, 2003). From a wider perspective, there are parties who dispute the privileges of the Malays and the position of Islam mentioned in the constitution to the point of irking the Malay ethnic community. Conversely, there are those who respond to the objection above in an exaggerated manner by raising the issue of Malay supremacy and dispute the citizenship status of non-Bumiputera (Teat, 2012). Therefore, moderation is important when making demands because excessive demands can invite objections that are also

excessive. Consequently, tensions and disputes arise that do not benefit any party. Nursi (1995) had emphasized this negative effect by concluding that hostility and enmity will be reciprocated with hostility and enmity.

In this regard, the government needs to exercise wisdom and caution when solving sensitive issues and not be influenced by the emotional sentiments of any party. Some of the suggestions for overcoming these issues are as follows.

i. Adhering to the principle that “our rights will be preserved in the way we preserve the rights of others”. Thus, if all parties are accorded their rights fairly, then irresponsible parties would not be able to excessively manipulate the rights issue of various ethnic groups or races for their personal interests. Justice is the basis of an integrated government and if it is practiced to the fullest, a government will continue to exist and secure the people's mandate. Therefore, some assert that Allah SWT will strengthen a just and fair government even if it is not an Islamic government and will not help or condone a tyrannical government even if it is an Islamic government (al-Madkhali, 2006). Short term aid or assistance to the people, such as BR1M, BB1M etc., needs to be developed into a comprehensive long-term package or policy. This is important as it would firmly indicate that the government is serious about resolving the people's problems and not just campaigning for the next election.

ii. Planting the seeds of unity and solidarity in people's mind through education at all levels, cultural-friendly programs that cut across religions and race, and making the nation's leadership a human model that can interact wisely with all levels of society etc. The government needs to show a healthy and mature form of politics through personal and organized programs so that the people are confident that the elected government acts in the interest of the country and all parties. For example, Aidil Fitri, Gong Xi Fat Cai, Gawai and Deepavali celebrations and related festivities are among the strategic measures that need to be further expanded because they can forge closer relationships between fellow citizens and leaders of various ethnic groups.

iii. Among the supporting programs that can be implemented is to form a unity committee at the village or district level that is represented by all ethnic groups. They can consensually plan and implement unity programs, such as community sports events, donation-drives for the needy, holding a gratitude or appreciation day that celebrates the children from the village or district who

have excelled in their studies etc., that can unite the various ethnic groups or races. Activities like this can further strengthen the cultural and religious programs that are carried out at the school level. This is consistent with the call by the former Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin who wanted the involvement of students and families in unity activities. Events like this are also recommended by the Department of National Unity and National Integration (JPNIN) (<http://www.jpnin.gov.my>).

Conclusion

Establishing the Wasatiyyah Institute, which shares common objectives with the Center for Civilizational Dialogue, is consistent with efforts to empower the values of tolerance and community cohesiveness in order to help the country achieve a developed country status. The principle of balance between fulfilling worldly demands and adherence to Islamic teachings is complementary to the empowerment of wasatiyyah values, in addition to the simple principle that emphasizes the fostering of dialogue culture amongst the community as the best instrument for delivering advice, reprimands and criticism.

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