

Ethnic Relations in Malaysia from the Perspective of the Quran

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Abstract

The Quran is the Book of Allah, a comprehensive set of Islamic Law, the greatest evidence and miracle of the Prophet, Rasulullah S.A.W. Al-Quran is the first Islamic source related to morality, shari'a, mannerism and courtesy. Allah S.W.T compiles in the al-Quran a complete treasure of makrifah, the secret of the truth, fairness, goodness, morality, guidance and legislation brought down to mankind. Al-Quran is not only the guidance for Muslims but also the entire mankind as they set to lead their daily lives. Thus, this article will discuss some Quranic verses related to ethnicity and its analysis with respect to ethnic relations in Malaysia, from the perspective of the Quran.

Keywords: Al-Quran, ethnic, Malaysia, humans, Islam

Introduction

The multiple ethnicities, races and nations that have become characteristic of human conditions are the *fitrah* created by God upon human beings. In Quranic terms, humans carry several names among which are *al-Insan*, *al-Nas*, *al-Ins*, *al-Basyar* and *Bani Adam*. Every name has its own characteristics and uniqueness, both of which can be discerned through the meanings of the words. *Bani Adam* refers to generations of Adam. It means that despite the propagation of man into various races, nations and ethnic groups, but it is a fact that humans have the same origin or *sulbi* which is from Adam. The generations of *bani Adam* indicate that humans need to live their lives collectively and harmoniously, because life itself has to be shared in all this diversity. Life is the reward of Allah to His creatures including *bani Adam*.

Quranic verses In Relation to Ethnic Relations

Islam endorses the nobility of every man without accounting for ethnicity. This is proven through a verse from Allah s.w.t in surah al-Isra` 17:70 which means: *We have honoured the sons of Adam; and provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things good and pure; and conferred on them special favours, above a great part of our creation.*

Thus, there should be no discrimination or negation of rights based on ethnicity (JAKIM 2005). This explains that, by *fitrah*, humans are created by Allah in different forms, groups and cultures and all must accept and respect the diversity and differences as part and parcel of life and the laws of nature that will continue to take place. Thus, this diversity and differences are not supposed to be the factor that causes segregation and dispute but instead human beings should get to know each other and help one another so that collective peace and harmony can be attained. This is consistent with the decree of Allah s.w.t in Surah al-Hujurat 49:13 meaning: *O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (and not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge, and is well-acquainted (with all things).*

According to Fathi Osman (1997), this verse specifically centers on the basis of plurality and states that human diversity seeks to stimulate and encourage interactions, collaborations so that they complement each other, instead of causing fragmentation or conflict. All in all, humans, without accounting for place and time, are equal in Islam in the context of humanity and self-dignity; they are seen as the same to Allah despite their different physicality and cultures.

It is clear that Allah S.W.T. creates humans of various ethnicity and races from the same origin. It is self-categorised, based on different skin colours and places where they live. The categorization aims to facilitate classification and record-keeping as human civilization begins to develop. Humans will not be held responsible for their different races, skin colours and ethnicities because it is against their desire or will. Human's *khilqah* that starts from one and later becomes diverse is simply to prove upon the grandness and supremacy of Allah s.w.t. as the Creator *oral-Khaliq*. (al-Hujurat,49:13).

From the aspect of religion or human faith and belief, it also undergoes the same process which is from being One, whereby the basic stance of Islam is by believing in the Oneness of Allah s.w.t. following the preaches and teachings of anbiya and rasul. Al-Quran details this in several verses of the al-Quran. Al-Imran 2:85, Yunus 11: 72, al-Maidah 4: 44, Yunus 11:84, al-Baqarah 1:131, al-Baqarah 1:132, Yusuf 12:101. These verses are supported by the assertion by Rasulullah s.a.w. which means "and the anbiya are brothers, they have different mothers but their religion is one". (al-Bukhari, 1999). It means that shari'a among anbiya is different but the fundamental teaching is to believe in one, Allah S.W.T. Based on the Quranic statement, clearly the anbiya and rasul are proponents of the teachings of Islam. The difference is only in the aspect of syari'a and it does not involve the basis of faith. It indicates that Isa a.s. @ Jesus did not urge his followers to embrace Christianity, Musa did not preach people to believe in Judaism, Ibrahim did not ask his followers to follow the paths of Judaism, Christianity or other religions. What they did was urging their people to believe in Allah. Allah S.W.T. further decreed: "Indeed the one religion of Allah is Islam" (al-Imran 3: 19). Allah SWT further decreed, "Today, I have perfected your religion and I have completed my rewards, and I grant upon you Islam as your religion" (al-Maidah 5: 3).

Al-Quran also narrated how deviancy through object-worshipping began, in Surah Nuh 71: 23. It means "And their leaders said, *abandon not your gods; abandon neither Wadd nor Suwaa', neither Yaghuth nor Ya'uq, nor Nasr*". According to Ibn Kathir (2002) when interpreting the verse, "According to al-Bukhari, their names are the names of good, noble individuals among the people of Nuha.s., that when they have passed, the evils would impart the idea that a tomb is erected to remember them and their nobility. The opinion was accepted and generation after generation, the tombs have become objects of worship".

This is in line with the words of Allah in Surah an-Nisaa' 4:1, Surah ar-Rum 30:22, Surah Yunus 10:99 and Surah al-Kahfi 18:29 which mean:

O mankind! The truth is from you Lord, who created you from a single person (Adam), created his mate (his wife - Hawa), and from them twain scattered like seeds countless men and women. Reverence Allah through whom you demand your mutual rights, and reverence the wombs (that bore you); for Allah ever watches over you (Surah an-Nisaa' 4:1).

And among His signs, is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colours. Verily in that are signs for those who know (Surah ar-Rum 30:22).

If it had been thy Lord's will, they would all have believed- all who are on earth! Wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe! (Surah Yunus 10:99)

And say (Muhammad): The truth is from your Lord, let him who will believe, and let him who will, reject (it), for the wrong-doers we have prepared a fire whose (smoke and flames), like the walls and roof of a tent, will hem them in: if they implore relief they will be granted water like melted brass, that will scald their faces, how dreadful the drink! And how bad is the Hell to live forever in! (Surah al-Kahfi 18:29).

Islam also stresses on giving justice to all, according to the law without accounting for ethnicity, as explained by Allah s.w.t in Surah an-Nisaa'4:58 which means: *All doth command you to render back your trusts to those whom they are due; and when you judge between man and man, that you judge with justice; verily how excellent is the teaching which He gives you! For Allah is He who hears and sees all things.*

Next, Allah asserts that this different ethnicities cannot be an excuse for one to deny the rights or discriminate against any ethnic groups, as stated in Surah al-Maidah 5:8 which means: *O people who believe!, stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing; and let not the hatred of others to make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety; and fear Allah. For All is well-acquainted with all that you do.*

Al-Quran is also flexible towards Muslims where it allows Muslims to form relationships with the non-Muslims as long as they are not against Islam. This is explained in Surah al-Mumtahanah 60:8 which means: *Allah does not forbid you from doing good and act justly with others who do not fight you or drive you out of your homes; for Allah loves those who are just.*

Islam also stresses on the freedom of faith and simultaneously the Quran gives humans the explanation that the religion of Allah is Islam. This explains that Islam does not force other followers to embrace Islam as stated in Surah al-Baqarah 2:256 that means: *Let there be no compulsion in religion (Islam), Truth stands out clear from Error; whoever rejects Evil and believes in Allah, has grasped the most trust-worthy tie that never breaks. And (remember), Allah hears and knows all things.*

Al-Quran asserts that, the difference in belief and faith is determined by God- it cannot be disputed and misinterpreted. Thus, it is humans' responsibility to benefit from the minds granted by God the best way they can to seek for the truth and goodness through the guidance of a decree. In surah Hud 11:118-119, Allah s.w.t states: *If your Lord (O Muhammad) had so willed, he could have made mankind one religion. (but He does not do so) but they will not cease to dispute. Except those whom Your lord has bestowed his mercy, (They unite in the religion of Allah)); and for this He created them. And thus the words of the Lord shall be fulfilled: "I will fill Hell with jinns and (sinned) men all together".*

Religious tolerance according to Islam is to acknowledge individuals in determining and defending their beliefs and to not sacrifice it for worldly pursuits. In surah al-Kafirun 109: 1-6, Allah s.w.t has stated further: *Say (O Muhammad): "Oh those who reject faith! I will not worship what you worship. And you will not worship (Allah) what I worship. I will not worship the way you want me to worship. And you don't want to worship the way I want you to worship. To you, your religion is your religion, and to me, my religion is mine".*

Islam also proposes that one respects other people, and condemning or calling people with bad names is forbidden. Thus, everyone needs to conserve and respect one's privacy without accounting for their religions. This is explained in Surah Hujurat 49:11 which means; *Oh you who believe! Let not some men among you laugh at others; and let not some women laugh at other women, (as) it may be that the latter is better than the former; and don't you defame or be sarcastic to each other; nor call each other by offensive nicknames. Ill intention is a name connoting wickedness, to be used of one after he has believed; and those who do not desist are indeed doing wrong.*

In al-An'am 6: 108, Allah s.w.t strongly forbids the act of worshipping other religions because it will trigger a much greater problems. This shows that religious and ethnic tolerance needs to be preserved to uphold the stability of the races and the religions.

Reville not those whom they call upon besides Allah, because they will later revile Allah in overbearing manner, in all their ignorance. That is how we make alluring the sights of every man on their deeds and actions, then they will return to their God, and We shall then tell them the truth of everything that they did.

The Analysis of Ethnic Relations in Malaysia Based on the Verses of the Quran

Osman Bakar (2008) explains that ethnic relations in Malaysia leans on the introduction of the religion by equating Malay with Islam and equating ethnic interests and religious interests. However, in the future, there will be a change in the trend of the identity of the Malaysian Muslims specifically from Malay ethnicity to various others. For Tariq Ramadan (2004) who looks into ethnic relations in Europe, it is more towards the introduction to religious identity rather than ethnic identity as they constitute a minority in the country where the majority of the residents are non-Muslims. However, earlier on, where Muslim immigrants travelled to Europe, they were still in the dark, whether to call themselves Muslims or Pakistanis, Turkish or Muslim Arabs. This identification of Islamic identity is agreed by Muhammad Mumtaz Ali (1996) as he divided the Muslim community into three groups. The first group is committed to the teaching and identity of Islam. The second group is interested in the Western lifestyle but they do not fully assimilate themselves and the third one, they fully assimilate Western lifestyle in terms of the idea and culture. The first and the third groups make up a minority and the second group is the majority in the West.

Ismail Ibrahim (2005) explains that ethnic relations must lean on the theories of comprehensive Islamic teaching where al-Quran elaborates on the origin of mankind from various ethnic groups. This is in order for humans to live together, communicate and be nice to each other and also to help each other and live in peace, build knowledge and economic and technological strength collectively and collaboratively in all aspects of life. The freedom of religion in Islam is based on one's conviction in choosing his or her religion and the Apostle explains that those in the category of *Dhimmi* cannot be hurt and fought. Anyone who fights them will be like fighting the Prophets. Such an understanding needs to be understood as it can help people to act upon their evil intention. The concepts of power sharing, the freedom of religion, the protection of the law on weak people is the basis that is blessed in Islam. The conflicts that happened such as the event on 13 May 1969 and the incident in Kampung Medan were not solely due to religion but more influenced by racial sentiment. Ethnicity plays the role in consolidating the collaboration in the pluralistic society, at the same time playing the role in strengthening the defensive system of Medina. The togetherness displayed by the people of Medina through the collective agreement on the Constitution of Medina struck as the symbol of success to the management of diversity and pluralism.

The acceptance and tolerance of the people of Medina rendered the Medina society a model of management of the diversity and pluralism in the effort to form collaboration, responsibility, fairness and respect among different ethnic groups. The same applies to Malaysia with the communities of various ethnicity and this diversity must be respected by all (Zaleha, Nik Yusri and Nazri 218). The discussion of the concept of the protection discrimination does not go on the opposite way from the principle of law equality, to re-marginalise the political, economic and social imbalances amongst the Malaysians. The study outcome also shows that the special position of the Malays does not conflict with the equality principle based on four main contentions, one being that the Malays do gain the access to the special allocations as dictated in the constitution, and it does not go through the process of confiscating non-Malay's properties and assets but instead acquired from the additional assets from the overall economy. Secondly, the implementation of the Malays' special position does not leave an impact on the positions of the economy, education also the politics of the non-Malays, but even in sectors of economy and education, they are in far better position than the Malays. Thirdly, the special position of the Malays is one that has long existed before the Independence and reenacted when the constitution was formulated. Fourth, it is a proposition that has been collectively agreed by the ethnic groups (Nazri, Abdul Latif and MohdAzmir 2012).

In the context of Malaysia that has various ethnicity, every citizen must respect one another, and acknowledge the rights of every individual and society. Beliefs such as extremism, chauvinism, fanaticism, ethnocentrism, prejudice, stereotype and racism must be cast aside (Wan Suhaimi and Syed Mohammad Hilmi, 2007: 29–32).

Every Malaysian must strengthen their ethnic relations and always interacts with one another because it is demanded by Islam as explained in Surah al-Hujurat 49: 11 and 13. Other than that, the non-Muslims in Malaysia have benefited their rights as dictated in the Federal Constitution and the rights are consistent with those of the non-Muslims determined by Islam (Nazri Muslim & Azizi Umar 2017). These include the fact that they are free to follow the religion and practise religion peacefully and harmoniously, free to build their own houses of worship, free to eat, drink and dress according to their own cultures, free to find their own sustenance, free to own and manage their own properties, free to elect their own leaders, obtaining the rights of education and health, assured in terms of life security, justice of the laws so on and so forth. For instance, although Chinese-type and Tamil-type primary schools are excluded from the national education system, in terms of the management, the government still channels assistance to these schools (Azizi Umar, Mohd Syuja Saedin, Nazri Muslim and Supyan Hussin 2018)

Although Malays have some privileges as dictated in the constitution, they have not obtained this from the asset confiscation of the non-Malays, but in turn, from the additional fund from the entire economy. The special rights of the Malays also do not affect the positions of the economy, politics and education as well as the politics of the non-Malays, but in the sectors of economy and education, they are better than Malays. The special rights of the Malays are also something that have existed before Independence and reinstated when the constitution is formulated. It is also an agreement achieved through ethnic negotiations. Although Malays are protected and granted special rights in the field of economy, the Malay conditions do not change that much. Although currently we have many Malay entrepreneurs running various business empires and Malay billionaires have even emerged, the number is still scarce. The success of few Malays in business cannot be seen as representing the success of the Malays in the field of economy. Permit reservation and business tender to certain Malays only widen the gap between the rich and the poor. Referring to the Malaysian setting, Malaysia is a pluralistic country. This pluralistic nature will definitely create differences between ethnic groups in terms of their culture and religion. However, everyone is free to have their own faith and develop their own culture (Nazri Muslim, Nik Yusri Musa and Ahmad Hidayat Buang 2011). Non-Muslims are allowed to erect their own houses of worship where there are many religious followers. In politics, the selection of leaders is determined by the election which gives acknowledgement of justice to the people. In terms of the economy, the introduction of the national development policies such as New Economic Policy and National Development Policy, the Five-Year Development Plan, National Education Policy, National Cultural Policy also National Welfare Policy have taken into account the views of the people despite the fact that Maays have their own privileges as dictated in the Federal Constitution through Article 153 (Syed Othman 2007).

Conclusion

From the discussion on the Quran above, Islam is the religion that emphasizes the fact that the ethnic differences are commonplace in life. The debate among Muslim scholars about ethnic relations focuses on Surah al-Hujuratverse 13 that clearly endorses the ethnic differences in this world. These ethnic differences are not solely to create conflicts but to propose that humans really get to know one another. This shows that Islam is the religion that fulfills the human needs as the harmony and peace in everyone's daily lives are their natural instinct and needs. Meanwhile, the conflict that leads to dispute, arguments, murder and disorderly and chaos do contradict human nature.

At this point, Yusuf Qardawi (1989) explains that there are several basic principles that outline the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. The principles are as follows:

- i. The belief about human's grandness without accounting for religion, race and skin colour. It is this noble value that guarantees the rights for every human to be respected.
- ii. The belief that religious differences among humans follow the will of Allah, He who has given the freedom and choice to His creatures on what they want to do or otherwise.
- iii. The belief that humans are not assigned to question the issue of deviancy of the non-Muslims but it is Allah Himself who will ask these people in the Afterlife.
- iv. The belief that Allah has commanded that Muslims always act fairly and have good moral values although with the non-Muslims. Also, Muslims also need to be aware that Allah hates cruelty although cruel acts are committed by the Muslims themselves towards the non-Muslims.

However, in this issue, it is the responsibility of the non-Muslims to take care of the feelings of the Muslims who are also their fellow countrymen. It is also due to the Muslim sovereignty that they and their assets are given the protection and proper guarding. Thus, they are not allowed to condemn Islam, the Prophet and the Holy Book. They are also not allowed to spread any form of morality or idea that opposes the morality upheld by the country and the religion (such a position is in line with the requirement of the Federal Constitution in regard of the freedom of religion). However, if it is not from their own religious teaching and the spreading of the knowledge is only confined to their own community, then the action is allowed. They are also forbidden from doing the act of consuming alcohol and so on as forbidden by Islam, and they are also not allowed to sell it to Muslims because it will be detrimental to them. Anything that is seen deviant in Islam, but allowed in their religion, if they wish to do so, they must do so discreetly in the form that does not challenge the feelings of Muslims so in this way, the entire member of the society will live harmoniously and in unity (Mat SaadAbd. Rahman 2000).

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