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Factors Responsible for the Emergence of *Takfir* in Malaysia

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Abstract

This article discusses the “Factors That Are Responsible for the Emergence of Takfir in Malaysia”. The issue of *takfir* is a black spot that has appeared among Muslims in Malaysia. Hence, the issue must be tackled so that Muslims can avoid getting involved in this polemic again. This article was written with the aim of revealing factors that led to the emergence of issues on *takfir* among Muslims. The study used the documentation methodology and analyzed all the factors that are directly connected to the issue of *takfir*. Among of the factors that have been identified are political, social and mass media. Next, the article elaborates on the steps taken to prevent this issue from lingering further. This article reveals that there several factors responsible for the emergence of *takfir* in Malaysia such as the refusal of Muslims to adhere to Western thinking, differences in interpreting the texts of the al-Qur'an and hadith, and the influence of Malay political politics, namely UMNO and PAS.

Keywords: *Takfir*, Islamic Thought, Iman, Islamic Politics.

Introduction

According to the annals of history, the Malay opposition to British interference is closely related to the “infidel’s (*kafir*) rule” introduced by the English colonizers. One example of Malay opposition is the incident involving the resistance by Haji Abdul Rahman Limbong (1868-1929) in the state of Terengganu (Ghazali, 1996). The rule refers to the Land Rule that was enacted at the end of 1921, which imposed quit rent on all land developed by the people. Hence, Haji Abdul Rahman Limbong insisted that the developed land belonged to Allah the Almighty and not to the state administered by the British. Following that statement, the news spread from one village to another in Hulu Terengganu, with the message that ‘whoever obtained the authorization by the British to clear land fell into the *kafir`* category’ (Hamzah, 1981). The term *takfir* was used at that time to depict the resistance towards any effort to assimilate foreign rules into the Islamic way of life and against Islam.

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 and interviews. 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

After scrutinizing the development of the Malay society, numerous factors were found responsible for the birth of the *takfir* phenomenon in Terengganu. Among these factors are:

1. Politics

As mentioned earlier, the *takfir* phenomenon that occurred in Malaysia were greatly influenced by the party politics factor (Ahmad, 1980). The conflict between UMNO and PAS during the elections had influenced the life of Muslims in determining their attitudes and practices, which had spread to the appreciation and practice of daily religious rites (*ibadah*). Hence, separation and isolation in a society occurs due to the differences in political beliefs, such as separate Friday prayers, boycotting wedding ceremonies, invalid marriage vows because the marriage official is a UMNO supporter etc. (Bakar, 2000).

Another piece of evidence that shows the responsibility of the political factor in raising this issue is when PAS joined the *Barisan Nasional* between 1973 – 1977 and the issue of separation of religion from politics was suddenly obscured (Asri, 1993). The scenario happened when PAS joined *Semangat 46* through the *Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah* in 1990. Then again in 1999 until 2010, when PAS joined the *Barisan Alternatif* or *Pakatan Rakyat*, which comprised parties such as PKR (*Parti Keadilan Rakyat*) and DAP (*Democratic Action Party*) (Nakhaie, 2003). The coalition that occurred in the two situations mentioned above undeniably had very close relations with political battles during elections. Moreover, PAS could combine with *Semangat 46*, which championed Malay nationalistic pride and PKR, which held a liberal stand just to overthrow the *Barisan Nasional* government. This shows that political factors play an important role in raising or suppressing the *takfir* issue in society (Mohd, 2005).

2. Social

This is not the main factor that raises the issue of *takfir* but is a contributing factor that helps to enliven the issue. It is especially so when authorities supported by UMNO had oppressed, repressed or discriminated village folks who happen to be supporters of PAS in cases involving the allotment of land, subsidies and government aid. The aid comes in the form of fertilizer, seeds, pesticides, livestock and other forms of special aid to local farmers and also fishermen, in the form of fishing nets and boat engines. Each village is monitored by a committee known as the Village Security and Welfare Committee (*Jawatankuasa Kebajikan dan Keselamatan Kampung*), which has the power to handle security and development issues in the village. Those in the committee surely comprise committed

UMNO members. Before the subsidy is distributed to the locals, the application is forwarded to the proper authorities for action. The VSWC (JKKK) would then investigate and determine the political affiliation of the candidate who is going to receive the aid. Usually aid and subsidies are not given to PAS supporters. In some cases, the VSWC in several villages had failed to play its role as the intermediary between the people and the government, for example in the distribution of subsidies (Bakar, 2000).

The social injustice not only affects the village folks who support PAS but the government employees are also affected. The latter would be transferred to other areas if they were found to be supporting the other political party. One example involves the immediate transfer of a teacher from Mulong to Kerala in Tanah Merah. The transfer took place several days after the teacher had allowed a PAS lecture to be held in his house in Pendek, about 3 km from Mulong on 28 June 1985 (*Jabatan Penerbitan Dewan Pemuda PAS Kelantan*: 1405 H, 12). Besides that, discrimination had also taken place when allotting scholarships for pursuing higher education to children of PAS supporters (Muzaffar, 1988).

Hence, in situations of oppression, repression and discrimination, the leaders or local religious scholars had tried to raise the issue of *takfir* based on the understanding and definition of certain verses in the al-Qur'an and al-Hadith, such as the elucidation about the definition of *mustakbirin* (people who oppress), which is mentioned in the al-Qur'an. Among the verses in the al-Qur'an that elucidates the meaning of *mustakbirin* (people who oppress) are:

"Then We sent after them Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh and his establishment with Our signs, but they behaved arrogantly and were a criminal people"

Surah Yunus (10): 75

In explaining the meaning of *mustakbirin*, the magazine 'Gema Pemuda' stated:

"...the group in power in an ignorant (jahiliyyah) society that is controlled without any equal rights from a political or economic aspect. Besides they are always trying to control and hold on to power by using force, they try to control the mind and use numerous ways to force someone to condescend to them" (Dewan Pemuda PAS Kelantan: 1405 H,)

Though the accusation of *takfir* towards the UMNO-led government is not explicitly mentioned; hence, according to the writer, those who read this magazine would foresee the close relationship between the two situations. Thus, the *takfir* issue arises because of the oppression, repression and discrimination by the group that oppresses (*mustakbirin*) onto the group, that is powerless (*mustad'affin*).

This situation is worsened by incidents that depict and portray the rulers as oppressing the group that is fighting for the sovereignty of Islam, such as in the Lubuk Merbau and Memali incidents. The Lubuk

Merbau incident occurred one day before polling day in the Padang Terap by-election in Kedah. The bloody incident started when about 200 UMNO members armed with machetes, broken bottles, rocks and sticks attacked, slashed, beat and stamped the PAS workers in Felda Lubuk Merbau. As a result, seven PAS members were injured, scores were slightly hurt and one of them, Osman Talib, died the next day (Hasyim, 1993).

In relation to that, PAS had gatherings that were called *mustad`affin*: for example, the *Ijtimak Mustadaffin* in Darul Amin in Sungai Gau, Temerloh, Pahang on 27 January 1985. Haji Abdul Hadi Awang in his speech during the gathering had made the Lubuk Merbau incident the benchmark of *jahiliyyah* atrocities:

“The bloody incident in Lubuk Merbau is the beginning of jahiliyyah atrocities and also marks the beginning of the rise of Islam in this country” (Said, 1985)

2. Mass Media

The mass media is a source of information that is effective in disseminating various forms of information. The influence of the mass media could change the general perception about an issue by supporting, protesting or being silent. In this matter, it becomes a point of concern as the exploitation of an issue by the newspapers and mass media frequently creates an inaccurate public opinion (Ali, 1983). It is similar to the issue of *takfir*, for example the two-imam incident in Kampong Gong Pasir, in which the news was sensationalized by the mainstream media. Whereas, on the issue of poverty, the unjust sacking of the *imam* and the distribution of aid to certain quarters only was not raised or sensationalized. Supposedly, the mass media should play an important role in creating awareness among the public about the actual cause of the problem and work towards getting the responsible parties and the people to find a solution and not to deliver sensational news that sells well. If the *takrif* issue is looked upon from a PAS point of view, as explained previously under the title “separation of religion from politics”, the PAS leaders did not accuse the UMNO *imams* of being *kafir*. Most of the core issues they emphasized were about appreciation of the actual Islamic way of life and elaboration on the limits of faith (*Iman*) and disbelief (*kufir*). According to their view, it is not surprising that issues concerning “infidels”, “two imams”, “two graves” etc. have been successfully sensationalized through the government’s mass media to confuse the people. However, if the issues were to be handled more prudently and without the influence of party politicking interests, surely it could be solved amicably (Dewan Pemuda PAS Kelantan, 1405 H).

The effectiveness of the government-controlled mass media’s influence on the general society has been affirmed by a General Election 1986 analysis. This situation had caused authentic *fatwas*, such as the explanation on matters that nullify the Islamization of a Muslim and ideal PAS lectures that have been prevaricated and made to look confusing to the extent that PAS leaders were seen as the guilty party and to have caused disunity among the Muslims in Malaysia (Abadi, 1986).

Steps to combat the *Takfir* phenomenon

In order to combat the takfir phenomenon, several initiatives were carried out by the government and individuals to overcome this problem from further spreading throughout society. Among the steps were:

1. Publishing Pamphlets and Books

Several books and pamphlets were published to combat this issue. Among them was the book "*Khulasah dari Carilah Kebenaran Fitnah Kafir Mengkafir Sesama Islam*". The Committee on Development and Elucidating Religion for the State of Terengganu published this book. However, there is no exact date as to when the book was published based on a newspaper article mentioned in that book. This book was published somewhere around 1982 in order to contain the issue of *takfir* that was occurring in Terengganu, specifically and Malaysia, generally. Its contents had denied the existence of infidelity (*al-kufr*) among Muslims who were related to infidels based on the views of Tuan Haji Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, who said:

'Considering this fact, hence among the cases that were taken to the Dewan Ulama PAS were, for example, "What is the religious view concerning PAS joining the Coalition Government? This case and others that involve the same principle were rightly debated and the outcome was: HARUS; and was later debated conclusively by the Congress in order to "evaluate and assess" (al-tarjih) to determine the appropriate action to be undertaken'

The statement indicates that the religious view of PAS joining the coalition government is *HARUS*. Hence, the power sharing by the UMNO-led government with the non-Muslims is not an offence that could lead to infidelity (*al-kufr*). Therefore, during an interview with Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat in 2009 he had stated that from a Islamic public interest (*maslahah*) view at that time it was permissible to join the government and even now, if there is an intention to re-join (Aziz, 2009).

In addition, there was a small pamphlet entitled: "*A Small Pamphlet on False Accusations (Fitnah) on Infidelity among Muslims*", which was published to combat this problem. The Kelantan State *Kadi* Association published this pamphlet in 1981. It contained explanations about the issue of infidelity that occurred in the country at that time, especially among the East Coast states. The explanations involved issues that were always used in *takrif*, such as the religious scholar's (*ulama*) evaluation of the verses in Surah al-Maidah concerning *kafir*, *zalim* and *fasik* related to those who do not carry out Allah the Almighty's laws.

In combating this issue, the writer had rejected the meaning of *takrif* by explaining that the meaning of the verses was meant for those who had transgressed the laws of Allah the Almighty with their intentions (heart) and opposed them with words (tongue). Then, the meaning of *kufr* in the context of the verse is *kufr nikmah* (unappreciative of Allah the Almighty's blessing) and not *kufr* regarding apostasy; moreover, the verses were specifically meant for the Jews. This view was quoted from the interpretations of the *muktabar* religious scholars such as *Tafsir Ruh al-Ma`ani*, *Fakhr al-Razi*, *al-*

Tabari and *Ibn Jawzi*. Another explanation is about the meaning of the verse in Surah al-`Imran, which forbids appointing non-Muslims as rulers. This book explains that the meaning of “ruler” in the verse, which means an absolute ruler who has absolute power in all matters, especially matters pertaining to religion and religious worship (*`ibadah*) warrants compulsory allegiance and love. Next, it explains the separation of religion and politics by stating that politics that cannot be separated from religion is Islamic politics, which has been practiced and taught by the Prophet (p.b.u.h) and not a Western style party politics as seen today.

Lutpi Ibrahim wrote a book entitled, “Imam Ghazali: Solving the Problems of Labelling Infidels”. This book had explanations on solving the problem of *takfir* according to al-Imam al-Ghazali, in which he elaborated on the meaning of infidels (*kufir*) and the exegesis used by al-Asha’ari and al-Maturidi, the limits of impiety (*iman*) and *kufir* and solving the problems of *takfir* existing at that time.

Among the solutions adduced was the controlling of utterances related to calling those who have recited the two *Kalimah Shahadah* as infidels, to confine Allah the Almighty’s infinite blessings, like the words of some of the theologians who had referred to the commoners who do not have proper knowledge as infidels. It is as if they assume that heaven is specifically for their category of people. Hence, to keep quiet instead of calling others infidels is wiser.

One religious leader who had written about solving the problem of *takfir* was Wan Zahidi Wan Teh, in his book entitled, “*The Problem of Takfir in an Islamic Society*”. This book had elaborated on the meaning of verse 44 in Surah al-Maidah by quoting views of religious scholars of the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama`ah* sect, such as al-Tahawi, al-Ghazali (Omar et. al., 2017) al-Bukhari and many more. He also explained that to *takfir* contradicts the consensus held by religious scholars and becomes a sin bigger than false accusations (*fitnah*) in the Islamic society. At the end of the book, he lays down the solutions for the problem, which is to take a moderate stand in facing differences of opinions, to understand the interpretations of the most revered religious scholars (*muktabar*) and to solve problems according to the methods.

2. The issuing of *fatwa*

In relation to combating the issue of *takfir*, the government through the fatwa institution (council) had issued an official fatwa (an authoritative ruling on a religious matter) as a guide to Muslims on this issue. As of date, the researcher had found three fatwa, which is the Fatwa from the Mufti of Terengganu, the Permanent Religious Council Members for the Council of Rulers and the Fatwa Message from Haji Hadi.

The fatwa from the Terengganu Mufti had explained in detail about *takfir* and laid the legal standing of *haram* (forbidden) for someone who accuses another Muslim of being an infidel (*kafir*). The act of accusing is a capital sin (*al-kaba’ir*) because the accused person becomes an infidel due to the accusation. Among the leading arguments in the fatwa is:

“it is the consensus of all the Islamic ulama that this action (of calling others infidels) is a capital sin (al-kaba’ir) although it might not be the biggest sin because this causes the accuser himself to become kafir due to his false accusations” (Fatwa(s) by The Mufti of the State of Terengganu: From 1953 – 1970:1971)

Besides the above statements, the Permanent Religious Council Members for the Council of Rulers who had convened on 27 and 28 May 1963 had issued a fatwa, which among others stated:

“The Permanent Religious Council Members for the Council of Rulers advise the Muslim Brothers that the protestation of accusing and calling each other infidels should be controlled, either during campaigns or daily conversations or other instances”

The fatwa specifically regarding the Message by Haji Hadi was decided by the meeting of the 16th National Fatwa Council Committee on Religious Affairs on 19 February 1986 and concluded that:

- (i) It contradicts Islamic teachings
- (ii) It contradicts the interests of the Islamic society and the sovereignty of the religion.
- (iii) It contradicts the principles of the *dakwah Islamiah*. (Ahmad, 2002)

3. Formulating Legislation and Enforcement

In efforts to contain the issue of *takfir*, the central government through Parliament, had formulated amendments to the Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code (Act 4549). The amendments were tabled and passed in Parliament with the highest votes on 10 December 1982. The amendments were later presented for royal consent on 18 February 1983 and was gazette on 19 February 1983. This section intends to make it an offence for anyone, because of religious reasons, who is detrimental or tries to be detrimental or does anything that could be detrimental towards the harmony and unity among followers of a religion or between religions. The retribution provided in this section is a jail term not exceeding three years or a fine or both together. However, if the offence is committed in or near any place of worship or any gathering or a function on religious ceremonies (*Dewan Rakyat*: 1982).

In order to combat the issue of *takfir* from spreading even further, the authorities had charged Haji Mustafa Abu Bakar, the first person to issue a *fatwa* that openly claimed UMNO members as infidels, and he was given a jail term. He is a Tok Guru from Pondok Terusan Pasir Tumboh, Kota Bharu, Kelantan. He had issued a fatwa when giving a religious talk in Surau Haji Salleh Bin Mat Ali in Kampung Seberang Sungai Keruak, Hulu Besut on 4 November 1980 between 8.00 pm and 11.00 pm. He had called UMNO members infidels and he was charged and tried in the Besut Syariah Court under the charge of giving a religious talk without being qualified to do so. According to the chargers against him, he had said that “UMNO members in *Barisan Nasional* (BN) are apostates (*murtad*)” and “UMNO members in *Barisan Nasional* cannot be legitimate *imams* during prayers”, “livestock slaughtered by UMNO members in *Barisan Nasional* cannot be consumed”, “marriages solemnised by *Barisan*

Nasional marriage officials are not legitimate” and “if there is no mutual understanding between the husband and wife and one of them belongs to PAS while the other to *Barisan Nasional*, then the legal standing is the fall of the *talak* (vow of divorce) on them and if they had consummated then the act is termed as committing *zina* (illicit sex).

According to the allegations against him during the hearing, it was purported that he had accused “UMNO members in *Barisan Nasional* face the charge of apostasy (*murtad*)” and “UMNO members in *Barisan Nasional* cannot be legitimate *imams* during prayers”, “livestock slaughtered by UMNO members in *Barisan Nasional* cannot be consumed”, “marriages solemnised by *Barisan Nasional* marriage officials are not legitimate” and “if there is no mutual understanding between the husband and wife and one of them belongs to PAS and the other to *Barisan Nasional*, then the legal standing is the falling of *talak* (vow of divorce) on them and if they had consummated then the act is termed as committing *zina* (illicit sex) and if a child is born due to the *zina* (illicit sex) then the child is deemed to have been born out of wedlock” (Mamat, 2009)

Meanwhile, the PAS leader who had become the imam during Friday prayers at the PAS headquarters and the *amil* were later fined and those who could not pay the fine were jailed. Two PAS leaders from Besut, namely Ustaz Abdul Latif Muhamad and Hussin Jusoh, had emphasised the point of staunch belief (*aqidah*) when propagating Islam (*dakwah*) and thus were deemed to be responsible for the emerging phenomenon of infidel (*kufr*) calling, therefore, they were banished for two years (Mohamed, 1994).

Conclusion

After examining the history of the emergence of the *takfir* phenomenon in Malaysia, it could be concluded from a historical aspect that the *takfir* phenomenon in Malaysia could be translated as the rejection and opposition to the interference of foreign power and law that had encroached onto the beliefs and Islamic traditional customs of the Malays. Meanwhile, after the country had achieved independence from the British, opposition against the rule of law that contradicted the al-Qur’an and hadith had influenced the *takfir* phenomenon, even though the ruling power were with the Muslims and Islam being declared the official religion of the country. Since the *takfir* phenomenon in Malaysia had not been handled cautiously and wisely; hence, unhealthy social ills had formed, such as disunity, injustice, discrimination and exploitation of issues in the party’s interest. The *takfir* phenomenon in Malaysia has been greatly influenced by the party politics factor of the two biggest political parties in Malaysia with an Islamic base, namely UMNO and PAS.

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