The Malay-Islamic Values as the Foundation of Nation-Building in Malaysia: A Study on the National Cultural Policy

Wan Norhasniah Wan Husin* and Jessica Ong Hai Liaw
Faculty of Defence and Management Studies, National Defence University of Malaysia
Sungai Besi Camp, 57000 Kuala Lumpur Malaysia
*Corresponding author: Tel: +603-90513400 - 7622078; Fax: +603-90513441
E-mail address: hasniah@upnm.edu.my / hasni_wan02@yahoo.com

Abstract

The Malay-Islamic values are the foundations of the Malay community's culture. It is the result of interaction between the foundation of budi-Islam values, the Malay social system, and Peninsula's landscape. With the status of the Malays as the indigenous ethnic that forms the majority of Malaya's community, it was natural that the Malays values were chosen to form the backbone of Malaysia's nation-building. However, as a multi-ethnic society, the diverse cultural traditions did cause dissatisfaction with other communities, especially the Chinese. Hence, to gauge the reaction of the non-Malay communities on the recognition of Malay-Islamic values as the core value for nation-building, this study will focus on the implementation of the National Cultural Policy. To fulfill the objectives of the research, the textual analysis method was applied. The findings show that, even though the Malay-Islamic values were implemented in the National Cultural Policy, it resulted in negative reactions from the non-Malay communities.

Keyword: Malay-Islamic values, nation building, Malays community, non-Malay communities, National Cultural Policy.
INTRODUCTION

The idea of nation-building had never crossed the minds of the Malayan society until the arrival of the British colonial masters. Malaysia's early beginnings was traced to the founding of the city state of a Malay traditional kingdom, Malacca. It was populated by different types of the ethnic groups originating from the Malay Archipelago, like the Malays, Minangkabau, Jawa, Bugis, Boyan, Batak, groups that share similar traditions as they are from the same civilization (Mohamed Aris, 1977: 3-4). As a result of the British's policy, the society was forced to accept a different administration structure, from the Malay Sultanate kingdom to a British government with a Resident as its ruler. The long colonialization period had brought major changes in the demographic structure of Malaya, from a nation that was built upon the traditions of the Malay culture, to a multi-ethnic nation consisting of the Chinese, Indian and other ethnicities that embrace different traditions. To ensure that unity prevailed, nation-building was important as it was a method relied upon to form a new independent nation.

In Malaysia, the status of the Malay-Islamic values as the foundation of nation-building was embraced by the government as soon as the nation was granted its independence. The decision was made based on the status of the Malays as the indigenous inhabitants of the country, who also formed the majority of the population. Based on this, the Malays felt that the National Agenda must be based on the Malay-Islamic principle's a continuation of the value before the arrival of the colonial ruler. A similar policy was also implemented by the United States of America (U.S.A) in enforcing the values of Western Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) as the basis of American nation building, thus dismissing other immigrants' traditional values like the Arabic, Chinese, Indian and Afro-Americans (Schlesinger, 1998: 30). French nationalists also upheld a similar stance in defending the white supremacy values from being challenged by Muslim immigrants from Algeria and Morocco (Cogen, 1999: 1-3). Even though other communities, especially the Chinese, voiced their protests, but the government was unmoved in implementing the policy (Wan Norhasniah, 2012: 385-390). Thus, to gauge the reaction of the Malaysian society on the enforcement of Malay-Islamic values as the foundation of nation building, this study will focus on the implementation of the National Cultural Policy.

Based on previous studies, it was discovered that so far, the link between the implementation of Malay-Islamic values in nation-building and the National Cultural Policy...
has not been studied by any researcher. Most research focus on the aspects separately. Among prominent research that debate on nation building includes Abdul Rahman Embong's writings titled *Negara-Bangsa, Proses dan Perbahasan* and articles like *Negara Bangsa dan Bangsa Malaysia*. Meanwhile, various discussions on the National Cultural Policy had been carried out by a number of researchers, such as writings by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports like *Asas Kebudayaan Kebangsaan*, Burhanuddin al-Helmy titled *Asas Falsafah Kebudayaan Kebangsaan Melayu*, Abdul Latif Abu Bakar that is *Sejarah Pemikiran Konsep Kebudayaan di Malaysia*, and an article by Chew Hock Tong titled *Beberapa Asas Integrasi Nasional Pro dan Kontranya* and others. The focus on Malay-Islam values role in the process of nation building in Malaysia can be found in Wan Norhasniah Wan Husin's writing.

Based on the explanation, this research attempts to establish a new insight that is to determine the reaction of the Malaysian society towards the implementation of the Malay-Islamic values as the foundation of nation-building. The research relied on text analysis to achieve the objectives of the study.

**THE MALAY-ISLAMIC VALUES AS THE FOUNDATIONS OF ETHNIC UNITY**

The Islamic and Malay cultural values are two main values that have emerged from the structure of the Malay culture. It is the result of the interaction between the influences of *budi*-Islamic values with the Malay's social system born out of the interaction of the Malays with their surroundings. As this study focuses more on the Malay community's status, the explanation will highlight more on the Malay-Islamic values.

1. The Malays' Culture

The Malays' culture was founded upon their traditions and influence of their surrounding elements. According to Abdullah Alwi (2001: 52), the cultural system had been in existence since the pre-Islamic era, and was first introduced by the Deutro-Malay clan. The whole Malay realm, irrespective of their religion, traditions or sub-ethnicities, had embraced the traditions and rites in their culture. However, their practices might differ from one community to another, such as the cultural system practiced by the Ibans are more towards upholding their traditions and practices, then to the judiciary system (Jensen, 1974: 98 & 112).
In general, the cultural system is divided into two, that are; culture that encompasses the patterns of behavior and customs that have become tradition as they have been infused in the community and practiced for a long time; and, culture as a way of life that has undergone various transformations to suit the ever-changing environment. Culture, in this context, is not regarded as the core as it changes, and categorized under traditions and rites. However, the study will still look into the first type of culture that largely involves human daily activities. It is categorized as social norms that advocate the ethics and morale codes based upon social values (Norazit, 1997: 34; Wan Abdul Kadir, 2000: 76). It is this culture that influences the Malays' commitment when interacting among themselves or with other communities. Based upon research that studied the Malays conduct and action when interacting among themselves or with non-Malay communities, it is apparent that the Malays are keen to inculcate the values of compromise, respect, and non-confrontational attitudes. With such stance, it is believed without doubt that Malay leaders are well occupied to lead the multi-ethnic nation (Wan Norhasniah Wan Husin, 2012: 113-161). The sensitive and humble nature of the Malays were further reinforced by the sacred land's geographical location, which was naturally bestowed with an ideal climate, well-protected from natural disasters, hence providing them with abundant provisions which guaranteed that they did not suffer from famine. They also relatively never endured any form of cruelty at the hands of the Kings and rulers. All these combined elements bred a nature of compromise and respect in the Malay community (Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1977: 145-146; Swettenham, 1907; Winstedt, 1925).

Therefore, to safeguard the sanctity of the customs and traditions, the Malays strived towards sustaining Malay-Islamic values as the foundation of nation-building of the country.

2. The Malays - The Natives of The Sacred Land

For the Malays, the Malay Peninsula was their native soil, and the Malay-Islamic values had been embedded into its foundation. They were the ones responsible in developing the Malay civilization in the region. Opinions from historians, archeologists and language and literary experts further validated the claims that Malay-Islamic values formed the backbone of the Malay realm's identity.

Based on studies by anthropologists and historians, since 2500 years ago, Malay elements had been the core values embraced by the natives from the territory. The native inhabitants were made up of the Malay tribe that originated from the Yunan region also
known as the Proto-Malays or the Ancient Malays, the forefathers of the Polynesian-Malays since the Neolithic period (Dartford, 1958: 5; Senu Abdul Rahman, 2002; Ensiklopedia Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu, 1994). Meanwhile, since the end of the Stone Age or the early part of the Bronze-Metal Age, many Indochinese and immigrants from nearby regions had migrated to the Malay Peninsula, known as the Coastal Malay (Melayu Pesisir) and Deutro-Malays (Winstedt, 1961: 11; Ryan, 1962: 2-6; Chew Hock Thye, 1975: 49). It was this group that later formed the Malay ethnic tribes spanning across the Southeast region which was finally identified as the countries of Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei and the Philippines (Ensiklopedia Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu, 1994).

From sharing of parallel cultural systems and loyalty towards their Sultans or Kings, the similarities were extended beyond geographical boundaries as they shared many similar Malay-Islam elements. It emphasized the Malay-Islamic elements as the prevailing values that formed the frame of nation building across the region, compared to other non-Malay values like the Anglo-Saxon, Chinese or Indian elements. The reinforcement of the values was also established with the definition of Malay and the Malay realm (Shamsul Amri, 2000: 355-356; Andaya, 2001: 315-330; Asmah Haji Omar, 1988) from the aspects of language, politics, history and literature. When referred to the use of language and culture in the Encyclopedia of Malay History and Culture (1994), all Malay aspects like the language, environment, physical appearance and traits directly refers to the community residing in the region. Meanwhile, from the political aspect, it refers to the ethnic community that was the followers of the Kings that descended from the Bukit Siguntang in Srivijaya (Abdul Rahman Embong, 2000: 33; Abu Talib Ahmad, 2005: 20). Even though some parties viewed the Malay term as a social construction that could change overtime as the ethnics were separated politically, resulting in labeling of regional groups like Pahang-Malay, Makasar-Malay, Aceh-Malay, etc, but the feeling of togetherness still prevailed as some significant similarities still existed.

The specific traits detailing the Malays ethnic could also be gleamed from the Constitution of Independence. Among them, Article 3 (1) that constituted Islam as the official religion, Article 152 that affirmed the status of Malay Language as the national language, and Article 153 that outlined the King's responsibilities in protecting the rights of the Malay without marginalizing the basic needs of other ethnicities (Laporan Majlis Gerakan Negara, 1969: 89).

The spread of Islam in the Malay Peninsula had started since the 7th Century, and its elements were infused with the Malay values. Since the Malacca empire era until the present,
Islamic values had changed the landscape of the Malay kingdom, where almost every aspect of the Malay elements was influenced by Islamic values. The spirit of Islam was embedded in the souls of the Malays, which even resulted in the phrase ‘embracing Islam’, that is likened to ‘embracing Malay’ (Reid, 2004: 14; Mohamad Abu Bakar, 1999: 24). The Islamic aura continued until the proclamation of Malaysia as an Islamic nation by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohammad, the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia (http://anotherbrickinwall.blogspot.com) and the concept of Islam Hadhari propagated by Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badhawi, Malaysia’s fifth Prime Minister (Utusan Malaysia, 16 Mac 2008). The universal appeal of Islam had transformed the Malays into a highly-spirited and influential group in the Islamic world. For example, when the caricatures of Prophet Muhammad were mocked by the Danish media, the United Nation (UN) requested for Malaysia to take on the role of peacemaker (Suara Merdeka, 13 Februari 2006). Other than that, Malaysian delegates were also appointed to head the Organization of the Islamic Countries-OIC (Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1977: 75), Malaysia is an Islamic model country, even though it has a diverse ethnic population, but it managed to uphold peace and harmony among the multi-racial society.

However, there are also some facts that categorize the Malay community as immigrants based on the migration theory (Abdul Rahman Embong, 2000: 35) as they originated from Yunan. There are also views that claim that the history of the Malay Peninsula only began in the 19th Century; hence a similar acknowledgment must be accorded to the immigrant ethnics due to their huge contribution in developing the economic sector of Malaya (Lee Kam Hing, 2003: 332; Voon Phin Keong, 2007: 19). On the other hand, Zainal Kling reiterates that the sovereign of the Malay language and culture had affirmed the Malay values as the identity of the region. Thus, the historical discrepancy and denial, political reality and cultural process founded upon the Malay-Islamic values would only create more conflict in the society (Zainal Kling, 1982; Hashim Haji Musa, 2003: 56).

The explanation clearly exhibits that the Malay Peninsula was initially populated by the Malay community (Abdul Rahman Embong, Autumn 2002: 38). Even though occupation by foreign powers that led to changes in the Malays’ socio-political, socio-economy and socio-cultural landscape to accommodate the multi-ethnic community, but the traditions of the Malay-Islamic elements were preserved. Affirming the origin is important as it functions as the main basis of the national framework built upon the core elements of the natives of the region. The factor was also implemented by the Anglo-Saxon community in affirming the WASP values as the basic foundations of the American nation-building. In fact, other
migrating communities were expected to assimilate themselves with the values. It was unveiled from J.Q Adam's proposition to European immigrants to rid themselves of outdated European cultural values, and to embrace WASP elements as the basis of American nation-building (Schlesinger, 1998: 30).

NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY AS THE CORE FOUNDATION OF NATION-BUILDING AND ETHNIC UNITY

After gaining independence in 1957, the composition of the Malaysian society was transformed, from being a mono-cultural community made up of the Malays that shared a similar civilization, to a multi-racial society that included the Chinese, Indian and other ethnics. For a multi-racial society like Malaysia, the enactment of a National Cultural Policy is important in order to foster harmony by preserving the national identity and developing an ideal nation and society.

The starting point in developing the National Cultural Policy was after the declaration of independence, however it was only reaffirmed after the May 13 1969 racial riot. The founding of the policy did experience a couple of obstacles - first, due to the fact that it was initially implemented unofficially and informally; and it was only debated by some Malay scholars at the National Cultural Congress in 1971, while the core elements proposed by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports were viewed as biased towards certain parties. As a result, the issue sparked dissatisfaction among the non-Malay communities who claimed that there was no provision or constitutional acts that advocate its implementation (Chew Hock Tong, 1986). Secondly, there was resistance from the Chinese community who perceived that the Malays were trying to rid their traditions that was inherited through the assimilation process. According to Ratnam (Bruce, 1982: 3),

'While accepting the desirability of a local orientation in education, the non-Malays continue to insist on cultural pluralism. They are willing to become Malayan politically; culturally however, they are determined to remain Chinese or Indians'

Hence, when the National Culture concept was proffered by Tun Razak, outlining the Malay-Islam elements as the main building blocks of Malaysian unity, discontentment from the non-Malays ensued. However, based on strong historical facts, the government Pressed on
in acknowledging the two elements as the foundation in developing the National Cultural Policy. The justification was based on the following explanation (Abdul Latif Abu Bakar, 1982: 16).

‘...our forefathers had dwelled in this sacred land, leaving behind a legacy of culture so rich and valuable. Therefore, there is not an inkling of doubt that for us to develop a national culture based and modeled after the culture of the natives of this region. However, it is also proper for us to accept suitable customs and traditions of other cultures that have arrived on our shores that could enrich and revive the future of Malaysian culture. However, bear in mind that in determining the ideal National Culture, it is of utmost importance that the nation's multi-racial background is taken into consideration’

Based on the proper handling of the issues, the implementation was done cautiously, by allowing other cultures to be retained. The immigrants’ traditions were not sidelined, there were given the freedom to practice their traditions, and public holidays were declared in recognition of the minority’s festival celebrations. The pledge to provide consent to the minorities to preserve their culture mirrored the tolerant character of the Malay leaders from the past until the present day. Malaysia has gained independence for 50 years, but the identities of the non-Malay communities are still strongly preserved. The Malays’ tolerant stance is prominent from their acceptance of other ethnic’s traditions, like the freedom of the Chinese to perform their lion dance, and the building of the largest Hindu statue in Southeast Asia in Gombak. The Malays’ high tolerance is gleamed from the following statement by Tun Musa Hitam (Bruce, 1982: 184),

‘...in our country, a Malay can remain being a Malay, a Chinese can continue being a Chinese, and an Indian can maintain being an Indian; and every community has their prejudice and sensitivities, that may lead to damaging consequences, if the elements are allowed to be exploited extremely’

To strengthen the integrity between ethnicities, the government had proposed the design of a national attire called ‘Baju Malaysia’ that combined the elements of the three major ethnics of the nation, that are the Malay, Chinese and Indian. The fashion depicted the Chinese collar style, the opening of the collar and sleeve and the use of the songket material
that take after the Malay style. Meanwhile, the slits by the side are fashioned after the Indian attire. However, the noble intention was not successfully implemented as some parties deemed the move as authoritarian. But the government reiterated that the execution was to nurture understanding and respect among the ethnics. In fact, the government would not tolerate any faction that attempt to practice extreme racism (New Straits Times, March 8, 1981).

Calls from the non-Malay community for the government to put into practice the equal policy and providing comparable status to the Malay and non-Malay cultures, incited the displeasure among Malay nationalists as it clearly went against the annals of historical facts of the nation. According to Zainal Kling (1982: 1-3), in reality, the non-Malays had no right to question the values of Malay-Islam being employed as the core elements for the National Culture as history had proven its rightful claim. In fact, the Chinese’s attempt at amending the traces of the Malay culture to be at par with the National Culture was deemed as downright offensive.

‘There are many perceptions that the current socio-political framework is trying hard to deny and refute and historical facts, that is both compelling and desperate. We view this effort as a clear insult... This kind of attitude is ‘the social construction of reality’ where the truth is, our way of life is constructed by man, and not a construed spiritually, with divine intervention that determines fate and destiny of mankind... That is the reason that the Malay sovereignty is questioned, and looked down as a reality that could be reorganized to suit the perception of others that are temporal, and discard the existing realities...’

According to Zainal, when viewed from the perspective of culture, every culture must have its place of origin, the place where it thrived to develop. Meanwhile, diversity is a result of assimilation between similar cultures that take place within the same territory. The parallel components then converged to develop a sub-ethnic culture (budaya sukuan) that could easily blend with the core traditions as they originate from the same region. The same cannot be said with the culture practiced by the Chinese and Indian immigrants. The culture was just a cut off-fraction that was not only foreign, but separated from its origin, and did not have similarities with the local culture. However, this cultural fraction continued to thrive when the British protected them through their divide and rule policy, and provided them the freedom to be incorporated with their new surroundings. In fact, the strength was reinforced
through the interference of gangsters that protected its existence. By right, the status as a cultural fraction should not have been accorded any specialty. They should have just adjusted their customs to fit into the prevalent local culture. However, when independence was granted, it was the very culture that tried to challenge the sanctity of the Malay culture. As immigrants that depended much on the native community, the values that should have been retained were the acceptance and respect towards the standing of the Malay culture as the prime culture of the nation (Zainal Kling, 1982: 9-12).

However, the Chinese continued to view the policy as an attempt to sideline their traditions. In fact, they highly revered the Chinese culture, for they felt that the Chinese civilization was highly regarded in the world. Hence, they would pull out all stops to protect their traditions and would protest vehemently any attempt to marginalize their culture, like undergoing the assimilation process (Tan Cheek Bang, 1986: 143). It was based on these arguments that the Chinese community strongly defied the implementation of the National Cultural Policy (Rittman, 1965: 136). In fact, the policy was interpreted as a method by the government to ‘Malay-nize’ other cultures, that was unfair and undemocratic. According to Tan Chee Beng, the government should have been prepared to stamp out racial politics, eliminate extreme quota, and formed a government based on the principles of total democracy and justice. Thus, in the issue of National Cultural Policy, the Chinese continued to question the special accordance provided to the Malay culture as they were fighting for equal rights, and not simply accepting the policy of sidelining their culture (Tan Chee Beng, 1986: 147).

Hence, various plans were made to rejuvenate the Chinese culture, such as by revisiting their past glory that included the revival of the dragon and lion dances. For the Chinese, the lion or dragon depicted wisdom, which they felt was not present in other races. (National Geographic, 27 Mei 2006). The dance was actually a form of ancient Chinese culture that was long forgotten by the mainland Chinese. However, in Malaysia, it was revived and practiced effectively to signify the strong ties to their native land. In fact, when Chinese visitors came to Malaysia, many were not aware of the existence of the dance, as it was a long-forgotten tradition in the mainland (Shamsul, 2004)

Under the National Cultural Policy, the Malay values are closely-related to the Islamic values. Thus, it was ensured that every Malay policy gazetted was not in contrast with Islamic values. For the Chinese community, their religion was not accorded any special privilege, as it considered parallel to other non-Islam religions and philosophies like Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism (Shamsul, 2004: 116-117). This is due
to the shared belief that every religion propagates towards righteousness, as stated by

*If you believe in something, you will find it there. If you don't believe it, it will
disappear*

The philosophy provided the foundation to the Chinese on the elements of liberty and
tolerance in religious issues, for every human was free to practice any religion as they are all
similar in the objectives of proposing goodness among mankind, with only the means of
achieving them that differ (Lee Siow Ming, 1986: 6). The concept of religion for the Chinese
was totally the opposite of the faith of the Malays. The Chinese was tolerant in religious
issues, but for the Malays, and other Muslims around the world, it was different altogether.
For the Muslims, religion is sacred and religious freedom does not exist in the religion, as
stated in the Quran (*al-Baqārah* chapter: 256);

*There shall be no compulsion in (acceptance of) the religion, for the right course is
clear from the wrong*’

In matters related to Islam, non-Muslims found it quite difficult to grasp as it involves
not only physical but the spiritual faith of its believers as well. Hence, any attempt that might
offense Islam could spark conflicts in the devotees’ bid to defend the holiness of the religion.

In issues regarding Islam, the main aspect that non-Malays need to recognize is the
status of Islam which is different from other faiths like Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism,
Christianity and Hinduism. Even though there were Chinese writers who perceive that the
divinity of deity, ritual ceremonies, faith system, and religious organizations are similar in
Islam and other religions (Chew Hock Tong, 1986: 121), the fact is, the perception is
regarded as far from the truth by Muslims. There might be external similarities, but from the
aspect of fulfillment, implementation, and concept of communication, there is a great
difference. For example, the concept of respecting the elders is similar in the Islam and
Confucius teachings under the principles *Xiao* and *Filial Piety*, where children must obey
their parents. However, Islam does not condone the act of worshipping parents, as advocated
by the Confucius philosophy. The same principle applies to the concept of God, where Islam
teaches its devotees to worship the one and only Allah the Almighty, while Christianity holds
fast to the concept of Trinity. Meanwhile, the Chinese proclaim that there are hundreds of deities. This obviously shows a stark contrast between the spiritual belief of Islam and other faiths. In the aspects of ethnic relations, Islam calls upon its faithful followers to avoid abusing others, without discriminating their background or religion. In fact, Islam had gazetted some decrees especially for non-Muslims residing in a Muslim state under the provision of *Dhimmi*, guaranteeing their wellbeing (Yusuf Qardhawi, 1985: xiv). Thus, if anyone attempts to dissect the noble values of all religions, whether Islam, Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity or Hinduism, he might be committing blasphemy if he is not well-informed on the true nature of Islam.

The relation of the Malays with Islam is actually not as strong as the teachings in the al-Quran and al-Sunnah. Even though the Islamic traits of the Malays tilt more towards Islam that is adapted to the Malays’ way of life, (Mohamad Abu Bakar, 1999), however, in issues that touch upon basic aspects like faith, the Malay community would steadfastly protect its sanctity. This means that Islam is against renouncing of the religion among its followers, as it is considered an act of apostasy. Any non-Muslim that wishes to marry a Muslim must revert to the religion before the marriage can be solemnized. In fact, the decree is mandated in the Federal Constitution. According to Tun Salleh Abas, Islam is not just a dogma sect or religious rituals, but it is the ad-din (guidance), a complete way of life that encompasses every aspect of human activities, is it private of public, judiciary, politics, economy, social, culture, morale and justice (http://www.islam.gov.my/buu/artikel2.html).

Conflicts that have reared between the Malay and non-Malay communities were due to the stance of defending the holiness of religion. If the Malays are devoted to preserving the sanctity of Islam at the highest level, other religious followers like the Chinese and Indians would also strive to accomplish the same. However, in religious aspects, the Malays would not compromise in any way as Islam does not only represent the identity of the Malays, but it also involves the matter of one’s faith towards his Creator.

Among the issues disputed by the non-Malays that challenge the holiness of Islam is; firstly, the status of Islam in Malaysia and their attempts to recognize other religions as parallel to Islam. In this aspect, even though Islam is respected by other religions, but their dissatisfaction was evident when Article 121 (A) of the Federal Constitution was disputed. This is because the non-Malay community felt that it was unfair to subject others to the ruling when they are not followers of the religion. As a measure of protecting the rights of the non-Muslims, the Bar Council had proposed a forum on ‘embracing Islam’. However, the forum
was condemned by the Malay community, whether from the government agencies, opposition parties, and non-Muslim NGOs. The then-Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Minister of Internal Affairs, Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar had voiced their concerns that if the forum was allowed to proceed, it is akin to inviting wrath among the Malay community that could transgress to worse incidents. In the meantime, the PAS President, Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang viewed the forum as something that could trigger suspicion and incite ethnic strains between the Muslims and followers of other faiths in Malaysia (http://www.malaysiakini.com). Protests were also received from Muslim leaders from PKR. In fact, when the Bar Council proceeded with the forum, more than 500 Malays gathered in front of the Bar Council headquarters, bringing banners that convey their sentiments, like ‘Hancur Bar Council (destruction to the Bar Council); Hidup Islam (long live Islam), Batalkan Forum (Cancel the Forum), Jangan cabar Islam (Do Not challenge Islam), ‘Awas Persatuan Peguam, jangan bermain api (Beware Lawyers, do not play with fire) and ‘Menjunjung Keadilan dan Menyanggah Kezaliman (Upholding Justice and Preventing Violence). The strong resistance from the Muslim Malays caused the forum to be prematurely ended (http://www.malaysiakini.com). As a consequence of the conflict, the government responded sternly by proclaiming that any matters regarding Islam as dictated in the Federal Constitution could not be disputed.

CONCLUSION

The recognition that the Malay-Islamic values as the foundation in the process of nation-building in Malaysia is appropriate, since the Malay community is the original inhabitants of the land and constitutes the biggest ethnic group in the country. Even during the British colonial rule, this fact was recognized and British acted accordingly. To protect the Malay interests from being overwhelmed by the influx of immigrants, Malay special privileges were introduced and recognized by the British Governor, Sir Hugh Clifford since the early stage of his duty here. To soothe the Malay nervousness, they came out with a slogan that Malaya was ‘Lands of The Malays’. The objective was to protect the Malay community from being dominated by the aliens, especially when the later were given the citizenship after the independence.

From the above fact, when Federation of Malaya achieved her independence in 1957, all the efforts to unite these diverse communities in nation building activities are based on the
Malay-Islamic value as the core value for the new nation. One of the policies that transpired from this core value is the National Cultural Policy. However, the effort to strengthen this policy was hampered by the strong opposition from the non Malay communities, especially the Chinese. They accuse the government of promoting assimilation of the Malay cultural values which at the end, they claim will erode their cultural values. What they hope for is, a policy that put the cultural values of all the ethnic communities on the same footing including the right to choose religious affiliations. To face this predicament, the government needs to be firm in implementing the policy, otherwise accommodative attitude will over time erode the status of this value as the core value in the nation building activities.

According to the former prime minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the Chinese attitude of not respecting the policy is only happens in Malaysia, whereas in other countries like Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam the communities do not dare to raise their head in opposing the National Policy in the respected countries. In Thailand, the government is firm in controlling and restricting other cultures including Chinese culture from flourishing or competing with the National Culture. To enhance the Thai culture, the government assimilates the cultural values, language and religion into the Chinese culture through marriage and almost a similar policy was carried out in Vietnam. Although Chinese ethnic used to rule Vietnam over a long period of time due to close geographical proximity and sharing of religious values including the naming system, any effort to reinvigorate the Chinese culture is prohibited (Mahathir Mohamad, 1970: 146).

Based on practices in above mentioned countries, if the government is firm in implementing the National Cultural Policy, it will not be viewed as discriminative since the Malay is rightful in wanting to see their culture flourishing in this part of the world.

REFERENCES


National Geographic, (27 Mei 2006).

*New Straits Times*, (March 8, 1981), It is The New Look for Government Men at Work.


Suara Merdeka, (13 Februari 2006).
Utusan Malaysia. 16 Mac 2008.
Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
Kuala Lumpur: Centre For Malaysian Chinese Studies.