

Islamic Governance: Strategies for Relevance

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The Constitution of Brunei Darussalam is very clear when it comes to the socio-political role of religion – the official religion is Islam and the head of religion is His Majesty the Sultan of Brunei. The history of Islam in Brunei goes back to when the then ruler, Awang Alak Betatar, converted to Islam and became the first Sultan. Throughout the centuries since, Islam has been assimilated into the lives and culture of the people. In recent times, this process of assimilation was further enhanced during the reign of the late Sultan Haji Omar ‘Ali Saifuddien III, the 28th Sultan, who ruled from 1950 until 1967. It was during his reign that the Brunei Constitution was promulgated in 1959, resulting in the establishment of a number of Islamic governmental institutions, mosques and schools. Today, among the principal institutions directing the dissemination of Islam, and ensuring that they are in accordance with the *‘aqīdah* of *ahli sunnah wal jamā‘ah*, are the State Mufti’s Office, the Brunei Islamic Religious Council, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The most recent *Titah* that has come into force is the enactment of the Compulsory Religious Education Order, 2012, effective from the 1st of January 2013, and the Syariah Penal Code Order, 2013, effective from the 1st of May, 2014. Brunei is therefore not starting from scratch when we discuss the functional relevance of Islam in Brunei. However, inclusive strategies for effective functionality – relevant to all in the Bruneian context – are needed.

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Strategies for Functionality and Relevance

Formulating strategies that can bolster functionality and relevance of Islam must, at the end of the day, meet three critical criteria: first, it is implementable, second, it is effective, and third, it must be sustainable over time. This paper will explore these criteria holistically at the national level in Brunei Darussalam, as a modern Negara, without specific reference to any particular ministry or department per se. A holistic one-nation approach is crucial in order to achieve the objective of creating functional relevance of Islam, and work towards an Islamic system of governance. As mentioned, Brunei has already established various Islamic religious institutions, and introduced several laws. This raises the question regarding their incorporation into the everyday life of the people, especially since it is human agency that will be responsible for the execution of whatever strategies are being developed to make Islam functional and relevant. Thus, whatever strategies are implemented needs to somehow focus on this important point. Such strategies will need to look at three main stakeholders: Government civil service, the public and the international community. Taking all of these into consideration, five main strategies are devised and offered to bolster functionality and relevance of Islamic system of governance for Brunei:

Strategy 1 – Formulate a Single Common Understanding of Islamic Governance

Strategy 2 – Ensure Commitment from Top Management

Strategy 3 – Train and Develop Competence

Strategy 4 – Engage the Public

Strategy 5 – Engage the International Community

The first three strategies are focused on the Government civil service, while the remaining two strategies are focused towards the public and the international community. However, if the Government, as the engine of the country, is not able to pull together and strengthen functional relevance of Islam, then one should not expect the public to do so. The public is

looking at the Government to show that they are able to deliver. How can the Government ask its public to go with them on this path if they are not doing it themselves. As the Malay proverb goes, “*Seperti ketam menyuruh anaknya berjalan betul.*”¹

Strategy 1 Single Common Understanding of Islamic Governance

Islamic Governance will need to be incorporated into the functioning of government offices. Thus, it is important that all civil servants are on the same page when the Islamic system of governance is implemented. We cannot have some individuals implementing what they feel is part of the Islamic system of governance, while others are doing it another way. Such inconsistencies will create chaos and uncertainty, not only within the Government, but also for the public and country at large. Therefore, one must have a common guideline as reference. To achieve this one common understanding, existing processes and procedures need to be reviewed and amended, or new ones created, to ensure that they meet the five main *Maqāṣid* or objective of the Shari'ah, namely: the preservation and promotion of Faith, life, intellect, progeny, and wealth. The attainment of these five *Maqāṣid* must, at all times, be based on the core values of justice and equity. To achieve this, it is important to emphasise that Islamic Governance cannot be done by just anyone. We need to have learned individuals with the correct discipline, who are *amānah* (trustworthiness) and have the same aspirations and understanding of what is needed to meet the *Maqāṣid*. To this end, it is necessary to locate the implementation of an Islamic system of governance within the four components of what can be deemed as an Islamic state, which are composed of religious society, non-racial, equitable and underpinned by the concept of *shūrā* (mutual consultation). Through instituting proper processes and procedures at the state level, the society should be able to deliver on *farḍ al-ʿayn* (individual obligations) and *farḍ al-kifāyah* (social obligations). Without these proper processes and procedures in place means that we are preparing for

¹ The direct translation is: ‘Like a crab teaching its offspring to walk straight,’ which means that we are all judged by not only what we say, but also by what we do

failure right from the start.

For Islamic Governance to function effectively, it is important to emphasise that the foundation is strong Faith, i.e. *Tauḥīd*, the belief in Allah alone. Faith cannot be forced onto others, otherwise it will become superficial, i.e. only a Muslim by name, but does not follow what Islam teaches. Continuous efforts need to be made in order to instil *Tauḥīd* firmly in the hearts of civil servants, so that in undertaking their duties and responsibilities, *Tauḥīd* will always act as a guide to help them make appropriate decisions in accordance to the teachings of Islam. We may have the processes and procedures in place, but we must always be reminded that it is the individuals who will implement those processes and procedures. Thus, if the individuals are not instilled with strong Faith and do not act within the parameters of what is *wājib* (obligatory) and what is *harām* (forbidden), it will be difficult to achieve the *Maqāṣid*. On this, we will need to be guided with the wisdom of the appropriate learned *ʿulamā* on how to effectively and continuously instil *Tauḥīd* within the people.

Strategy 2 Ensure Commitment from Top Management

It is important to understand that the foundations of undertaking something as challenging as creating functional relevance of Islam demands full commitment and involvement from the top management, who are essentially points of reference when certain issues arise. Top management, therefore, need to possess a deep understanding of the *Maqāṣid* of the *Sharīʿah*, in order for them to be able to provide clear direction and guide their staff members. In addition, top management must be fully committed to the implementation of an Islamic system of governance. If senior management are not able to lead and set good examples by abiding to Islamic principles of governance, then they will find their workforce also not making the necessary effort to implement the required changes. In this way, the implementation process will be slow, and over time will run the risk of being incomplete. As a result, the strategy for creating functional relevance of Islam becomes unsustainable.

Hence, top management carry a much higher responsibility, and are accountable to deliver on making Islam relevant and functional. All levels of management, but more so senior management, must demonstrate leadership traits, defined by the possession of *‘ilm* (knowledge), *khauf wa rajā* (a sense of fear and hope before God), and *shukr* (gratefulness), *ṣabr* (patience), *zuhd* (self-denying), *tawakkul* (trust), *ridhā* (contentment), and finally *maúabbah* (love). Having leaders who demonstrate these characteristics will go a long way towards inculcating a workforce, not only motivated to participate, but will also go the extra length to achieve the *Maqāṣid*.

Strategy 3 Train and Develop Competence

Personally, after undergoing the 4-day Islamic Governance course myself,¹ it has truly been an eye-opener to discover high-level principles of governance, and the importance of ensuring that we achieve the *Maqāṣid*. This course also highlighted that such principles should be applied more widely when one interacts with one's peers and counterparts in everyday work life. Thus, in order for the principles of Islamic Governance to achieve functionality and relevance in the modern Negara, there must be strong sense of ownership. This can only be achieved if there is a nation-wide training program developed for all levels of the Government, regardless of rank. The aim of this program must include to provide an understanding of why we, as a nation, should move together in the right direction towards fulfilling the *Maqāṣid* of the Sharīah. We now live in a society that must be engaged in-line with *shūrā*, and in which we continue to reinforce the concept of *Tauḥīd* in our training programs. These programs should aim to instil a sense of moral duty to undertake the task to meet the *Maqāṣid* through patience, compassion, generosity, caring and self-denying. We will then be able to develop the right type of competencies, and enable Government civil servants to carry out their duties. It is also important to emphasise that across the various ministries, different types of competencies are needed, e.g. the

¹ Executive Development Programme for Senior Government Officers at the Institute for Leadership, Innovation and Advancement, UBD, 2016

Ministry of Finance needs to look into Islamic Finance, and they need individuals who understands both finance and Islam, not only one or the other. In summary, the programs cannot be just like any other training programs: it must be tailored towards achieving the *Maqāṣid* of the Sharīah.

Strategy 4 Public Participation

The first three strategies discussed thus far focused on the roles of the Government. However, if these strategies are to be implemented at the national level, there also need to be another important strategic component: that is, the dissemination of correct information and knowledge to the public whom the civil service serves. If the public do not understand the objectives of our strategies, we will not be able to achieve functional relevance of Islam for the country. Public seminars need to be specially tailored to provide a better understanding on the Islamic system of governance aspects and its implementation in the governmental system, and what this means for the public. Suitable avenues can be provided to listen to the general public's concerns, and where appropriate, those concerns can be considered and deliberated within the framework of *shūrā*. Public pressure on the Government will be heavy, and the Government cannot afford to disappoint the people, especially during the early stages of implementation where expectations are always high. At this stage, there needs to be sessions, which includes the *penghulu-penghulu* and *ketua-ketua kampung*,¹ who will be able to assist in disseminating information and receiving feedback from the community. During such sessions, Government's top management needs to be present to show their seriousness and dedication. In addition, their presence will send a strong message to the *penghulu-penghulu* and *ketua-ketua kampung* regarding their accountability in proactive engagement with their community. The *penghulu-penghulu* and *ketua-ketua kampung* can also provide feedback on what their community are concern or unclear with back to the Government. This two-way

¹ *Penghulu* refers to head of a group of villages, and *ketua kampung* refers to the head of a village

communication between the public and the Government needs to be done efficiently without having to wait for another gathering, as His Majesty the Sultan of Brunei pointed out in a *Titah* during a special consultation session of the Brunei Islamic Religious Council in 2014:

“We should act fast. Whatever wrongdoings should be rectified immediately. There are many ways for rectification such as making a statement in the media, and also through radio channels and television. Explain in the best possible manner until the public understands, and not to wait until the next meeting to commence.”

This *Titah* is one of the lessons of the previous year, and we need to be reminded that this message must not be forgotten when we move forward to enhance functional relevance of Islam in the modern *Negara*. If the masses are confused, and facts are not perceived as facts, it will be more challenging to achieve our aims.

Strategy 5 Engage the International Community

In the world we live in today, and with the technological advances in multimedia, we are no longer isolated from the rest of the world. His Majesty the Sultan of Brunei stated during his 69th birthday celebration this year:

“Every changes or development in the world, usually all parties will feel the heat, including us in this country, because we are a part of the world. The heat covers every aspects of socio-politics, socio-economy and socio-culture.”

As such, what we do in Brunei will be questioned, and thus, in moving to bolster for Islam relevance and functionality, we also need to engage the international community, and provide them an understanding of how an Islamic system of governance will uphold the rights of individuals, regardless of race, religion or culture. We are a part of the international community and cannot live in isolation. As the Malay proverb goes,

“seperti katak di bawah tempurung”.¹ No matter what, we need to find ways and means to engage with the international community. Only by doing so, will the international community be able to see that this is the right path for Brunei, even though it might not be so for their country. It will not be an easy task, but the important aspect is to prove and show that Brunei, by going on this Islamic Governance path, has been able to improve the lives of its people, and create a sense of *waṣatiyyah* (balance). Everybody is, after all, talking about the same objectives because we all seek Faith, intellect, good health, and uncorrupted prosperity. The various engagements need to be led by individuals who have the right competencies and holistic overview of the Government civil service to answer the queries and concerns of the international community. Here, the international community also refers to the embassies and high commissions established in the country, who are our channels to cascade the correct information back to their home countries.

Pilot Project

It is important to devise ways to monitor the implementation of the strategies proposed from the outset. The monitoring system will highlight what needs to be done and improved. The significance of this monitoring function cannot be overestimated, especially since we are referring to the implementation of whole-nation strategies. So how do we, in our planning, undertake to ensure that we are able to address as many issues as possible, and in the least possible time? Here, the suggestion is to implement a pilot project that can provide the implementers with a prior understanding of what works, what doesn't, as well as what can be done to improve the strategies. If it was implemented nationwide in a single attempt, the concern is that we will not be able to gauge what needs improvements, and why things have failed as the scale of the potential problems would be overwhelming and too big. For this proposed pilot project, there could be two different departments selected rather than just one, so that one department can obtain different point of views, and in

¹ The direct translation is: 'Like a frog under a coconut shell,' which refers to the state of being isolated from the outside world

case the one selected department does not provide good representation. Before the pilot is implemented, there needs to be clear deliverables, including ensuring that the staff within the selected departments feel secure to openly share their issues without having to worry about being reprimanded for their honest feedback, especially since such feedback may also be touching on the effectiveness of all, including the top management. The pilot will be able to uncover what improvements needs to be made in its implementation within other departments. It may not address every problem or issue, but it would at least be able to highlight the main ones.

Conclusions

Brunei Darussalam, like any other countries, will continuously be faced with challenges as well as unfavourable influences be it from within or as part of the world community. His Majesty the Sultan of Brunei stated in his *Titah* during this year's *Maulud Nabi Muhammad* ﷺ: -

“However, in this busy era, even if the *amal salih* (good act) is easy to do, like *berselawat* (send salutations to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ), it is also easy to be disregarded because of the occupations that swamps humanity. Strictly speaking, humans nowadays are less attracted to *pahala* (spiritual rewards), compared to the fun of the world. What glitters in front of the eyes will be prioritised, and the promise of the Hereafter that is not apparent would not be able to tease their hearts.”

To be able to address the problems that our community are facing, it is important that as a country we have strong will and this can be achieved by instilling the correct functional relevance of Islam. This cannot be achieved overnight, and will take time. So, it is important that the effort be pursued with a sense of urgency. To enable this to happen, among the critical prerequisites is for top management to be equipped with the proper understanding of Islam in order to be able to guide the organisations they lead. A further aspect is at the individual level, i.e. to

have a moral code in line with Islamic values, and uphold the concept of *Tauḥīd* within oneself. *Tauḥīd* is an aspect that needs to be continuously inculcated into the lives of the individuals, and is crucial to maintain the functional relevance of Islam. Through the inculcation of *Tauḥīd*, the *Maqāṣid* of the Sharīah would be achievable by the majority. Finally, it should be emphasised that in order to implement the proposed strategies, proper planning and effective communication are key to ensure that our people understand correctly what it means for them, as an individual, when our nation seeks to make Islam in our society functionally relevant. Whatever negative perceptions are assumed by the masses, it must be corrected immediately by the relevant authorities. Social media, if not managed properly, will only create additional challenges. Expectations will be high, and we need to ensure throughout this that there are improvements to the life and wellbeing of our people. Citizens and residents of Brunei Darussalam have been blessed with the peace and prosperity, and we pray that our future generations will continue to be able to continue to enjoy this for years to come.