

Political Power-Sharing from Islamic Perspective(Tahaluf al-Siyasi Fi al-Islam): Muslim's Experience in Malaysia

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Abstract

Malaysia is a multicultural society with Malays, Chinese, and Indian living side by side in peace. Although the Malaysia's identification with race remains strong, however, a powerful sense of being Malaysian prevail among the population. This paper will examines Islamic point of view on the participation of Muslim political parties in the coalition government consisting of political partners with a semi-secular agenda, the writing also will explores what are the Malay values system and its ability to support power-sharing among different ethnics groups in Malaysian politics, and how the Malaysian power –sharing model has contributed to Malaysian political stability.

Introduction

To understand the Islamic point of view on political power sharing, it is first necessary to understand what is actually the responsibility of Islamic leadership as a representative of God(*khalifah*) on earth. The Holy Qur'an clearly stated in chapter 3:119(Surah al-Imran) that the prime responsibility of Islamic leadership is to enjoin what is right(*ma'ruf*) and forbid what is evil(*munkar*).² In today's context, this responsibility can be fulfilled in the most effective manner if the Islamic leadership can utilize state machinery. For that reason it is necessary to examine the issue of participation of Islamic political parties in a coalition government consisting of political partners with a semi-secular agenda. In doing this, Islamic history and Islamic law(*shari'ah*) must be strictly keep in mind.

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². Al-Qur'an states : " You are the best of peoples, evolve for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong " (Al-Qur'an, Surah al-Imran (3): 119..

The general rule in judging the acts of human beings in Islam is that all actions are permissible unless a prohibition is specified. This principle of Islamic law (*shari'ah*) indicates clearly that what practices and methods are not prohibited and forbidden (*haram*) in Islam are lawful (*halal*) under the Islamic *shari'ah*.³ It can therefore be safely affirmed that the involvement or participation on Muslim parties in the coalition government having partners who are not committed to implement Islam but at the same time also not antagonistic, hostile and opposed to Islam are permitted or lawful in Islam.

It is therefore a must for all Muslims to do what they can in order to obey God's commandment and establish His governance. But what if the Muslims are unable to do so? The rule is that we are obliged to do only that we can, as God Himself stated in chapter 2:233: "No soul shall have a burden laid on it greater than it can bear" (surah al-Baqarah:233). It is an undeniable fact that every Muslim has a responsibility toward the task of establishing an Islamic government. However, if such a task is not possible, Muslims must endeavor to accomplish whatever can be accomplished.

Muslim Historical Precedent

Power sharing in a non-Muslim or Muslim environment becomes a necessity in order to lay the foundations of the social order. This power sharing may not necessarily be based on Islamic law (*shari'ah*). However, it must be based on an important foundation of the Islamic government, namely popular consultation (*shura* process), or the authority of the community (*sultah al-ummah*), so as to prevent the evils of dictatorship, foreign domination, or local anarchy. Such a process of power sharing may also aim to achieve a national or a humanistic interest such as independence, development, social solidarity, civil liberties, human rights, political pluralism, independence of the judiciary, freedom of the press, or liberty for Islamic activities.

If we look back at history, we will find examples that bear testimony that participation in government which is not strictly Islamic is permissible both for individual Muslims and groups for achieving good and avoiding evil.

³ . For a detail discussion on the subject please refer to Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradhwai's book (2009). Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam. Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, p.37.

In this connection, reference may be made that Prophet Yusuf(AS) participated in the government of Pharaoh in Egypt to rescue the people from famine and drought.

Prophet Yusuf(A.S) did not hesitate to join the pagan government of Pharaoh and he did not make it a condition that the non-believer(*mushrikin*) have to accept monotheism(*tawheed*) before taking charge the government and implement food resource management. He accepted the ministerial post and responsibility as he believed it was his human responsibility to ameliorate the suffering of the people.

This means that if Islamic leadership has any expertise, they are bound even today to offer their services to the ruling government for the common good(*maslahah*) and social welfare. Refusing to give such service is tantamount to oppression(*zulm*) . Prophet Yusuf therefore did not hesitate to participate to participate in the administration of Pharaoh to save people from starvation. The same principle should hold good and valid even today. What happened to Prophet Yusuf is certainly relevant to Muslim today. In such circumstances, Muslim are permitted to participate in the non-Islamic government to fulfill the greater interest of the Muslim community (*ummah*) , and prevent evil and wrongdoing. Failure to do so will lead to undermining the overall interest of the community and allowing evils to spread and dominate the society.

Another example is that of Caliph 'Umar Ibn Abdul Aziz . This Umayyad Caliph, whose leadership did not exceed two years, is considered by historians and scholars to be the fifth guided Caliph because of his piety and justice, although more than half a century separated him from the last of the four guided Caliphs. Although he was a king who inherited kingship, he was unhappy with the monarchy, and in principle did not approve of it. However, he has unable to alter the system and failed to restore the right of the community(*ummah*) in a consultative(*shura*) style government due to the accumulation of corruption over the years.⁴ Nevertheless he took important steps and managed to bring about major changes and reforms in the society and eliminate many bad and evil practices (*munkar*),thus restoring justice and fairness(*adal and Ihsan*).

⁴ . Rashid al-Ghannoushi(1993). " The Participation of Islamists in a Non-Islamic Government", in Azzam Tamimi,ed. Power Sharing in Islam. London: Liberty for Muslim World Publication, p. 275.

By accepting to rule under monarchy, which he did not endorse, 'Umar ibn Abdul Aziz was able to do many good things (*ma'ruf*) and no historian has claimed that he was wrong and misguided in his actions.

The stated examples indicate that the community of believers (*al-mujtama' al-mukminin*) may participate in an alliance aimed at preventing injustice and oppression, at serving the interest of humankind, and at protecting human rights. The believers or faithful (*al-mukminin*) can pursue all these noble objectives even with those who do not share the same beliefs or faith and ideology. This is established by the endorsement by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) of the *hif al-fudul*,⁵ an agreement signed by the pre-Islamic Arab tribes to protect their rightful mutual interest.

In addition to the mentioned examples, we also noticed that the agreement signed by the Prophet (PBUH) with different tribes before and after the conquest of Mecca including the '*Treaty of Hudaibiyah*' are ample testimony that the Islamic leadership can always cooperate with the non-Muslim rulers not to speak of half-hearted Muslim rulers in matters of common good and rightful cause. The Madinah charter (*sahifah al-madinah*) is an important document that makes it clear that cooperation between divergent ideological communities is essential for establishing peace and tranquility in the society, which can create congenial atmosphere for the onward march and progress of the Muslim community (*ummah*).

It is true that an Islamic government is a government based on a number of values, which if accomplished in their totality, would result in a perfect or near perfect system. However, it may not be possible for all such values to be implemented, and therefore some must suffice in certain circumstances in order for a just government to exist. A just government (*hukumah al-'adilah*), even if not Islamic, is considered very close to an Islamic government because justice (*'adalah*) is the most important feature of an Islamic government. It has been said that justice (*'adalah*) is the law of God (*sunnatullah*), Ibn Taimiyyah is reported to have said, "upholds the just state (*dawlah al-'adilah*) even if it is unbelieving, but does not uphold the unjust state even if it is believing".⁶

⁵ . Ibid.

⁶ . See 'Power-Sharing in Islam', in <http://shahfoundationbd.org/halim/power-sharing-in-Islam.html>, p.3/5.

Those who studied the objective of Islamic law (*maqasid al-shari'ah*) understand that the goal of Islam is to include everything that is needed to realize human well-being (*al-falah*) and a good life (*hayah al-tayyibah*) within the constraints of the Islamic law (*shari'ah*), as Imam al-Ghazali pointed out that, " The very objective of the *shari'ah* is to promote the welfare of the people, which lies in safeguarding their faith, their life, their intellect, their property and their wealth. Whatever ensures the safeguarding these five serves public interest and is desirable".⁷

To make Muslims more aware of the importance of the study of the objectives of *shari'ah*, a well-known contemporary Muslim intellectual, Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradhawi, pointed out the profound need of understanding and establishing the principles of balance (*fiqh al-tawazun*), the balancing of interest, and its effects so as to determine which should be given precedence and which should be discarded.⁸

When interest' conflict, lower interests are sacrificed for the sake of higher interests, and private interests are sacrificed for the sake of common interest. The owner of a private interest is to be compensated for his loss. In addition, in cases of conflicting interests, temporary interest is forsaken in favor of long term or permanent interest, superficial interest is neglected for the sake of real interest, and sure interest is given precedent over uncertain interest. If evil conflicts and some of are indispensable, then one should choose the lesser of two evils and the lower of two degrees of harm prescribed.

In case of the conflict on interests and evils, they should be examined carefully in terms of their size, effect, and duration. A slight evil should be forgiven for the sake of realizing a major interest. A temporary evil should be forgiven for the sake of realizing long-term or permanent interest. Even a great evil should be accepted if its elimination would lead to a greater evil. However, in normal conditions, the avoidance of evil should come before the realization of interest.

⁷ . Quoted from Muhammad Umar Chapra(1983). Islam and the Economic Challenge. United Kingdom: The Islamic Foundation, p.73.

⁸ . Yusuf al-Qaradhawi(1998). Priorities of the Islamic Movement in the Coming Phase. Cairo: Dar al-Nashr, p.33.

Contemporary Consideration for the Need of Power-Sharing

The question that needs to be raised here is whether an alliance with non-Muslim political forces is acceptable with government that do not adhere to Islam. Furthermore, is it permitted to participate in the ruling regime that is not purely Islamic and operates under a constitution that has loopholes or does not have the full approval of Islam?

According to Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradhawi, the structure of politics should be built on the 'principle of balance' (*fiqh al-tawazun*) Dr. al-Qaradhawi referred to the case of Dr. Hasan al-Turabi who has joined the Socialist Union of Sudan and accepted the appointments under Jakfar Numeiri's regime even before he announced the application of Islamic law (*shari'ah*) in Sudan. This is a clear case of choosing a lesser evil to avoid a greater evil.⁹

In contemporary times, we find there are many Muslim communities that exist in countries that have Muslim majorities but which happen to be ruled by nationalist parties claiming to be Islamic, or by semi dictatorships regime hostile to Islam. Such Muslim communities may not be able to reform the regime or change it alone. Does the *shari'ah* object to cooperation and alliance between these Muslim communities and the secular nationalist parties that also work to establish democracies that would respect humans and guarantee their liberties? No, not at all.

In addition to the stated example, we also find that Islamic groups existing in Muslim majority countries governed by nationalist group may be able to attract majority support from the public and establish an Islamic government. However, such transition may incite hostility towards them from within their own country or from other countries, rendering the newly formed Islamic government susceptible to oppression or other forms of pressure that may end with its collapse. Is there any reason why such Islamic group cannot coordinate with secular or nationalist groups in order to isolate the existing oppressive power and established a nationalist or secular democracy postponing the long-term objective of establishing an Islamic regime until circumstances permit? Certainly, there is nothing against that.

⁹ . Ibid., p.38.

Based on the mentioned rationality, we find that the majority of Muslim scholars have supported the participation of an Islamic party or with non-Islamic political groups or with a non-Islamic government as a mean of achieving common objectives, prevent evil, and to serve the greater interest of the community within a non-Islamic framework. With due respect to the Muslim scholars who believe that true Islamic parties should not cooperate with secular parties, non-Islamic or with half-hearted commitment to Isla, it can be safely pointed out that such an extreme view is not supported by the *shari'ah*. Such cooperation is definitely permissible and lawful as it aims to equip the Islamic leadership with the ability to react positively in difficult situations when the interests of the community need to be protected.

The intention of the Islamic law(*shari'ah*) is to make life easy and convenient, and not one of hardship and inconvenience. God in His infinite mercy and wisdom has advised Muslims not to make their live difficult but to opt for the easy option, The Qur'an stated which means: " God intends for you ease, and He does not want to make things difficult for you ".¹⁰ In another verse God also stated which bring the meaning: " He... has imposed no difficulties on you in religion....".¹¹ Again in chapter 5 God further asserted which bring the meaning: " God does not want to place you in difficulty".¹² As well as in a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad(PBUH), Ibn Abbas reported that the Messenger of God(PBUH) said which means: " Teach and make things easy and not difficult".¹³

If Muslim communities weather in Muslim or non-Muslim countries feel that there is no hope of forming an Islamic government in the Muslim World in the near future, the best option for different political parties that exist in a minority or a majority of Muslims countries is to share or enter into an alliance and coalition with democratic political parties that shall protect human rights, defend their life and properties, and guarantee the freedom of expression and belief.

¹⁰ . Al-Qur'an al-Karim, Surah I-Baqarah (2): 185.

¹¹ . Ibid., Surah al-Hajj(22): 78.

¹² . Ibid, Surah al-Maidah(5): 6.

¹³ . Quoted from ' Power-Sharing in Islam'http://shahfoundationbd.org/halim/power_sharing_in_Islam.html.

According to Rashid al-Ghannoushi, an eminent Islamic scholar in Tunisia , due to the establishment of an Islamic government is the ultimate long-term objective of all Muslim communities and Islamic movements in the Muslim world, there is no impediment in forming alliance with any nationalist political parties or non-Islamic political parties for a common purpose the objective of which is to ensure human welfare(*maslahah*) and justice(*'adl*).¹⁴

An Islamic leadership should always be ready to extend their helping hand to democratic forces particularly when such non-Islamic political parties commit not to frame laws repugnant to Islam. In this regard, the leadership of an Islamic political parties of Islamic groups should be sufficiently pragmatic to form alliances with democratic forces not totally committed to implementing Islam as a stopgap and as a strategy and short-term arrangement to advance the cause of Islam.

The Impact of Islam on Muslims Power- Sharing in Malaysia

To understand the acceptance of the non-Malay and non-Muslim citizens of Malaysia into a Malaysian political scene, one must have a clear view of Malaysian history. Present-day Malaysia is evolved from a Malay-Muslim polity. The illustrious Melaka kingdom, with a Malay as its language and Islam as its religion, marked the genesis of this polity, which, in a sense, has remained an integral part of this region for more than five centuries. Although this kingdom ended in 1511, its successor states retained the defining characteristics of Malay-Muslim polities in relation to language, religion, culture, politics, and administration. British colonialism acknowledged these sultanate as Malay-Muslim polities and concluded treaties and agreements with them on that basis.

The Chinese and Indians communities in Malaysia were part of the economic enclaves created by colonial rule. Neither the colonial administration nor the Malay rulers regarded them as citizens. It was only after the Second World War that the situation changed dramatically. Many Chinese and Indians, the overwhelming majority of whom were first generation immigrants, were given citizenship rights on a very liberal basis.

¹⁴ . Ibid., p.5/5.

Their children received automatic citizenship as a birth right or *jus soli* in the 1957 constitution of independent Malaya.¹⁵ As a result of these and other changes, almost 44 percent of the citizenry in the early 1960s was of Chinese or Indian descent.

Their incorporation into Malaysia transformed the polity's very character from exclusively Malay to a multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multi-religious society. In the process, the Malays, who once constituted the nation, were reduced to one community, albeit primary, among communities.¹⁶ This decline in the status of the Malay community represents a great concession by an indigenous people to non-indigenous communities in its midst. It is this metamorphosis in the status of the Malay-Muslim population that lies at the heart of the Malaysian political system's accommodation and acceptance of non-Malay and non-Muslim communities.¹⁷

Thus, it is not an exaggeration to say that the Malay value system itself is inclined toward accommodation as a result borne out by a number of trends and tendencies in Malay history. In the kingdom of Melaka, for instance, there was an accommodation of non-Malay political interests that sojourned there and atmosphere of cultural cosmopolitanism without precedent or parallel in any Southeast Asian empire.¹⁸

Some post-Melaka Sultanates, such as Johor, were also open to alien cultural influences. Even when Malay nationalism began to grow in the early twentieth century, there was very little evidence of rabid Malay hatred communalism toward other communities, although some nationalist writing did contain traces of racial prejudice and ethnic bigotry.¹⁹

¹⁵ . For more information on citizenship, see K.J. Ratnam. 1965. *Communalism and the Political Process*. Kuala Lumpur: University Malaya Press, p.17.

¹⁶ . Chandra Muzaffar. 1989. " Accommodation and Acceptance of Non-Muslim Communities within the Malaysia Political System: The Role of Islam", in *The American Journal of Islamic Social Science*, Vol.13, Issue 1, p.29.

¹⁷ . To obtain clear thought on the nature of the stated metamorphosis see Young Mun Cheong, eds. 1974. *Trends in Malaysia II*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, p.37.

¹⁸ . Muhammad Yusuf Hashim. 1983. " Masyarakat Malaka Zaman Kesultanan dan Sifat Kosmopolitannya", in *Melaka: The Transformation of a Malay Capital C. 1400-1980*, Vol.1., ed. K.S. Sandhu and P. Wheatley. Oxford: United Kingdom: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp.232-256.

¹⁹ . W.R. Roff. 1967. *The Origin of Malay Nationalism*. Kuala Lumpur: University Press, p.17.

Nonetheless, Islamic reformers, one of the major groups in the nationalist movement, advocated greater Muslim-non-Muslim communal interactions that emerged in the various administocrat-led states gave some consideration to non-Malay economic interests. Thus, even in the midst of anti-Malayan Union agitation, an agitation vital to Malay survival, the community never considered the total exclusion of non-Malays from national life.²⁰ Even at the darkest hour, accommodation and cooperation was the Malay preference, provided it did not lead to annihilation.

Having established that the Malay value system has made such accommodation possible, according to Prof. Chndra Muzaffar, the Malaysian citizen should ask: What is it in the Malay value system that supports accommodation or power sharing? What is the force that persuades the Malay community to accept others?²¹ It is generally recognized that Islam has been the single most powerful influence upon the Malay value system. In shaping Malay attitudes toward "*the other*", Islam has been particularly important.

Right from its arrival in Southeast Asia during the twelfth century(particularly in the city of *Peureulak and Pase (Pasai)* in the Sultanate of Aceh), Islam established amicable relations with the indigenous communities. Brought mainly by traders from Arabia and India, Islam spread peacefully and rapidly. While royal patronage in Melaka and other regional sultanates helped the spread of Islam, there no doubt that the presence of Sufi saints was also a major factor. Revered for their piety and companion, these Sufis, in some respects, set the tone and tenor of Islamic attitudes and values among the masses. This is believed due to Islam's universal spirit and its humanitarians concern for all living creatures. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, a prominent Islamic scholar, believes strongly that, " The Sufi preaching of the self-same universal spirit that accounted for the identical expressions in the doctrines of different religions, has made it possible for plural societies that have existed in Malaya to live side by side peacefully and with a spirit of tolerance that is evident even to this day."²²

²⁰ . For more detail information on this point see Anwar Abdullah. 1971. Dato' Onn Riwayat Hidup. Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, p.124.

²¹ . Chandra Muzaffar.1989. " Accomodation and Acceptance of Non-Muslim Communities within the Malaysia Political System: The Role of Islam", in The American Journal of Islamic Science, Vol.13, Issue 1, p.33.

²² . Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. 1963. Some Aspects of Sufism as Understood and Practiced Among the Malays. Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Institute, pp.99-100.

The universalism reflected in Sufi teachings is integral and fundamental to the Qur'an. In one of its verses, the Holy Qur'an expounds a concept of all-encompassing and all-embracing human unity as stated in chapter 2:213, " Humanity was one single nation, and God sent Messengers with glad tidings and warnings; and with them He sent the Book in truth, to judge between people in matters wherein they differed".²³ Again, in the same chapter of the verse 111-112, the Qur'an express its acceptance of religious diversity and acknowledges human diversity in a powerful current that runs right through the Qur'an. As case in point, in chapter 22 verse 67 the Holy Qur'an observed that , " To every people have We appointed rites and ceremonies, which they must follow".²⁴ This is part of the divine plan, as stated in chapter 5:48 which means: "if God has so willed He would have made you a single person, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God".²⁵ In the ultimate analysis, it is these virtues, which transcend all our ethnic, cultural, and religious differences. It is these Quranic universalistic values that have shaped Malay thinking toward non-Malay communities in Malaysian society and accepts them as partners in the power sharing process for the establishment of the most stable political system in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

The Malaysian experience demonstrates that its success is the logical outcome of a development political culture that included different ethnic groups. It is a fortunate country within the Muslim world to have visionary leaders who pursued policies to promote peace, political stability, and prosperity for all ethnic groups in the country. It is believed that the adoption of prudent and effective policies for socio-economic development alone is not sufficient, but due to the implementation of its economic policies with a full sense of responsibility, and taking into account the interest of the largest of both, the majority and minority communities in forming a united nation also plays an important role in achieving Malaysian political stability.

It is believed that the ability of the Malaysian leaders to create a constructive vision for the nation is a product of the entire socio-cultural and civilization package that is a part and parcel of the Malay identity, personality, and culture.

²³ . The Holy Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah: 213.

²⁴ . The Holy Qur'an, Surah al-Hajj:67.

²⁵ The Holy Qur'an, Surah al-Maidah:48.

In addition to good economic policies, the Malaysian government has placed significant effort into national programs that cultivate and nature unity in a unique multi-ethnic society. This is achieved through the use of a fine combination of strategic ingredients. e.g. an inter-ethnic commitment to protect and promote each community's interests, a Peaceful Mechanism of Conflict Resolution(PMCR) through a durable and respectable power sharing formula.

It is believed that due to the Malay value system, which is influenced by Quranic universalistic values that have clearly shaped the Malay thinking towards non-Malay communities, encourages the Malay community to accept and accommodate other ethnic groups within the Malaysian society as their partners in the formulation of a power sharing mechanism in Malaysia.

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