

## CONCEPTION OF CIVILIZED ISLAM IN MALAYSIA: PERSPECTIVES OF THE NON MUSLIM POLITICIANS

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### Abstract

Civilized Islam (Progressive Islam) or also known as Islam Hadhari in Malaysia, is characterized by ten fundamental principles which incorporate the sense of moderation of Islam and how Muslims should be guided in following its path while they face this modern world challenges. Previous literature studies showed that there were poor understanding and acceptance towards Civilized Islam among the non Muslims in Malaysia. This article will highlight findings from a research which studies the viewpoints of non Muslims' politicians on Civilized Islam. The research which is descriptive in nature, has utilized the qualitative approach on three non Muslims' politicians in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Data which are recorded through using the in-depth interview method are transcribed verbatimly and analyzed by the Qualitative Data Analysis Software (*QDA Miner*) Version 2.0. Findings of the research showed that all respondents rejected the idea of Civilized Islam (Islam Hadhari). They gave fairly negative impressions towards the concept of Civilized Islam and described that Civilized Islam is confusing.

**Keywords:** Civilized Islam; Politicians; Non Muslims; Understanding; Acceptance

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## 1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multicultural and multi-religious country. Clause 3 of the Federal Constitution clearly stipulates that Islam is the official religion (Wang, 2005). Nevertheless, it also allows the other religions to be freely practiced and expressed in their own ways as well. Hence, the freedom of every religion to perform their spiritual belief brings a unique blend of cultural and religious integrations which leads to a harmonious concession between the populace.

History showed that Islam has progressed in Malaysia since the 1970s. In fact, Islam in Malaysia has undergone many changes throughout the Islamisation processes that have evolved. It was in 2004 the then Malaysian former prime minister, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had proposed a contemporary brainchild, known as 'Civilized Islam' (Islam Hadhari). Literally, Civilized Islam can also be translated as Progressive Islam. It is a guide through the rigors of time for Muslims to be progressive. It is truly an effort to bring the *ummah* back to basics, back to the fundamentals as prescribed in the Quran and Hadith that form the foundation of Islamic civilization and its glory. Civilized Islam is characterized by ten fundamental principles which reflect the value of moderateness in Islam, namely;

- Faith and piety in Allah.
- A just and trustworthy Government.
- A free and independent people.
- Mastery of knowledge.
- Balanced and comprehensive economic development .
- A good quality of life.
- Protection of the rights of minority groups and women .
- Cultural and moral integrity.
- Safeguarding the environment .
- Strong defences.

In general, Civilized Islam has been acknowledged as a force that leads to changes and national development. It stresses the technological and economic competitiveness, moderation, tolerance, and social justice.

Since its implementation five years ago, the effectiveness of Civilized Islam has been questioned by certain quarters. Unfortunately, in such a diverse and multicultural society, most of non Muslims in Malaysia do not really accept the concept of Civilized Islam. Yeoh (2007) wrote in her blog that one obvious indicator of whether Civilized Islam will work constructively towards national unity or not, is the public's response.

Therefore, it is the objective of this study to gauge the public awareness, understanding and acceptance of Civilized Islam, focusing on non Muslims as respondents. This study will be a useful channel in getting the non Muslims' responses to justify their lukewarm acceptance attitude and behavior towards the concept and implementation of the Civilized Islam.

Understandably, it is nearly impossible for Civilized Islam to get an all-round approval. The challenges in implementing Civilized Islam in a multi-ethnic environment like Malaysia are greater; most likely because of the barriers of religion also coincide with ethnic barriers. In order to implement Civilized Islam without any encumbrances, the government needs to address the differences and strive to understand each ethnic cultural identities, traditions and values accordingly. Since the Non Muslims currently account nearly 45% of the whole Malaysian population, instigating a new national agenda like Civilized Islam without really listening to their concerns and responses could result in an unmitigated disaster for the nation. The government must first addresses and acknowledges their needs and opinions about the execution of Civilized Islam within the period of its implementation.

## **2. Literature Review**

All issues that are related with religiosity are always sensitive to be discussed. This is particularly more critical when religious issues are discussed in such a multicultural and multi-religious country as Malaysia. Very often, religious discussions yield conflicting parties to become defensive and unable to escape for being skeptical towards each other. It is

argued that, Malaysia under Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's Premiership has witnessed an abrupt escalation of inter-religious tension such as church and mosques burning, which not only threatens to distrust communal harmony and nation-building.

Chong (2007) wrote in her article, 'The Emerging Politics of Civilized Islam' that the idea of progressive Islam is not a contemporary issue, but it is merely a replication of Malaysia's former political landscape in the early 1970s. Chong perceived Civilized Islam as a clash of civilization between a few religious-based civilizations in Malaysia. He viewed Civilized Islam as a mean to fight the 'Islam Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS)'. Thus, he stated that there would not be any major changes in United Malays National Organisation's (UMNO) contributions in taking part in the establishment of Islam.

Besides, Chong also held the opinion that Civilized Islam would be one of the Malay capitalist notions in this globalization era. The ten fundamental principles of Civilized Islam have been proposed to enforce the Muslim to be tougher in facing all kind of obstacles in this globalization age.

Yeoh (2007) remarked that the non Muslims would genuinely appreciate the concept of Civilized Islam provided that three elements are being satisfied. Firstly, there should be a convincing assimilation between the real element in Islam and the modern development. Secondly, Islam should be completely integrated within all implementation in the aspects of life. The Quran and Hadith should be comprehensively enlightened by all those ten fundamental principles of Civilized Islam that have been put forth. Nonetheless, a question that should be pondered is how realistic it is that it can be translated into universally accepted practices especially in our multi-religious and multi-ethnic society.

Boo Teik (2004) wrote in the 'Aliran', that Civilized Islam is a political mechanism in at least three dimensions. Firstly, Civilized Islam was perceived to transform Dr Mahathir's Islamisation policies that had been utilized during the 1998-99 crisis. Secondly, Civilized Islam has been proposed as 'moderate' and 'progressive' Islamic tenets in a time of heightened global cynicism over anything labeled as 'Islamic'. Thirdly, with Malaysia holding the chairperson capacity of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), Civilized Islam enabled Abdullah to internationalize the UMNO's religious credentials beyond their earlier involvement which was only focusing the national development.

Precisely, the understanding and acceptance of the non Muslims towards Civilized Islam is still far from reaching the initial expectation even after five years of its implementation. The Chinese particularly, view it as intimidating and apprehensive. There are also a few non Muslims scholars who presumed Civilized Islam as nothing short of a political mechanism and rhetoric in achieving certain agendas and motives.

### 3. Method

#### a. Participants

In this study, three non Muslims' politicians had been selected for the in-depth interview sessions. They represented different areas and demographic backgrounds. They were asked to respond and share their views as well as their personal opinions towards a few aspects regarding Civilized Islam. They were free to express their viewpoints and concerns. They were namely; Lee Kim Sin, Ronnie Liu Tian Khiew and Dr. A. Xavier. They are also members of the Selangor Executive Councilors and people's representatives from Kajang, Pandamaran and Seri Andalas respectively.

Lee Kim Sin is the elected people's representative of Kajang, Selangor. He was born in Kedah and very familiar with the Malay and Muslim's culture. He served as a teacher in a national secondary school in which he taught Biology. In 1996, he resigned as a teacher and actively got involved in non-government organizations (NGO). He held a full time position as a social worker focusing in social justice and people's advocacy. Currently, he is the Deputy Chairman of Keadilan for Hulu Langat's Division. He has a deep passion towards ethnics' music and cultures. Malaysian legacies, histories and heritages are among his fascination.

Ronnie Liu Tian Khiew is one of the appointed Selangor's Executive Councilors. He is an elected people's representative of Pandamaran and holds the Local Government, Study and Research portfolio in the Selangor state government. Prior being an assemblyman, he was a practicing lawyer and businessman. He holds a high rank position in the Democratic Action Party (DAP) that is as the central executive committee member. He has marked his presence in Malaysian political landscape within friends and foes for being outspoken and

involved in various controversial issues in the state, including the incinerator project and anti-privatization of water.

Seri Andalas assemblyman Dr. Xavier Jayakumar Arulanandam, is a prominent leader from Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). He holds the Selangor's exco position in charge of Health, Plantation Workers, Poverty and Caring Government portfolio. Previously, he was a dental surgeon. He is currently the PKR deputy secretary-general and Kota Raja's divisional chief.

*b. Structure of the In-Depth Interview Questions*

In order to ensure the interview session runs smoothly and organized, the interview's questions have been structured into ten questions to obtain significant viewpoints from the interviewees:

- 1) What do you understand with the concept of Civilized Islam?
- 2) Do you personally accept this concept of Civilized Islam?
- 3) Have there been any grudges, complaint or feedback regarding Civilized Islam received by you from anyone?
- 4) Do you think that the present government should pursue the implementation of Civilized Islam in Malaysia?
- 5) In your opinion, do the non Muslims in Malaysia understand and accept the concept of Civilized Islam?
- 6) In your opinion, why the understanding and acceptance of the non Muslims towards Civilized Islam are relatively low?
- 7) What are your suggestions in order to improvise the implementation of Civilized Islam in Malaysia?
- 8) Is there need any betterment in the concept of Civilized Islam especially the ten core principles that had been proposed by the former Prime Minister?

- 9) In completing this research, a module is proposed to increase the understanding and acceptance of Civilized Islam within the non Muslims. In your opinion, what are the significant structures and relevant ideas should be included in developing the module?
- 10) Are you interested to become one of our panels in developing the module?

#### 4. Results

##### a. *Personal Understanding and Acceptance of Civilized Islam*

Lim Kee Sin thought that Civilized Islam is a new *mazhab* and another misapprehension in Islam. He is convinced that Civilized Islam is nothing short of a political maneuver by the Barisan Nasional (National Front) in order to achieve certain hidden objectives. He also alleged the Civilized Islam is still clouded with ambiguity with no well-built supporting system that could sustain the implementation of the concept. According to him, this is totally different with the implementation of English as the medium language in teaching Mathematics and Science subjects at schools. Within a year, this initiative has been dynamically implemented throughout many different levels in the education systems. On the other hand, Ronnie Liu viewed Civilized Islam as generally confusing. Nevertheless, he considered Civilized Islam as an approach which highlights the moderation and modern aspect of Islam. As for Dr. A. Xavier, he was a bit oblivious about Civilized Islam. For him, it is just another slogan which has been proposed by the Barisan Nasional but without any concrete implementation plans. It is obvious that every politician has their own way in viewing and interpreting Civilized Islam which largely based on their self-understanding about Civilized Islam.

It is apparent that all three respondents rejected Civilized Islam. However, Ronnie Liu did recognize an encouraging point in Civilized Islam. He uttered that Civilized Islam could be a meaningful way in promoting the positive values in Islam to non Muslims who are usually misunderstood about Islam.

b. *General Insight Towards Other Non Muslims Understanding and Acceptance of Civilized Islam*

When they were asked about their opinion whether the non Muslims in Malaysia do generally understand and accept Civilized Islam or not, similar responses were given. Lim Kee Sin said that, generally most of non Muslims in Malaysia are not interested to know more about Civilized Islam. Since Civilized Islam has no inter-religious point with their communities, he reckoned that it would be difficult to capture the non Muslim's attention. Non Muslims' ignorance towards the concept of Civilized Islam is mainly due to the fact that they feel there is no relevancy to discuss about the Civilized Islam within their own circles. Civilized Islam is just for the Malays and the Muslims, they felt.

Furthermore, there is no provision in Civilized Islam that give impact to their way of life. Lim Kee Sin admitted that, they might be interested to know more should the implementation of Civilized Islam gives impact to their way of life and routines for example, restrictions on liquor, alcohol and pork consumption. Should Civilized Islam tangle with those issues; the Chinese is expected to raise their voice. Since Civilized Islam only confines to certain matters, it will remain as a policy framework with only conceptual values without insistent implementations.

A. Xavier claimed that since he becomes an assemblyman, there was hardly anybody ever issued any complaint about Civilized Islam to him. Therefore, he proceeded to the presumption that there are no significant impacts of Civilized Islam towards the public especially the non Muslims. One of the suggestions that the government can adopt is to use Civilized Islam towards the Non Muslims instead of *Islam Hadhari* which sounded quite Malay-centric. Perhaps, it is wise to widen and alternatively use different approaches in spinning out the values of Civilized Islam towards the non Muslims. Thus, it will make it easier for them to gain understanding and acceptance towards this concept.

During the interview sessions, every respondent was solicited on how they felt the implementation of Civilized Islam should be pursued in the future. All three respondents gave almost similar answers. They proposed that the implementation of Civilized Islam should be discontinued. They also believed that under the new premiership of Dato' Seri Najib Tun Razak, Civilized Islam is basically a closed chapter. They felt that the new Prime

Minister will lead and bring Malaysia to another height especially in reviving the national economy and development and will not introduce another concept which is similar to the Civilized Islam. Lim Kee Sin is positive that Dato' Seri Najib Tun Razak will be able to distinct himself from the previous administration style and in turn place himself as a more dynamic, progressive and responsible leader to the nation.

### *Suggestions towards the Enhancement of Civilized Islam*

Based on his experiences, Ronnie Liu viewed that an acceptance towards something could only be attained by having a sufficient amount of understanding of that subject matter. Realizing that, he suggested that it is imperative for the authority to carry out many series of dialogues regarding Civilized Islam as well as the inter-faith dialogues. On the other hand, Lim Kee Sin suggested a balanced harmonization of social and humanities activities to be fostered among all races in Malaysian in order to facilitate exchange of understanding towards other's way of life.

## **5. Conclusion**

The findings of this research are a manifestation of a general view of non Muslims towards Civilised Islam. Since the respondents were selected among the people representatives, it can be safely said that their opinions should somehow be regarded as a reflection of views of the people they are representing. The feedbacks that were received pointed out to a single notion that non Muslims disagree with the concept of Civilized Islam. It is being negatively viewed by the non Muslims and to some extent was remarked as confusing. On one extreme, Civilized Islam is said to resemble a new *mazhab* -Muslim sect. On the other extreme, Civilized Islam is seen as a mere political gimmick to regain support from the Malays who had voted the opposition in the last general election.

As a conclusion, it is inevitable to accept the fact that Civilized Islam would be nearly impossible to get an all-round approval from all quarters. The forthcoming challenges in implementing Civilized Islam in a diverse ethnic and religious atmosphere like Malaysia are simply greater because the barriers of religion coincide with the ethnic barriers. It is

essential to address the differences and try to understand each other's cultural identities, traditions and values. Non Muslims in Malaysia represented 45% of total population and ignoring their plight is a sheer grave mistake by the authority. Their concerns and uneasiness over Civilized Islam must not be undermined while simultaneously address and acknowledge their needs and opinions about the implementation of Civilized Islam within this five years period.

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