

Historical Review of Issues on Takfir in Malaysia

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Received: October 3, 2014

Accepted: December 26, 2014

ABSTRACT

The takfir trend is one form of deviation of the mind and behavior among Muslims from the sense of moderation of Islam. This study intends to examine the issues that are being debated, which have eventually brought about this trend within the Muslim community in Malaysia. This study uses the content analysis method for obtaining the necessary data. The study found that the takfir issues that were frequently highlighted in society were the issue of appointment and sharing of power with non-Muslims, implementing Islamic law and separating religion from matters regarding political administration.

KEYWORDS: Takfir, Islamic Thought, Iman, Islam, Islamic Politics.

INTRODUCTION

When we were to go further into the history of the emergence of the takfir phenomenon in Malaysia, we find that the term had actually existed when the country achieved its independence in 1957 or more specifically when the coalition of United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) had successfully formed the Coalition Government after they won the General Elections. The big issue raised was the power sharing with non-Muslims in ruling the Muslims. Takfir is an Arabic word that literally means "pronouncement of unbelief against someone," and can be translated as "excommunication" [1]. Hence, UMNO had shared the ruling of the country together with non-Muslims, represented by MCA and MIC. From that moment onwards, the takfir issue had changed its course from targeting the kafir English colonisers and their rules onto the Muslims themselves. According to the views of an Indonesian religious scholar living in Mecca in the 1950s, Syeikh Abdul Qadir al-Mandili (1910-1965) in his book 'Islam and its Sovereignty', the sharing of power of that nature is forbidden (haram). The religious scholars from Perikatan (Coalition) comprising Haji Abdul Rahman Merbok, Ghazali Bedong and others, who had defended the necessity of sharing power with kafirs (infidels) when ruling Muslims [2], challenged this view.

This problem had become the source of disunity and conflict only in the mid-1970s but it did not involve other parts of Islamic life, especially beliefs and religious practices. Although at that time there was a Tok Guru (religious teacher) from Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) who had issued a fatwa (religious decree) that Muslims could not appoint a kafir (infidel) as their leader and had declared as infidels the UMNO members who had associated themselves with kafirs (infidels) such as the Chinese and Indians, but the fatwa (religious decree) was not widely accepted and had not brought about religious disunity [3]. When the Islamic world was struck again with an Islamic upheaval in the early 1970s, Malaysia was not exempted from the spatter. The overwhelming exuberance to make Islam sovereign was ignited again with the onset of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The Iranian people rose to resist the tyranny of the secular government that was influenced by America and succeeded in forming an Islamic nation in a modern era. This situation had added the resolve and determination for changes to take place in Malaysia. Some Islamic religious and political activists had adopted the approach of takfir as a method or a convenient way to confront groups presumed to be secular [4], especially when facing an election. Hence, the rising takfir problem in Malaysia was closely related to the political turmoil involving parties in Malaysia, specifically the existence of the two largest Malay parties which are UMNO and PAS [5].

METHODOLOGY

The data obtained through library research of material related to the history and issues of takfir is happening in Malaysia. These materials include articles authored by Muslim scholars or researchers from the West. The main

reference that included was ancient and modern scholar's essay, thesis, seminar papers, newspapers and the latest journals regarding the title. The authenticity of the works of this "turath" (Muslim Writings) added strength in documentation, while modern resources will facilitate the search of fact.

DISCUSSION

This section discusses the main issues that form the accusation of takfir in society, which are the appointment and sharing of power with non-Muslims, implementing Islamic law and separating religion and politics.

Appointing and Sharing of Power with Non-Muslims

Malaysia today is a country with a society of various races that live harmoniously and peacefully. Basically, the Malays, Chinese and Indians are the three main races in Malaysia, followed by several minority races. From a historical point of view, the multiplicity of the major races that exist today actually began to form when the British brought in immigrants from China and India to work in the then Malay States. The influx of foreign labour was a British economic agenda intended for the tin mines and rubber estates in order to support the industrial revolution in Europe [6]. The coming of the British colonialist to this country had brought along the ingredients for sharing political power. This was the medicine for the racial syndrome that had been sowed and nurtured from the beginning. After the open-door policy was approved, the Malay States and later Malaysia became a fertile ground for racial politics [7]. This is the reality of history that the up-and-coming generations need to accept. History also tells us that since before independence, UMNO had implemented cooperative power sharing with the non-Muslim groups consisting of the Chinese, Indians, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and others. It started with the cooperation between UMNO-MCA in facing the Malay States Independence Party (IMP) led by Dato' Onn Jaafar (1895-1962) during the Kuala Lumpur Municipality elections in February 1952. MCA was originally a non-Muslim Chinese Welfare organization that was given the power by UMNO to represent the people and eventually lead the government, which eventually caused problems for the Malay Muslims. The cooperative power sharing was expanded to UMNO-MCA and MIC, an organization of non-Muslim people of Indian origin in the Coalition Party to face the 1955 elections. Registered voters in the first elections comprised 84% Malay-Muslim voters, 11% Chinese voters and about 5% voters of Indian origin. Nevertheless, UMNO were kind enough to offer 15 candidacies to MCA out of the 52 seats contested by the Coalition Party. This meant that UMNO had allocated 28% of the seats to the Chinese when their voting population was only 11% at that time. At first, the UMNO members insisted that they be given 90% of the total seats contested. However, the UMNO President then, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putera al-Haj (1903-1990) had cajoled and successfully influenced the Malays to drop their demands. This shows that during the early history of power-sharing Islam was not given its accorded rights in the general elections compared to the number of voters it had. Moreover, only 2 areas out of the 52 electoral areas in 1955 had non-Malay voting majority [8].

The consequence of the power sharing championed by UMNO saw its success in the 1955 elections. The Coalition Party had garnered a big win by controlling 51 seats of the 52 seats contested. Meanwhile, PAS had only won one seat in Krian Utara, in the state of Perak. The power sharing had substantiated the condition laid by the British who wanted the power-to-rule to be shared by other races if they wanted an independent Malay State. The 1959 elections saw the sudden increase in the percentage of Chinese voters because of the new citizenship laws. The number of Chinese voters increased from 11.2% in 1955 to 35.6% in 1959. Nevertheless, the National Coalition Council had allocated 28 seats to MCA [9]. Power sharing had continued to be practiced in ruling this country, from independence until today. The Coalition Party (later known as the Barisan Nasional) obtained a strong support from the multi-racial populace and managed to hang on to power and got a majority say in the parliament. The Coalition Party (now known as the Barisan Nasional) headed the issue of power sharing with non-Muslims in ruling this country, which eventually became a debatable issue between UMNO and PAS. Since the Coalition constitutes three of the biggest component parties, as in UMNO (Malays), MCA (Chinese) and MIC (Indians), the administrative matters were shared among the three parties, which involved Muslims and non-Muslims. The issue of "UMNO becoming infidel because it allied with non-Muslims" began during the general elections in 1964 and was later actively pursued in 1969. However, the issue did not arise after PAS joined the Barisan Nasional government in 1974 [10]. The core issue that was debated was the need to appoint a non-Muslim leader for the Muslims. The religious scholars in PAS said that there was no need to appoint a non-Muslim leader. On the contrary, the religious leaders in UMNO had the opposite view. Both parties had delivered their arguments and religious references (nas) to defend the own stand.

Implementation of Islamic Law

Although Islam is the official religion of Malaysia, as written in Article 3(1) of the Federal Constitution, which says, "Islam is the religion of the Federation"; hence, not all of the Islamic law is fully implemented. Only certain parts of the Syariah law especially that relating to family law, is practiced in the administration of the country [11]. This has become an issue because UMNO, which leads the government of this country, has been accused of being infidel (kafir) because they have not implemented the law of Allah the Almighty. Hence, people of UMNO are labelled infidels (kafir), thus allegedly, livestock slaughtered by UMNO members cannot be consumed while prayers led by members of UMNO are invalid [12]. Similar issues have emerged in "Haji Hadi's Message" which alleged that UMNO is maintaining the British colonist's constitution that reflects the law of infidels (kafir) and the ignoramus (jahiliyyah). The message reads as follows:

"My fellow brothers, believe me when I say that when we oppose UMNO it is not because its name is UMNO. We oppose Barisan Nasional not because its name is Barisan Nasional. We oppose them because they have retained the coloniser's constitution, retained the infidel's rules, and retained the rules of the ignoramus. That is why we are battling to oppose them. Believe me brothers, our battle is a jihad, our words are jihad, our donations are jihad and because we are battling this faction and die due to this fight, our death is syahid; our death is death in the name of Islam. We do not have to become a Jew, we do not have to become a Christian, we do not have to become a Hindu, we do not have to become a Buddhist but we would become an infidel (kafir) by saying politics is a quarter and religion is another quarter" [13].

When elaborating on his message, in [13] stated that the field of Islamic law in Malaysia is limited from the judiciary and retribution aspects. The retribution is not more than the figure 356, which is three years imprisonment, a five thousand ringgit fine and six strokes of the cane. The restricted powers are clearly noticeable in the part-time model case, Kartika Sari Dewi Shukarnor, 32 years, who was fined RM5000 and given six strokes of the cane by the Syariah High Court in Kuantan on 20 July 2009 after she pleaded guilty to consuming alcohol in a hotel in Cherating [14]. Although the punishment of caning does not reflect the Hudud punishment of 40 strokes according to the Syafie sect and 80 strokes according to the majority of religious scholars [15], hence, there are still quarters who do not agree with the punishment. According to the statement by the Malaysian Bar Council, it had mocked and dismissed the punishment of caning because it is unsuitable with the present Malaysian society that is full of sympathy for the guilty party. Furthermore, it had urged the government to abolish the punishment of caning for all forms of criminal offences [16]. The same feelings were voiced by [17], Executive Director of Sisters in Islam who characterized Syariah law in Malaysia as draconian and cruel. The understanding that accuses those who do not implement the laws of Allah the Almighty as infidels is based on the verse of the Al-Qur'an that mentions the compulsory nature of the adherence to the Al-Qur'an (Surah al-Maidah 5: 49), as exhorted by Allah the Almighty which means:

"And judge, [O Muhammad], between them by what Allah has revealed and do not follow their inclinations and beware of them, lest they tempt you away from some of what Allah has revealed to you. And if they turn away-then know that Allah only intends to afflict them with some of their [own] sins. And indeed, many among the people are defiantly disobedient".

There are also three verses in Surah al-Maidah 5: 44, whereby Allah the Almighty had exhorted, meaning "And whoever does not judge by what Allah has revealed-then it is those who are the disbelievers". In reference to the President of PAS by [18] had explained the close relationship between implementing man's law and polytheism towards Allah the Almighty. He said that 'Man's courage to reject the laws of Allah the Almighty and create his own laws based on ignorance about the reality of humans and the entire natural environment is the biggest form of tyranny related to polytheism"

Separation of Religion from Politics

The separation of religion from politics is a foreign concept that has infiltrated the Islamic society. It originates from a secular ideology that is intent on separating worldly affairs from religion. In [19] had defined the meaning of separation as "What 'separating religion from politics' means is that the government is not bound by religious laws and methods". When examining the verses of the Al-Qur'an, it clearly shows that the Al-Qur'an (Surah al-Maidah 5: 50) forbids the separation and assumes that the action pertains to disbelief (kufur), false accusations (fitnah) and ignorance (jahiliyyah). Allah the Almighty had exhorted, meaning: "Then, is it the judgment of [the time of] ignorance they desire? But who is better than Allah in judgment for a people who are certain [in faith]". The main

function of the Al-Qur'an is to have its laws implemented and not for it to sit on the shelf. Just as the Al-Qur'an structures and guides matters involving individuals and family, this similar function applies to countries and the international community. Islamic jurisprudence assumes that the country is part of religion [20].

From a historical perspective, the separation of religion from politics in the Malay States began with the coming of the British. They introduced the secular administrative system, in which religion and politics could never meet eye-to-eye. The British officer who introduced this system was Sir Stamford Raffles (1781-1826 M) because it was he who advocated the separation of learning the Malay language from the basics of learning the Al-Qur'an although according to Malay tradition a child should be able to recite the Al-Qur'an before he learns the Malay language. This initiative was further substantiated when he sent a report to his headquarters in India in 1823 stating that the 12 magistrates appointed by him would apply English law when delivering their verdicts. Raffles was the pioneer of the secular system that separated religion from education and later made the English law sovereign. Hence, the separation gained meaning when the Pangkor Agreement was signed in 1874, which stated that all administrative matters lay with the British Resident, except matters pertaining to religion (which had a narrow connotation by now) and Malay customs. This agreement was expanded with the formation of the Malay Federated States in 1895, which gave wide powers to the Resident General to administer except on matters pertaining to religion and Malay customs, which was given to the Malay Sultans [21]. After the country had gained independence and had its very own constitution, we find that Article 4 of the Federal Constitution, the highest law in Malaysia, is the constitution itself. This fact is substantiated by Article 3(4), which states that there are no provisions in the term "official religion" that could reduce the power of any other provision in the constitution. This means that the provision "official religion" cannot supersede other provisions, even though it contradicts the "official religion". It was on this basis that accusations of kufur were thrown at those who separated religion from politics, especially UMNO which is spearheading the rule of this country today.

CONCLUSION

After scrutinizing the history regarding the emergence of issues pertaining to takfir in Malaysia, it can be concluded that these issues are closely related to disputes about party politics in Malaysia, such as the issue of appointing non-Muslims as leaders of Muslims and sharing power in ruling this country between them. According to them, the al-Quran has clearly forbidden the appointment of non-Muslims. To the issue of not fully implementing Islamic law among Malaysia's multi-racial society, it leads to blasphemy as stated in the Al-Qur'an. The last issue is the separation of religion from politics. This separation is due to the secular ideology that has been borrowed from the West. Holding on to this ideology by Muslims could also lead to blasphemy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors also would like to thank Mr Zairi Ismael Rizman for his guidance and assistance in getting this paper published.

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