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Empowering Muallaf (Muslim Reverts): A Case Study on Baitus Salam

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Abstract

Islam as a caring religion has offered a guarantee to the Muslim reverts (muallaf), i.e. those who newly embraced Islam, by safeguarding their well-beings from the beginning until they can become independent and self-reliant. Aptly, Islam had them listed as one of the groups eligible to receive zakat (alm-giving). It is the responsibility of Muslims to provide support for the muallaf and strengthen them by means of as many forms of assistance as possible such as welfare assistance, moral guidance and financial support in the earliest stage of their reverting process into Islam. The establishment of Baitus Salam by Selangor Islamic Religious Council (MAIS) proves the attentiveness of the state government in looking after the welfare of the muallaf. However, issues are raised on what are the programs or activities organized by Baitus Salam to empower muallaf. Hence, this study is conducted with the aim to analyze some programs organized by Baitus Salam to realize its objectives as a platform that seeks to safeguard the well-being of the muallaf. This study utilizes compatible methods of data analysis or related documents analysis. This study finds that the establishment of Baitus Salam and the programs conducted in a regular manner are in accordance with the principles of Islam as a religion that cares about the welfare of the new reverts.

Keywords: Empowering, Muallaf, Baitus Salam

Introduction

Managing human capital development for the new reverts is essential and warrants attention. Malaysia is a multiracial country, hence, the term 'muallaf' usually refers to new reverts or Muslims from Chinese, Indians and other ethnicities who have newly embraced the practices of the religion of Islam (Irwan et al., 2015). According to JAKIM's Research Division (2009), the propagation (dakwah) efforts in Malaysia has shown positive effects that it successfully attracts non-Muslims to getting to know Islam, understand the religion and study it, to eventually choose Islam as their faith. In Malaysia, State Islamic Religious Council (MAIN) or State Islamic Religious Department (JAIN) are the responsible bodies that ensure matters that are related to muallafs are governed according to the provisions allocated for them as an eligible group to receive zakat.

Zakat provisions for muallaf as a group is clearly mentioned in the Quran in the words of Allah SWT in Surah al-Taubah: 60:

إِنَّمَا الصَّدَقَتُ لِلْفُقَرَاءِ وَالْمَسْكِينِ وَالْعَمَلِينَ عَلَيْهَا وَالْمُؤَلَّفَةِ قُلُوبُهُمْ وَفِي الرِّقَابِ وَالْغَرَامِينَ وَفِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَأَبْنِ السَّبِيلِ ۗ فَرِيضَةً مِّنَ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ (٦٠)

“Alms are for the poor and the needy and those employed to administer the (funds); for those whose hearts have been (recently) reconciled (to truth); for those in bondage and in debt; in the cause of God; and for the wayfarer. (Thus is it) ordained by God. And (remember) God is full of knowledge and wisdom”.

The provision ordained by Shariah for muallaf demands a good management system in order to empower their life. Hence, the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) has issued the Guideline for the Management of New Muslims Brothers 2009, specially for reference by the State Islamic Religious authorities, muallafs and their families, and other related parties which are involved in the management of muallaf, from the procedure of reverting to Islam, to managing the welfare of the muallafs in the forms of assistance, education and many more, and to include matters that are related to their deaths.

For the purpose of safeguarding the welfare and individuals of muallaf, Selangor State Government through Selangor Islamic Religious Council (MAIS) and Selangor Zakat Authority (LZS) have initiated the establishment of Baitus Salam (BS), not only as a place that provides protection, but also for the development and welfare of muallafs in Selangor. It served as a temporary place of protection for muallafs who were also the recipients of zakat. BS functioned as a community center for muallafs to recalibrate the purpose of their life after embracing Islam or when facing any misfortunes. The establishment of BS is more toward looking after the welfare of muallafs in Selangor.

In 2014, Baitus Salam was built at Jalan Kebun, Klang on a site of 2.65 acres. It began operating from January 2016, managed by the Muallaf Management and Development Division, Selangor Islamic Religious Council (MAIS). However, from April 1st 2017, the management of BS was taken over by Selangor Zakat Authority (LZS), concurrently with the handing over of muallaf's management functions from MAIS to LZS. This study is conducted particularly:

- To analyze some of the programs organized by BS according to its objectives in looking after the welfare of the muallafs and in empowering them.

Literature Review

A number of previous researches related to the present research were referred to. Among them are some discussions on the term 'muallaf'. Imam Hasan defines 'muallaf' as a group of people who professed other religions in the beginning, but later embraced the religion of Islam (Qardawi, 2007). According to Abdul Ghafur et al (2017), the term new brothers emerged in early 1970's, after the message of Islam that was spread began to receive interests from non-Malay non-Muslims. New reverts can also be construed as a substitute term for the term 'muallaf' (those whose hearts are softened), taken from the meaning of the Quranic phrase "al-Muallafati qulubuhum". Based on a report issued by JAKIM, 1990-2004 statistics estimated that there were 82,530 muallafs in Malaysia, while Selangor Islamic Religious

Council (MAIS) recorded that from 2010 to 2015, there were 10489 persons who embraced Islam (Marlon et al., 2014).

Various challenges of life are faced by a muallaf, especially emotional, cultural, economic, familial, career, bureaucratic, legal and other challenges. These challenges in fact bring changes into their life patterns which require a strong faith in the new religion in order to face them steadfastly. With the guidelines and good methods in educating Islam to the muallafs, it assists them in forming their new identity and builds their confidence in facing any challenges as a Muslim. In another study conducted in Pulau Pinang, sixty five percent of muallafs are practicing un-Islamic lifestyles, including consuming alcohol, extramarital pregnancy and fornication. The study also states that there are cases of renouncing Islam due to peer pressure, resulting from divorce cases (Azaruddin dan Khadijah, 2015). Through the work of Marlon et. al (2014), it is stated that in 2008 there was an alarming increase in the number of apostates that reached nearly half a million people. Following this is the number of muallafs who wanted to return their former religion.

Referring to the paper written by A'thiroh & Fariza (2009), muallafs experience various psychological stages before and after embracing Islam. Among them are the stages where they are searching for the nature of truth by studying and analyzing the authenticity and the beauty of Islam until they voluntarily utter the shahadah and continue their adherence to the teachings of Islam. However, in that process of choosing Islam as their religion, many new converts undergo various stages that require continuous knowledge, patience, encouragements, supports, advices and motivations. Othman & Luqman (2011) opined that when someone is registered as a muallaf, then zakat institutions are responsible for looking after them in terms of welfare and guidance.

It is clearly supported by Adibah and Zubaidah (2018) when they underline five necessities of a muallaf. The first necessity relates to the issue of identity of a muallaf in Malaysia with regards to his or her name, including the acquisition of a valid identification card or certificate for embracing Islam, after the completion of the registration processes. Secondly, it is related to a muallaf's religious education that requires JAIN, MAIN or other non-governmental organizations (NGO) to play their roles. Thirdly, that which is related to financial assistance to assist the muallaf in the matters of their livelihood. Fourthly, continuous dakwah efforts and counseling sessions to encourage the muallaf in being steadfast with the new faith. Lastly, comprehensive laws and regulations for reference and as guidance in governing muallaf-related matters in every state in Malaysia.

In this regard, they held that every muallaf needs to be guided in accordance with the spirit of the Shariah. Hence, they see that the passing of any rules or laws related to muallafs in Malaysia cannot be diminished in importance by authorized bodies. With efficient legal provisions, it can assist in the management of all matters regarding muallafs more systematically. Yunus et al (2017) stressed that educating and understanding the creed of Islam are an essential element that needs to be emphasized, particularly to the muallafs. Ignorance or lack of emphasis on tawhid, increases the possibility of a muallaf to return to his or her former religion. Hence, the true understanding of the creed must be provided for the muallafs, by means of proofs from the Quran and Hadith, and logic that can be easily understood.

According to Zahrah & A'throh (2015), after the completion of the process of embracing Islam, usually a muallaf will be encouraged to attend classes that provide guidance about Islam, organized by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved with Islamic welfare such as Muslims' Welfare Association of Malaysia (PERKIM), Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM), Malaysian Chinese Muslims Association (MACMA) and others. However, there are almost no formal educations extant in Malaysia for muallafs. The only recognized formal education institute is the Institute of Islamic Dakwah Perkim (IDIP) located in Pengkalan Chepa, Kelantan. The Institute of Islamic Dakwah Perkim (IDIP) is the only educational institution which issues recognized certificates to the muallafs after they have completed their studies and have been successfully trained as preachers.

Methodology

The methods applied in this study are qualitative, for the approach conducted is the analysis of the efforts done by LZS and BS, particularly in the management of the affairs of the muallafs. To answer the research questions posed, textual study has been adopted in which important documents are studied by the author. Documents are selected from authoritative sources and can be divided into two types of sources: namely, primary and secondary sources. Primary sources comprised of information related to muallaf, which is documented by LZS. Meanwhile, secondary sources are collected from journal articles selected from online search engines such as Google Scholar, LZS website, news clippings and online databases such as Scopus, Taylor & Francis, EbscoHost and others. Writings on muallafs, zakat and waqf were also being referred to support research findings. Next, content analysis was applied in analyzing the data gathered to ensure that the collected data are able to answer the research objectives. In fact, the process of data collection and data analysis are made simultaneously to ensure the findings are valid and recognized.

Results

This research found that there are four types of programs provided by Baitus Salam which includes among other

Protection and Care

This program is organized in the sense of providing protection and care. Based on the LZS-Baitus Salam document (2019), generally, this program serves to provide protection and care which include security, health, conducive lifestyle, love and attention, and good environment. Specifically, the emphases on protection and care are as the following

- i. To provide protection for muallafs who face threats from immediate family members. Usually, this happens because the family members are opposing them reverting to Islam. However, to isolate them from such threats, BS puts a condition that a police report must be made in cases where the muallaf had faced issues such as bully, ill-treatments, and threats, either by family members, employers or society.
- ii. To accommodate muallafs who have no place to stay or have been evicted by their family. BS also functions as a place of temporary protection for muallafs before they can find a suitable employment. Although it is temporary, the protection in BS is enriched with programs that can prepare the muallafs to be independent. In addition, BS also provides

protection to those who are undergoing their divorce proceedings after their reversion's registration.

iii. To provide a 24-hour protection and care center in Baitus Salam by preparing a proper security system. For instance, BS provides security guards and a total number of 21 staffs, and, most importantly, BS is already gazetted as a protected area under the Protected Areas and Protected Places Act 1959 (Act 298). Hence, BS is an area secured from all kinds of intrusion.

iv. To ensure that the muallafs feel comfortable in BS, and the ambiance facilitates their understanding of the religion throughout their stay. Baitus Salam provides a comfortable accommodation equipped with proper facilities that are parts of their immediate needs.

v. Collaborations with other agencies are organized to strengthen the aspects of protection and care of muallafs.

Muallafs' Developments

For the purpose of muallafs' development, BS provides spiritual programs and activities which contain the elements of Islamic thoughts, dakwah and skills as well as employment opportunities. Among the programs for muallafs' development (LZS Document-Baitus Salam, (2019) are

Muallafs' Fardhu Ain Classes (KFAM)

BS organize 13 sessions of KFAM every month with the average of 156 sessions every year, which is equivalence to 312 hours every year. The class participants are comprised of 30 BS occupants and 30 more muallafs who are from outside of BS. They are divided into level 1 (introduction and understanding) and level 2 (internalization and practice) learners. As a proof of effectiveness of this program, a total of seven occupants have furthered their studies at Perkim Institute of Dakwah Islamiah (IDIP), al-Saadah Complex Seremban (a center for muallaf activities under the authority of Negeri Sembilan Islamic Religious Council), and Selangor Islamic University College (KUIS) as well as in other institutions. KFAM programs are conducted by Asnaf Muallaf Teacher-Mentors (GPAM) who are appointed by the Department of Human Development and Economics (JPIE).

Tadabbur Diniy Program

The program is conducted by BS's Teacher-Mentor and Wardens for 20 sessions every month with the total of 240 sessions every year. In contrast with KFAM which is opened to BS occupants and muallafs who are non-occupants alike, Tadabbur Diniy is a special program which involves BS occupants only. This program is focused on providing guidance in both theoretical and practical aspects of learning Basic Fardhu Ain, reinforcing the practical aspects of worshiping and improving muallaf's confidence in doing it.

Guidance Class for Warden (BS staff)

Wardens are those who are the closest to the muallafs and they are directly involved with them. Hence, they should also be equipped with a sufficient knowledge. Due to this, Guidance Class for Wardens are conducted in afternoon sessions for the purpose of reinforcing the understanding of religion among the staffs on the practical aspects.

Muallaf 's Basic Guidance Course (KBAM)

The program is conducted on a regular basis at Baitul Hikmah Training Centre, organized by the Department of Human & Economic Development (JPIE) in collaboration with consultant panels. The 3-days and 2-nights program is opened to all muallafs who are the eligible recipients of zakat in Selangor. Among the organized courses are Muallaf 's Basic Guidance Course, Muallaf 's Advanced Guidance Course, Fiqh Regarding Women Course, I am a Mukallaf Course, Muallaf's Basic Guidance Course (according to language) and others.

Muallaf 's Skills Program

The program is organized in once in every 2 months/6 times every year, for 4 to 5 hours per session and is dedicated to BS occupants only. This program is organized in collaboration with Klang Community College and is instructed by the college teachers themselves. This type of program is relevant to the muallafs since they can explore more on their talents, enhance their creativity as well as giving them opportunities and can provide them with ideas to create their own businesses in the future. It is also in accordance with the goals of BS to empower muallafs with certain skills as a preparation for them to join the working industry.

Celebration Programs for Special Days in Islam

There are seven programs in a year to celebrate these days which include Isra Mi'raj (the Night Journey), First Days of Ramadan, Nuzul Quran, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, Islamic New Year (Awal Muharram or Maal Hijrah) and Mawlid. The main objective of the celebration programs of these festivals is to introduce to BS occupants the special dates in Islam. It also aims at inculcating the spirit of brotherhood and strengthening their bonds as Muslims, and instilling Islamic values by internalizing spiritual and intellectual aspects of these organized festivities. The Program to Celebrate Prominent Days in Islam is conceptually intellectual in nature, with talks and forums delivered by invited religious scholars.

Guidance and Counselling

In principle, the purpose of the program is to assist the occupants to address their emotional and psychological issues. These muallafs come from diverse backgrounds and thus their problems are also various. Hence, guidance and counseling programs can assist them in solving their problems and in helping them to think through their problems rationally. Various programs are organized by BS including group and individual counseling sessions to help nurture efficient problem-solving muallafs, thus lightening their burdens. Among the programs are Manage Yourself and Your Emotion, organized twice a year, in partnership with Hushim Motivational & Counselling Consultancy (HMCC). Every time, before beginning the course, every participant will undergo tests conducted by the consultants to identify their problems and its root causes. HMCC personnel would deliver motivational talks to all participants to enhance their knowledge about managing their own selves and their emotions (LZS Document-Baitus Salam, 2019).

Other than that, BS also organizes Mukhayyam Program and Sahsiah Muallaf Program, held twice every year. The course is one of the initiatives of Baitus Salam to help reducing the difficulties faced by muallafs in addressing their general life issues, shaping their identity and forming their directions in life (LZS Document-Baitus Salam, 2019).

Welfare of Muallafs

BS has given much emphases on the welfare of the muallafs. Matters related to muallaf issues and their welfares such as daily sustenance, medical supplies, clothing and other needs were sufficiently fulfilled by BS staffs. Such is also the case with basic equipment and necessities of the occupants, including their healthcare and medication provision of every single occupant. Besides, BS also assists muallafs in managing their identification information in terms of changing their status of religion on their identification and conversion cards. To the muallafs who have to solve family-related issues, BS would assist in the management of their marital status after reversion, or divorce matters. Interestingly, BS also provides monthly allowance for all of the occupants (LZS Dokument -Baitus Salam, 2019).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the establishment of BS proves the concern of Selangor State government in the realization of the support and assistance through MAIS and LZS, not only for the benefits of the muallafs but also to empower them until they can be self-reliant and independent while being the best Muslims possible. Interestingly, the programs created by BS are consistent, have solid objectives and cater to the needs of the muallafs. This is also true with other aspects that are emphasized, ranging from protection and care, to muallafs' development, guidance and counseling, and muallaf's welfare, which are all important in the early stages of the muallafs' life as new reverts. Furthermore, the conducted programs and activities covers all significant aspects of human necessities as they emphasized the essential domains in character building, i.e physical, emotional, intellect and social. However, some improvements in the management and programs conducted must be done. In addition, further research on a regular basis is essential to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each program toward future improvements.

This research is very significant to enable important progress to be made in Muallaf's curriculum and program development as well as the necessary reforms. It could provide guidelines to the educators and trainers in understanding the muallaf's individual differences and preferences. More importantly, this research could provide insights in adapting methods of teaching to the needs of individual muallaf.

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