Response of Muslim Community Concerning Liberal Islam In Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Liberal Islam is presently considered a threat to the direction of Muslim thought, particularly in Malaysia. Various approaches and responses have been submitted by various parties, whether government or non-government organizations (NGOs). This article will discuss the approaches taken by government agencies and NGOs in Malaysia on this issue. Since its inception, the group of Liberal Islam has conducted many regular activities concerning public education. Nevertheless, there are activities and programs as responses to Liberal Islam include talk shows, publication of books and booklets, conferences and seminars. Initial findings of this article concludes that the threat of Liberal Islam in Malaysia is difficult to spread widely because it is being monitored directly and indirectly by government institutions and non-government organizations, those in academia and the community.

Key words: Liberal Islam, Malaysia, Non-Governmental Organization, Muslim community, public response.

Introduction

Liberal thinking merged into the Islamic world during the 18th century due to the influence of religious liberation during the Renaissance of the 16th and 17th century in the west. The liberal group was initiated by personnel like John Locke, Rousseau, Adam Smith and J.S Mill who stood for individual liberty but denied moral values and transcendental aspects.

Besides, the development of liberal thoughts in Islam was also claimed to have a continuity with the modernization of Islamic practice which was conducted by some Islamic intellectual like Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh during the 20th century with the aim to bring the Islamic community forward in the field of science and technology, based on western philosophy (Shahrom 2002:34). In addition, some were of the opinion about the development, also had continuity with secularism, orientalism and the philosophy of relativism, rationalism and nihilism.

Since the 18th century, a fraction of Muslims have been progressing liberal thinking in the world including Malaysia. Although the idea of liberalism was accepted by some Muslim intellectuals, yet the term ‘liberal Islam’ does not exist. According to Uthman El-Muhummad (2008) this term was initially introduced in 1988 and was promoted by Leonard Binder through his writings, entitled ‘Islamic liberalism: A critique of development ideologies’ and followed by Charles Kurzman’s book, ‘Liberal Islam: A source-book’ which was published in 1998. Both these books have been the main source of references for the supporters of this idea in the world.

Nurcholis Madjid, Harun Nasution, Ahmad Wahib, Lutfi al-Syaukani, Ulil Abshar, Djohan Efendi (Muslim 2005) and many more have been usually related to the development of Liberal Islam.

Moreover, the influence of Liberal Islam was claimed to have developed in Malaysia as well. Scholars like Kassim Ahmad (Azizan, 2006), Farish Noor, Syed Akbar Ali (Anis Shakila, 2006), Zainah Anwar (Ramnaizzudin, 2005), Reza Shah Kazemi (Ariffin, 2009) Astora Jabat and Zainuddin Idrus (Hafiz Firdaus, 2007) and organizations like Musawah (Wan Salim, 2009), Jemaah al-Qur’an Malaysia (Zamihan, 2008) Sister in Islam (SIS), Inter Faith Commission (IFC), Women’s Aid Organization (WAO), all Women’s Action Society (Awam) and The Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) were said to have tried to develop the liberal thought in religious matters among Muslims in Malaysia.

Materials and Methods

Responses and Approaches of Malaysian – Muslims Community:

Since its inception, government agencies and non-governmental organizations have conducted many regular activities concerning public education. With the assistance from funding agencies, these groups were able to voice the issues of Liberal Islam. Their activities and programs include syndication of liberal Islam writers. This is the most important program undertaken by them. It is intended to collect writings from author’s proponents who do not promote pluralism and inclusivism and disseminate them to local mass media which have difficulties in finding good writings and writers on those issues. This syndication provides selected articles, interviews and sources every week for local newspapers. Talk-shows of radio IKIM, held interviews of scholars who did not promote pluralism and an inclusive understanding of religion. This program is seemed as the most effective effort to disseminate the threats of liberal Islam. Publication of books discussed on issues of liberal Islam, pluralism and inclusivism in religion. Publication of booklets or leaflets contained a short article, interview, or abstract from books on controversial issues in religion. Discussion of Islam; with cooperation from other institutions, were arranged with distinguished speakers from all over the world. Conferences, seminars and workshop discussions were held on campuses in Malaysia with the cooperation of student organizations to disseminate the issues of Liberal Islam.

Several approaches and responses were suggested by many parties which were either governmental or non-governmental agencies. Hence, the approaches of writings or literatures either used methods of critical analysis, historiography or writing analysis in discussing this topic have been recognized by the writings of current critics and analysts in Malaysia.

Researchers found that the main focus area of liberal Islam in Malaysia was based on the survey of existing researches regarding various related aspects that not only included this country, but Indonesia and the Middle East as well. Analysis of contents is used as an approach in discussing the related literatures to analyze the opinions which were forwarded in some literatures based to the related issues of the Islamic Liberal group.

Results and Discussion

Persatuan Ulama Malaysia (PUM) in respect of this issue, has taken the pro-active steps by publishing a book entitled ‘Islam Liberal Isu dan Cabaran’ (2009). It assembled fifteen working papers explaining on the forms of attacks and manipulation of Liberal Islam either in Malaysia, Indonesia or Egypt. The ideas which were attached in this book were more to the historical aspects and issues that were being promoted by the Islamic Liberal understanding based on the researche’s observation. Nevertheless, the writings of Bharuddin Che Pa, Raja Hisyammudin Raja Sulung and Afriadi Sanusi entitled ‘Usaha Membendung Islam Liberal: Kajian Terhadap Strategi Kiai Haji Ahmad Dahlan Dalam Memurnikan Ajaran Islam’ are regarded as having their own differences in focusing on the forms of certain individual approaches as the strategy to hinder the flow of liberal Islam which was not being particularly discussed in previous researches.

The articles entitled ‘Tafsiran Quran Dalam Perspektif Jaringan Islam Liberal’ ( Muhd Najib, 2007) and ‘Tafsiran Jaringan Islam Liberal: Kajian Analisis Metodologi dan Penyelewengan Tafsir Jaringan Islam Liberal Indonesia’ by Muhibbudin Hasan in year 2004, have given attention to the approaches used by the liberal Islamic thought in the translation field. Both of these researches have discussed the methodology which was used by the supporters of Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL) in Indonesia for translating the sacred verses from the al-Quran which obviously has deviated from the truth of Islamic guidance. By using the critical and historical methods of analysis, the authors have summarized that JIL tended to use the mind approaches and translation method of bi al-ra’yi al-mazmum when they translated the al-Quran in a way to synchronise the meanings of the al-Quran verses with their teachings. In addition to those articles, a research entitled ‘Methodology Ijtihad versi Jaringan Islam Liberal: Satu Analisis Metodologi Ijtihad Jaringan Islam Liberal Indonesia’ by Muslim Gunawan in year 2004 has discussed the JIL methodology. These researches have indirectly delivered information to the public community particularly about the Liberal Islam scholars in Indonesia and the direction
of their thought, including the public awareness towards the issues of Liberal Islam against the beliefs of the Muslim community. However, there is no literature explaining the methodology used by the Liberal Islam group in relation to translating the prophet's hadith.

The following articles entitled ‘Mengenal Pemikiran Islam Liberal Wacana Islam Liberal di Timur Tengah’ and ‘Memahami Pemikiran Islam liberal’ by Shahrom have focused the discussion on the ideas of the Liberal Islam scholars such as Mahammad Arkoun, Abdul Karim Soroush, Muhammad Abduh, Qasim Amin, Nasr Abu Zayd and others. In other words, the writers of these articles would like to show the readers the differences among the group scholars by analyzing their literatures through the methods of content analysis. For example, Soroush suggested the theory of development and deduction. However, Arkoun has used the historical approaches which are also known as historicism. These two scholars have the same direction in their writings even though there is a difference in terms of the approaches taken. They are trying to advise people to revolve the translation of religious scriptures in a manner to update the thoughts as per current time. In fact, the researchers have revealed the foundation of the Liberal Islam thoughts from various countries to the community.

The discussion on the issues which were highlighted by the Liberal Islam thoughts was delivered in the forms of writings as implied in the book entitled ‘Islam Liberal dan Pluralisme Agama’ by Riduan Mohamad Nor (2006) and the thesis, ‘Konsep Pluralisme Agama dalam Aliran Islam Liberal’ by Nur Farhana (2010). Both of these literatures have discussed the same issue which is a concept of religious pluralism according to the Liberal Islam, which a thought that claimed all religions are true. The discussion on these issues is very interesting since the authors such as Riduan and Ahmad Adnan are trying to relate the issue with the situation among Muslims in Malaysia. Nevertheless, the researchers suggested that the discussion on the issues of Liberal Islam need to be addressed, particularly the issues with regards to women such as akrab or polygamy which seem to be noted by the Muslimah in Malaysia such as the Sisters in Islam society. However, the discussion pertaining to issues of women by the researchers was not elaborated in detail and was merely discussed as a sub-topic under certain topics.

As a result, the responses on Liberal Islam that were shown by the Islamic community in Malaysia, particularly through the literature approaches are highly appreciated and contributes to various, current information of which could be shared together. In conclusion, there are less number of researches discussing in detail the reactions or strategies of individuals, institutions and certain groups to weaken the influence of the Liberal Islam thought in Malaysia. Thus, the researcher concludes that more discussions need to be further elaborated and forwarded, for example, concerning impacts or implications of Liberal Islam on the thinking of the Islamic community or the principles of the Islamic community on Liberal Islam and so on.

Approach by Critical Analysis:

There are a lot of courses pertaining to the issues discussed by the critical approaches, for example:

Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) Department of Islamic Development Malaysia is one of the governmental departments playing a key role in the issues of Liberal Islam. The department has held several discussions on fatwa in order to debate the issues pertaining to the Islamic community in Malaysia by critics. Tan Sri Dato Harussani, who is one of the group members of the Muzakarah Ulama committees (11-13 June 2006), stated the requirement of the government to revise the practice of several religious festivals such as ‘shared festivals’ and open houses in a way to ensure that the Islamic laws are not compromised. This practice seems to be a threat to the Islamic teachings and could lead to syirik.

First Document; the Resolution of the Muzakarah Ulama 2006, concludes that the Liberal Islam thought and the pluralism of religion are categorized into one of mental approaches played by the West and grounded by the influence of secularism, modernism and post modernism.

Liberal and plural thoughts in this context clearly contaminates the truth of the Islamic fundamentals, including polluting religious truths compromising the roles of the al-Quran as the sacred book and God’s guidance, dispute the reputation of the prophecy and the greatness of the Prophet’s (SAW) personality, affect the al-Sunnah and the Ijmak Ulama authorization and weaken the power and greatness of the Islamic teachings. The group has decided to set up those resolutions due to the issues as follows:

Government Policy:

The government should be responsible and firm about the negative influences of Liberal Islam and the pluralism of religion. Prevention should be taken to avoid the development of the thought. The practices of
sharing the religious celebrations with different religious believers need to be re-evaluated in order to maintain the truth of the Islamic teachings.

The rights and obligations of Muslims to firmly practice and understand Islam as a way of life should be always protected. The government should firmly disagree with the IFC and other like groups whose purposes are nothing but to interrupt the truth of Islam and to interfere the religious practices of the Islamic community. The Muzakarah has demanded the government to take rapid actions to control the development of the secular, materialistic lifestyle such as in the forms of broad Hedonistic culture, partying and uncontrolled entertainment. The development of the culture has caused the destruction of the religious faith and the pollution of the religious lifestyle among the community.

Education and Research:

The Muzakarah suggested an establishment of a special institution under the jurisdiction of the Mufti, comprising religious and academic scholars to keep track and handle the threat of Liberal Islam. The Muzakarah also suggested teaching and conveying courses pertaining to the influence of the thoughts at a higher education level with particular emphasis of critics and disagreements towards Liberal Islam and other kinds of groups. The program of sending our students to the western or other foreign institutions for higher education also needs to be selectively considered and carefully conducted with the concern of the influence of Liberal Islam on these students. The Muzakarah also proposed the needs of enhancement efforts to be taken towards Islamic teachings according to Ahl al-Sunnah wal Jamaah at every formal and non-formal education level.

Teaching and Dialogue:

The Muzakarah suggested to all parties including political, governmental institutions and non-governmental organization to be further concerned to cleanse off the damaging thoughts since the Liberal group has polluted the truth of Islamic teachings by using the global, incentive and well-planned strategies. It is important to consider this, so as to make the community aware of the dangers of Liberal Islam and the pluralism of religion. The Muzakarah also supported the ideas of dialogue between religion with the purposes to understand and respect each other without affecting and interfering one’s faith.

Improvement, Ijtihad and Condition:

The Muzakarah agreed for the needs of improving Islam, but the efforts should be taken based on the principles and in a legal manner as the teachings of Islam. It has also reminded that the opening of the ijtihad channel is not meant to be regarded as a term-free improvement. The ijtihad can only be performed by those personnel who are well acquainted with the terms and conditions of the ijtihad and they should be responsible for the actions taken.

Resolution and Commitment of Muzakarah:

The Muzakarah has determined to struggle for defending and promoting the facts and truth of Islam according to fundamental resources; the al-Quran and the al-Sunnah.

Second Document-The law for customizing or celebrating other religious celebrations:

The fatwa which was put forward by the Lajnah al-Daimah Li al-Buhuth al-Ilmiyyah al-Ifta’, firmly stated that attending and joining non-Muslim celebrations was illegal according to Fatwa no.9253, 8848 and 6394. The Perak State Syariah committee in a meeting which was held on 11 March 2004, decided that celebrating or joining non-Muslim festivals was illegal. However, this resolution by the Muzakarah in facing Liberal Islam and religious pluralism was criticised by Astora Jabat, who rejected the outcome which was elaborated in his writings, entitled ‘Ulama Jangan Merapu Cemar Imej Islam: Kongsi Raya Boleh’ on page 3 of the Al-Islam magazine dated, August 2006. He is in favour of allowing the practice of shared celebrations by various religions or beliefs.

Responses Through Writing Approaches:

Shaharom’s ‘Wacana Islam Liberal di Timur Tengah’ is one of the writing analyses which was on page 24 of the Massa (A weekly magazine) dated, 3-9 August 2002. Besides that, writings by Mohd Rumaizudin entitled ‘Ciri-ciri Islam Liberal’ on page 18 of the al-Islam magazine on September 2005, has also been recognized as one. Furthermore, the article by Mohammad Nordin Ibrahim entitled ‘Pengaruh Fahaman Liberal Dalam Buku Fiqh Lintas Agama’ on page 157 of the Journal of Research 2005, which was published by Jabatan Kemajuan
Islam Malaysia was one of the writing analysis on the issue and the effort to address Liberal thoughts on Muslim religious issues in Malaysia.

**Historical Approaches:**

There are various researches and writings which studied and explained the history and state of origin of Liberal Islam.

**Jabatan Agama Islam Negeri:**

Performed the particular research regarding Liberal Islam, for example, the Research Department of Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor has made researches concerning Liberal Islam from time to time.

Organized conferences such as ‘Seminar Pemurnian Akidah 2009’ which was conducted on 20 August 2009 and ‘Seminar Isu-isu Semasa Akidah kepada kakitangan kerajaan dan Badan-badan Berkanun 2008’ and played the role as investigation agent to reveal the secret of the Muslim liberalist, including preventing the delivery of the Liberal Islam influence to the community. It reported a list of 25 prohibited words that included *Allah*, *nabi* (prophet), *wahyu* which were not to be used at all, verbally and literally by non-Muslims. Infringement of the prohibition would result in a fine amounting to not more than RM3000 or a prison term of not more than 2 years or both to those who disobeyed the law. This enactment has been used by 10 states including Selangor and Pahang.

**Jabatan Mufti Negeri:**

Organized *Muzakarah Ulama* at state levels such as *Muzakarah Ulama* 2006 to issue the *fatwa* related to Liberal Islam. In collaboration with Jabatan Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan, organized the conference, ‘Seminar Pemurnian Akidah 2009’ and played the role as investigation agent to reveal the secret and danger of Liberal Islam.

Publication of books such as ‘*Cabaran Akidah Pemikiran Islam*’ by Jabatan Mufti Wilayah Persekutuan which are related to Liberal Islam.

Stop individuals and groups that are trying to broaden the influence of the Liberal Islam ideas to the community. Jabatan Mufti Wilayah Persekutuan upon conducting detailed researches has reported the illegality of the ESQ Leadership Training organized by Ary Ginanjar Agustian as the training has delivered the damaging teachings which can destruct the teachings of Islam (Utusan Malaysia, 2010)

**Mahkamah Syariah (Syariah Court):**

Struggle for the authorization to handle the family-related issues, *munakahat* and *murtad* muslims which have been fooled around by the ideas of Liberal Islam. As an example, the Syariah Court firmly faces the attacks and pressures from non-Muslims concerning the *murtad* issue, whereby they repeatedly challenge the reputation of the court including undertaking the efforts to cleanse off the Articles 11 (4) and 121 (4). The Syariah Court could lose the power of authorization to judge any *murtad* issues, *munakahat* and Islamic firmly-related systems if the federal laws were deleted. The action of SIS,WAO and JAG in sending a memorandum to the Prime Minister entitled ‘Justice for Kartika’ dated, 25 August 2009, in order to demand both, the Federal and state government to eliminate the laws of *Syariah* crimes which are highly conducted in this country has pressured the government to remove the laws of *Syariah* crimes.

**Jabatan Pendaftaran Negara (JPN):**

Disapproval of the application to change names of Muslim citizens and the elimination of Muslim or Islamic identity in identification certificate.

The effort to smoothen the process of changing the religion has been continuously conducted by the Liberal Islam group in Malaysia.

**Jabatan Perdana Menteri:**

Approval of the application of re-evaluating the laws of 2005. The Federal Territory Family as requested by Sister In Islam. The Minister back then in the Department of Prime Minister, Dato’ Dr. Abdullah has stated that the community needs to understand that the laws were not designed to discriminate Muslim women (Utusan Malaysia 2005)

Non-goverment Organization (NGO)
Collaboration of Pulau Pinang Islamic NGO.
Organize the demonstration to disapprove the conduction of closed conference by the Article 11 group.
Malaysia Ulama Association.
Publication of the book entitled ‘Islam Liberal: Isu dan Cabaran’
Organize the conference of Liberal Islam thought in Malaysia
Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia (PERKIM) / Muslim Welfare Organization Malaysia.
Organize the conference entitled ‘Akidah dan Syariah’ which discussed on these issues.
Yayasan Dakwah Islam Malaysia (YADIM).
Collaborated with the Ulama Association of Malaysia, to organize the conference of Islamic thought at the national level with the theme of ‘handling the thought of Liberal Islam in Malaysia’.

Academician.
Write the literatures in either forms of writing analysis, critical analysis or history. They act as the forum panelist, presenters of working papers which are either during conferences or workshops.

Political Parties: Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) for example organized open forum and intellectual discourse on the influence of Liberal Islam to the community.

Islamic community
Organize the demonstration of terminating the establishment of the IFC organization, demanding the disagreement of SIS and preventing other non-Muslims to use words of Allah particularly in the writings of the catholic weekly magazine, Herald.

Conclusion:
In conclusion, the movement of those who influenced by Liberal Islam is a threat to Muslim community in general and Malaysia’s Muslims in particular. The influence of Liberal Islam from neighbouring countries, the west and Malaysia herself, spreads to the Malaysian community through various approaches and efforts. The condition and environment of religion and the Malaysian intellects are believed to slow down and hinder the spread of this thought to the Malaysian community. We can also see parties such as government, non-government and individuals taking the effort to describe the issues of this thought with Allah’s will. Nevertheless, synergy from the institutions should be enhanced in order to have a continuous effective monitoring, in facing the spread of the liberal thought in Malaysia. This effort should be taken into account in order to protect the truth of the Islamic teachings and practices based on the al-Quran and the al-Sunnah, according to the teachings of traditional and contemporary Islamic scholars.

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