

Application of the *Rahmatan Lil Alamin* Concept in a Pluralistic Society during the Pakatan Harapan Government Era in Malaysia

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Abstract

The Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin concept was introduced by the Malaysian government under the Pakatan Harapan leadership as a form of government policy for monitoring and solving issues related to a pluralistic society in Malaysia. Throughout the 21 months of PH rule various issues had emerged, mainly concerning relations between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities as well as issues related to daawah among the Muslims. The approach and primary slogan used by the PH government in overcoming these issues was the Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin concept. However, some quarters disagreed with this approach when certain issues did not favour the Muslims in Malaysia. This qualitative study aimed to examine the implementation of the Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin concept introduced by PH through analyses and evaluations of this initiative based on the understanding of the al-Quran, Hadith and views of the Ulama. This study used the document analysis method focusing mainly on online printed materials and newspapers related to the Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin concept introduced by the PH leadership. Findings show that some actions by the PH government through the Religious Affairs Department in the Prime Minister's Department were interpreted as actions based on an inaccurate understanding of the rahmah principle that could dismantle the identity and majestic nature of Islam. Besides practicing leniency and tolerance when using the rahmah daawah approach, the Prophet SAW was also strict when facing uncompromising issues and these strict actions are considered to be rahmah in situations like this.

Keywords: *Rahmatan Lil Alamin* Concept, Pakatan Harapan, Malaysian politics, Pluralistic Society

Introduction

The Pakatan Harapan (PH) comprised various parties that represented each ethnic community or a specific political ideology in Malaysia, namely Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Parti Tindakan Demokratik (DAP), Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH) and Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM). The Pakatan Harapan (PH) government steered the administration of the nation after they won the 14th Malaysian General Elections, which lasted from 14 to 19 May 2018. The PH government lasted for about 21 months as the legitimate government until February 2020. Among the approaches introduced to tackle relations in a pluralistic society was the use of the *Rahmatan Lil Alamin* concept. However, some quarters disagreed with the introduction of this approach, especially when the resolution did not favour the Muslims in Malaysia. Hence, this study examined the implementation of *Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin* by the PH used to resolve various issues concerning relations between Muslims and non-Muslims as well as to analyse and evaluate the initiative based on the interpretation of the al-Quran, Hadith and views of the Ulama. This study examined two issues, namely the application of this concept on Muslims as well as non-Muslims, as implemented by the PH government.

A Pluralistic Society and the Pakatan Harapan Political Collaboration

Pluralism refers to something that comprises or is formed of several sections or parts but combines to form a whole (The Dewan Dictionary, 4th Edition: 2005: 978). In sociology, the word 'pluralism' usually refers to a type of society where several sub-societies live beside each other in one common political unit but are divided in some life matters. Each sub-society has its own religion, culture, language, ideas and lifestyle (John Sydenhem Furnivall 1956: 304, 1967: 446). Malaysia's pluralistic society is made up of its own dimensions, namely the political, economic, social and cultural dimensions (Maurice Freedman 1960: 3:159). Malaysia's plural society emerged and formed based on the policies of the colonisers beginning in 1824 and the ensuing years had changed the reaction of the Malay community to the multiple ethnic emigration that flowed into the country initiated by the British. This is because in efforts by the British government to exploit the economy and riches of the Malay States at that time, they adopted the divide and rule policy by bringing in foreign labour, which caused unhealthy, and sometimes tumultuous, cultural interactions and relations.

Uncomfortable reactions among the local community towards the British initiative eventually became the pivoting factor that led to the demand for independence, which Malaysia has since enjoyed for more than 60 years.

When the nation was ardently battling for independence, it was actually indirectly creating a change in the country's ethnic landscape. Malaysia, which was once enthusiastically wanting to become a distinguished civilisation under the name of the Malacca Sultanate, is not something new to multi-racial interactions on this land. History has mentioned that the local government once practiced the concept of open acceptance and social relations with foreign merchants doing business in this country, such as the Burmese, Benggala, Chinese, Indians and Arabs. Besides the interactions with these merchants when carrying out trade in the East, daawah and propagation of religion was also rampant (Zaid Ahmad, 2006). The vibrant trade activities involving various ethnic and cultural groups eventually lead to the assimilation and amalgamation of the locals and foreign communities. The result saw the birth of the Chinese Peranakan, Arab, Jawa and various other communities, which shows that the Malaysian community had a long time ago faced ethnic variability, resulting in a myriad of sub-societies of mixed ethnic background.

According to the country's historical developments, the early rule by the British colonisers saw the power of the Malay royalty limited to only ceremonial and religious roles. The population composition aspect was shadowed by racial sentiments and apprehension due to the uncontrolled influx of foreign labour. Racial sentiments worsened with the arrival of the Japanese to the Malay States during World War II in the early 1940s. The racial instability reached a worrisome level when the Japanese began to treat the Malays well compared to the Chinese and Indians. The Chinese in the Malay States were oppressed by the Japanese and treated cruelly, which created enmity among the Chinese towards the Malays, and sowed the seeds of impending conflict. This led to the Chinese and Indians vigorously establishing their own ethnic identities, which saw bitter sporadic episodes of racial tension erupting in the country before independence. However, the emergence of an organised movement to confront the colonisers saw signs of an encouraging and positive relationship between the major ethnic groups in the Malay States, leading to the formation of political parties aimed at safeguarding the welfare of the various ethnic groups and seeking the independence of their beloved country. Power sharing among these parties began in 1952 until the formation of a collaboration between the various ethnic-based parties in the Malay States resulting in the Parti Perikatan, which was headed by UMNO (Malays), MCA (Chinese) and MIC (Indians). Similarly, Pakatan Harapan also comprised the collaboration of several political parties that formed the government after winning the 14th General Elections on 9 May 2018.

The *Rahmatan Lil Alamin* Concept in Islam

This section discusses the *Rahmatan Lil A'lam* concept in Islam based on its understanding in the al-Quran, Hadith as well as discourses by the Ulama and academicians. This study will first elaborate on the meaning of *rahmah*, which according to the al-Quran and Hadith, can be categorised into two, namely its linguistic and conceptual meanings. Allah SWT characterised HIMSELF by referring to *rahmah*. The characteristics of *rahmah* are mentioned 142 times in the Al-Quran (Muhammad Fuad Abd Al-Baqi 2001). In order to understand the meaning of *rahmah*, there are several mentions of the word in the al-Quran that can be understood literarily. Generally, the word *rahmah* has seven different meanings, which are gentleness, good fortune, prophethood, fertile land, deliverance of the al-Quran, rain and heaven (Harjani Hefni, 2017). First, *rahmah* means gentleness and affection, which is in contrast to anguish and misery, as mentioned in Surah al-Kahfi [18: 81]. Second, *rahmah* refers to good fortune (*rezeki*). Allah SWT is the ALL provider of good fortune because the good fortune bestowed by Allah SWT to HIS subjects and creatures is unlimited, such as air and oxygen. This is mentioned by Allah SWT in Surah al-Isra' [17: 28]. Third, *rahmah* refers to prophethood. The prophets who were discharged to guide humans were the primary *rahmah* for humans. Prophet Muhammad SAW, in particular, had conveyed exemplary values to humans, which eventually helped form the moral values of HIS companions, *tabi'in* and all the *ummah*. This is reflected in the exhortations of Allah SWT in Surah Hud [11:28]. Fourth, *rahmah* refers to fertile land, namely the huge spread of land mass bestowed onto humans is a *rahmah* to all of humanity. Fertile land has an impact and produces products of high quality that help in the continuity of human life in the form of food and sustenance. This is mentioned in the exhortation of Allah SWT in Surah Yunus [10:21]. Next, *rahmah*, from a linguistic aspect, refers to the deliverance of the al-Quran. Humans were created on this earth and it was not a wasteful act as Allah SWT wanted HIS subjects to steer this earth in the right direction. The al-Quran is the greatest form of joy bestowed on humans because the best method for religiously enlivening this earth is mentioned in the al-Quran. One example is the exhortation by Allah SWT in Surah Yunus [10:57]. *Rahmah* also means rain, which is also a sign of love by Allah SWT for HIS subjects, while creatures need air to live. An example of this is the exhortation by Allah SWT in Surah Al-A'raf [7:57]. Lastly, *rahmah* refers to heaven created by Allah SWT. The greatest form of joy and the main intention after seeing the face of Allah SWT is to enter heaven. Allah SWT iterated that subjects who successfully enter heaven are solely based on the *rahmat* of Allah SWT. This is exhorted by Allah SWT in Surah al-Nisa' [4:175].

In addition, the word *rahmah* could also mean *al-Riqqatu wa al-Ta'attufi*, which is the expression of gentleness and kindness with a motherly touch (Ibnu Mandzur, 1999). This refers to the finesse, gentleness and affection which is characteristic of a mother's love towards her child. Ibnu Faris mentioned that the meaning of the term yields a more in-depth meaning, as in *rahima*. *Rahima* refers to a relationship based on kinship, blood relations or royalty (Abd Salam Muhammad Harun, 1979). Al-Asfahani firmly stated that the concept of *rahmat* can be understood in two ways, namely as *al-Riqqat al-Mujarradah* (solely love and affection) and *al-Ihsan al-Mujarrad duna al-Riqqat* (show of goodness or good intent without love and affection). Both these meanings indicate that the characteristics of *rahmat* are affiliated with Allah SWT, hence, it means 'solely goodness'. On the other hand, if the characteristics of *rahmah* are affiliated with humans, then, it means 'solely sympathy' (Makmun Rasyid, 2016).

The characteristics of the Prophet SAW, portrayed as *Rahmah* to the whole universe, as exhorted by Allah SWT in Surah al-Anbiya verse 107 is suitable with the teachings propagated by the Prophet SAW, which is Islam. Consistent with the proclamation '*lil alamin*', the *rahmah* concept should be universal in nature. The love and affection advocated by Islam should be enjoyed and appreciated by each and every living thing (Ahmad Sanusi & Mohd Yusuf Ismail, 2018: 2). In one Hadith, the Prophet SAW had characterised himself consistently with the characteristics Allah SWT had given HIM in the form of *Rahmatan lil alamin*. In another Hadith, Imam Abu Daud and Imam Ahmad narrated that the Prophet SAW exhorted:

"Verily I was sent as a Rahmat for the whole universe"
(Sunan Abi Daud, Musnad Ahmad).

The message of Islam as a *Rahmat* to the whole Universe was realised by the Prophet SAW in HIS life and times. The *Rahmah* concept was translated by the Prophet SAW through HIS daily interactions with those around HIM. This includes the show of *Rahmah* towards children, daughters, women, orphans, elderly, knowledge seekers, and even animals (Ahmad Sanusi, Mohd Yusuf Ismail 2018: 2). *Rahmah* in this verse also refers to Muslims and non-Muslims. The Prophet SAW's *Rahmat* towards the Muslims is translated in the goodwill they receive in this world and in the afterlife. Meanwhile, *Rahmah* to non-Muslims is translated as the escape or deferment of the anguish of the afterlife compared to previous humans whose anguish was hastened while still on earth (al-Tabari 2000: 18/552, Ibn Kathir: 1419H: 5/339). When dealing with non-Muslims, the Prophet SAW provided some guidelines by exhibiting a high level of humanistic values (Ahmad Sanusi, Mohd Yusuf Ismail 2018: 3). One of them is the obligation to safeguard the lives of non-Muslims who have a treaty with the Muslims (*Kafir Mu'ahid*) (al-Bukhari: 1422H: 4/99). Besides that, acting appropriately to non-Muslims is evident in the Hadith where the Prophet SAW asks Asma to act appropriately to her mother, who was a *kafir*. The Prophet SAW had paid HIS last respects to a dead Jew as HE stood still as a sign of respect when the body passed HIM, as a form of human goodwill (al-Bukhari: 1422H: 2/85).

This incident indirectly indicates a high level of *Rahmah* in Islam. Thus, if a dead Jew deserves respect what about a living Jew; surely, they deserve their share of human rights (Ahmad Sanusi & Mohd Yusuf Ismail 2018: 3-4). Nevertheless, the strictness and firmness displayed by the Prophet SAW, either to Muslims or non-Muslims, is characterised as *Rahmah*, just like when the Prophet SAW witnessed the threat by Abu Jalal who asked the Quraish to be hostile towards Islam. The Prophet SAW then exhorted,

"And, with my life in HIS hands, I will fight them, crucify them and show them the light although they are full of hatred. Verily I am the Rahmah sent by Allah and Allah will not put me down until HE has succeeded in propagating HIS religion" (Hadith narrated by al-Tabarani, al-Mujam al-Kabir: 2/123).

The other characteristic of the Prophet SAW that indicates firmness in this hadith is clear when involving matters related to beliefs and respect for Islam; hence, there is a sign of compromise in this matter. Tolerance towards non-Muslims is only shown when dealing with human and social interaction aspects. This is the *Rahmatan Lil Alamin* concept according to Islam.

The *Rahmatan Lil Alamin* Approach in the Pakatan Harapan Government

It was during the 21-month rule of the PH government that the *Rahmatan Lil Alamin* concept was introduced by the Minister at the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Seri Dr Mujahid Yusof Rawa. According to the minister, the components of *Rahmah*, which are *Rahmah*, Peace, Harmony, Friendliness, Experience and Respect, play a significant role in the country, especially in solving racial issues and narrowing the ever-widening racial divide (Berita Harian, 2019). Besides the racial issues, the approach to the LGBT issue was among the issues raised when evaluating the *Rahmah* approach as well as the intention to imitate the characteristics of *Rahmah* exhibited by the Prophet SAW. *Rahmah* and its components had become government policy when it was approved by the Cabinet Meeting held on 25 October 2019 (Sinar Harian 2019).

Nevertheless, some quarters disagreed with the use of the *Rahmatan Lil Alamin* approach, especially when involving issues concerning non-Muslims as well as the LGBT because the approach lacked a firm attitude. Conversely, the Prophet SAW, who was characterised as *Rahmatan Lil Alamin*, exercised a firm attitude, while at

the same time expressing gentleness and tolerance (Ahmad Sanusi, Mohd Yusuf Ismail 2018: 9-12). This approach could be used to solve issues related to either Muslims or non-Muslims. Several issues that were later discussed led to conflict and confusion among the Muslims. The concept had a dangerous effect when transgressions committed by Muslims were not tackled firmly but rather gave them the opportunity to delve further into vice. Several interpretations by academicians in the country concluded that the *Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin* concept introduced by the PH opened avenues for liberalism and pluralism, which strongly indicated that the *Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin* concept in Islam had confused the Muslims in Malaysia. One issue that involved daawah to the LGBT based on the *Rahmatan Lil Alamin* concept was when the Minister for Religion had a meeting with the LGBT activists who demanded their rights and heard out what they had to say. Some quarters disagreed with this approach because they believed that the *Rahmah* approach does not require hearing out and giving opportunities to fulfil their wishes. However, the Prophet SAW had exercised a firm attitude when dealing this group during HIS time, as clearly mentioned with a strong intonation in HIS Hadith. This firm attitude exhibited by the Prophet SAW is an approach characterised as *Rahmah* (Ahmad Sanusi, Mohd Yusuf Ismail 2018: 9-12).

Conclusion

The *Rahmatan Lil Alamin* concept is an epic concept concerning the characteristics of the Prophet SAW that is debated in the al-Quran. This concept is a good approach for delivering daawah and enticing others to follow Islamic teachings. The PH government had applied the *Rahmah* concept throughout its rule of 21 months and it was approved as a government policy at that time (Sinar Harian, 2019). There also emerged various issues throughout the 21-month rule, namely relations between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities as well as the daawah approach for Muslims. Some of the PH government's initiatives through its Religious Affairs Department disagreed with the wrongful use of *Rahmah* as that would lead to actions that corrupt the identity and majestic nature of Islam. It is worth noting that besides the gentle and tolerant actions in propagating daawah by using the *Rahmah* approach, the Prophet SAW was also firm when faced with issues that could not be compromised and an exercised strict attitude, which were also part of *Rahmah*.

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