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RESEARCH ARTICLE

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AMONG MALAYSIA'S DIVERSE SOCIETY

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Abstract

Religious practices in Malaysian society are an important aspect of their daily lives. Malaysia is a multicultural and multireligious country, with Islam being the predominant religion, while Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism are also recognized. In the religious practices in Malaysia, there are several key features that influence how Malaysian people carry out their religious beliefs. Firstly, Islam is the primary religion in Malaysia, with the majority of the population being Muslims. Islamic practices include performing the five daily prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and adherence to Sharia law. Secondly, there are Buddhist religious practices among the Chinese and Thai communities in Malaysia. They follow Buddhist teachings by attending temples, engaging in meditation, and practicing values such as kindness and simplicity. Thirdly, the Indian community in Malaysia practices Hinduism. They worship various Hindu gods and goddesses through religious ceremonies, such as worship and offerings at Hindu temples. Festivals like Deepavali are also part of their religious practices. Fourthly, Christianity is also present in Malaysian society, especially among the indigenous population and the Chinese minority. They attend churches and perform religious rituals based on Christian teachings, including reading the Bible and celebrating Christmas. Fifthly, there are also minority religions such as Sikhism and traditional religions among the indigenous Orang Asli communities. They practice unique religious rituals based on their beliefs. Religious practices in Malaysia often closely intertwine with local culture and artistic heritage. Additionally, Malaysia celebrates various religious festivals with enthusiasm, reflecting the diversity and tolerance in Malaysian society. This study attempts to examine the overview of religious practices in the diverse society of Malaysia. The research uses qualitative methods involving data collection, data analysis using

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historical research methodology, and document analysis. The study findings indicate that religious practices in Malaysian society reflect the religious and cultural diversity of the country. Despite differences in religious practices and beliefs, Malaysia has successfully achieved a unique religious harmony where various religious communities coexist peacefully and respect each other. This is a significant feature that enriches Malaysia's cultural heritage.

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Introduction:-

Freedom of religion in Malaysia is subject to the Malaysian Constitution. It is a principle that grants freedom to individuals or communities to adhere to and practice their respective religions, considered as one of the fundamental human rights globally. In Malaysia, despite Islam being recognized as the religion of the Federation according to Article 3(1) of the Federal Constitution (1957: 20), followers of other religions are still free to adhere to and practice their religions. The right to freedom of religion is provided for in "Article 11 of the Federal Constitution." Freedom of religion is enshrined in the Malaysian Constitution. Firstly, Article 11 stipulates that every person has the right to profess and practice their religion and (subject to applicable laws restricting the propagation of other religions to Muslims) to propagate it. Secondly, the Constitution also states that Islam is the religion of the federation (the Constitution does not declare Islam as the official religion but rather as the religion of the federation), but other religions can be practiced in peace and harmony (Article 3) (Federal Constitution 1957).

Religions in Malaysia

The term "religion" in Malay refers to a binding belief. This means that religion is a set of rules governing human life based on a connection between the spiritual and the supernatural realms that exert control over individuals and the known world, as well as their submission to and worship of the divine being (Smith 1963: 351). Religion can be defined as the relationship between humans and an extraordinary power believed to provide protection. This sacred relationship leads to human submission to it, along with love, trust, and seeking protection from it. E.B. Tylor (1903) defined religion as a belief in supernatural beings. Meanwhile, Durkheim (1915: 47) argued that religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred objects.

In Malaysia, religion refers to the beliefs, doctrines, practices, and religious rituals followed by individuals or community groups in the country. There are various religions in Malaysia, with Islam as the predominant religion, and other religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and the traditional religions of the indigenous Orang Asli communities are also practiced by different communities.

The definition of religion in Malaysia often refers to a system of beliefs and practices that govern the relationship between individuals and God or divine power, as well as the moral values, ethics, and social norms associated with those beliefs. Religion also plays an important role in the cultural and social identity of Malaysian society, and it has a significant impact on their lives, including in the fields of education, law, and daily life.

It is important to note that Malaysia recognizes these religions through the country's constitution and separate religious laws for each religion. These religions are guaranteed their rights to practice freely and are protected by law. However, religion in Malaysia is also a sensitive issue that requires continuous monitoring and attention to ensure harmony among the diverse religious communities in the country. Therefore, the definition of religion in Malaysia can also refer to legislation and policies that control religious practices and promote peace and security among various religious communities.

Malaysia has a population of over 27 million. According to the latest Census and Housing Survey, 60.4 percent of the population is Muslim; 19.2 percent is Buddhist; 9.1 percent is Christian; 6.3 percent is Hindu, and 2.6 percent practices traditional Chinese religions. The remaining are recorded as other religions, including Animism, Sikhism, and other belief systems (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2022). Being a Muslim is a requirement to be considered a Malay according to the Malaysian Constitution (Federal Constitution 1957).

Freedom of Religion in Islam and the Constitution

Islam is a religion that calls upon humanity to uphold goodness and foster relationships among people. It is known by the concept of "Hablun Min al-Nas" – the bond among people. In the context of religious concepts, Islam never compels anyone to embrace any particular religion against their will. Individuals are free to choose their own religion according to their beliefs. This is in line with the words of Allah SWT (Al-Baqarah 2: 256):

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ ۚ قَدْ تَبَيَّنَ الرُّشْدُ مِنَ الْغَيِّ ۚ فَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِالطَّاغُوتِ وَيُؤْمِنْ بِاللَّهِ فَقَدِ اسْتَمْسَكَ بِالْعُرْوَةِ الْوُثْقَىٰ لَا انْفِصَامَ لَهَا ۗ وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ

"There is no compulsion in religion. The right path has become distinct from the wrong path. Whoever disbelieves in false deities and believes in Allah has certainly grasped the most trustworthy handhold, which does not break. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing."

This verse from Surah Al-Baqarah emphasizes the principle of freedom of religion in Islam. It explicitly states that there is no compulsion in religion, and individuals are free to choose their religion based on their beliefs. Islam respects the individual's freedom to embrace or leave a religion without coercion or force.

The Constitution of Malaysia also recognizes the freedom of religion. Although Islam is considered the primary religion, Article 11(1) of the Federal Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of religion for every Malaysian citizen. This article states:

"Every person has the right to profess and practice his religion and, subject to Clause (4), to propagate it."

This indicates that the Constitution of Malaysia respects the right to freedom of religion and protects the right of every individual to practice their religion without coercion. Therefore, the principle of freedom of religion in Islam and the Constitution of Malaysia align in granting individuals the right to choose and practice their religion without compulsion or pressure.

Islam does not force and does not accept non-Muslims to convert to Islam under compulsion. However, those who are already Muslims are required to adhere to the regulations that have been determined. Every individual needs to understand and be knowledgeable in choosing/embracing a religion. As for the guidance of Islam regarding the relationship among human beings, it is based on the words of Allah SWT (Al-Hujurat 49:13):

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا ۗ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

"O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted."

This verse emphasizes the diversity of humanity, created from different backgrounds, to encourage mutual understanding and knowledge among people. It highlights that the superiority of an individual is based on their piety and righteousness, not on their race or ethnicity. Islam promotes equality and encourages people to recognize and appreciate the diversity among them.

According to the Federal Constitution, Article 4(1) states that the Federal Constitution is the supreme law in Malaysia, and any law enacted after Independence Day that contradicts the Federal Constitution is void to the extent of the inconsistency. Furthermore, Article 160(2) when defining the meaning of the law states, "The 'law' includes written laws, common law in so far as it is in operation in the Federation or any part thereof, and any custom or usage having the force of law in the Federation or any part thereof" (Suhakam 2022).

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) clearly states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

This is also supported by Article 20(b) of the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam 1990, which states, "No one shall be subject to coercion, which would impair his/her freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice" (Suhakam 2022).

In Malaysia, freedom of religion is also guaranteed under Article 11 of the Federal Constitution, which stipulates that every person has the right to profess and practice their religion. Article 11(1) states, "Every person has the right to profess and practice his religion and, subject to Clause (4), to propagate it." Clause (4) grants power to state laws and federal laws for the Federal Territories to control and restrict the propagation of any doctrine or belief among those who profess the Islamic religion. This provision is seen in line with Schedule 9, List II, Item 1 – "control of propagation of doctrines and beliefs among persons professing the Islamic religion" (Federal Constitution 1957).

Therefore, it is clearly understood that the freedom to profess or practice religion is recorded in the Federal Constitution, and there are no restrictions or obstacles to conducting any religious ceremonies in Malaysia. The freedom of religion rights outlined in the provisions of the Federal Constitution indicates that the freedom of religion granted by the federal constitution clearly guarantees the right to profess and practice religion and limits the propagation of religion. For Muslim followers, they are better protected compared to followers of other religions. Nevertheless, it is essential to understand that the presented provisions are aimed at maintaining the stability of Malaysian society, which is predominantly Muslim and sensitive to the spread of religions other than Islam. Overall, with the existing provisions, it shows that the right to freedom of religion is guaranteed to all. However, it still has certain limitations to maintain the peace, health, and morality of society, and no one can be forced to pay taxes if it is not provided for a purpose other than their own religion. The right to the propagation of religion for an individual is still subject to state laws or federal laws if the propagation is made among those who have embraced Islam. This is important to elevate Islam as the religion of the Federation that can preserve all aspects of a diverse society and religion, making Malaysia a unique and special country (Nur Afifah Mohd Najib & Ahmad Munawar Ismail 2018).

Religious Sensitivity Issues in Malaysia

Malaysia is a country with a diverse multicultural society. Religious sensitivity issues in Malaysia are crucial in the social and political context of the country. Malaysia is a multicultural nation with various religions, with Islam as the predominant religion. Other recognized religions include Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and the traditional religions of the indigenous Orang Asli communities. While this diversity contributes significantly to Malaysia's cultural heritage, it also gives rise to sensitive issues that need attention.

According to Nur Farhana & Nur Syariah (2020), issues related to religious sensitivity have been explicitly discussed since the 1990s until the millennium. In the 1950s-1960s, citizenship and social contract issues were predominant. In the subsequent decade (1960-1970), Malaysia experienced new conflicts, particularly related to language, giving rise to language-related issues. New issues emerged in the following years, such as quota and urbanization issues, but received less attention towards the 1980s. From 1980-1990, no significant issues were reported. However, in the subsequent years, religious issues emerged as a major concern among the Malaysian populace, significantly impacting the relations between followers of different religions. These issues led to conflicts and disputes among communities of different faiths, indirectly indicating that religious matters are sensitive in a multi-religious society (Siti Khatijah & Fadzli 2017).

Furthermore, Nur Farhana & Nur Syariah (2020) highlight various religious sensitivity issues that have emerged among the Malaysian population, largely discussed on social media. These issues include theological, social, ethical, and other concerns. For instance, issues related to the call to prayer (azan), readings, and mosque activities were identified as causes of negative perceptions among non-Muslims towards Muslims, especially when it involves sounds from mosques or prayer halls not authorized by religious authorities. While this issue was less discussed in the 2000s, it resurfaced about five years later when individuals questioned the appropriateness of using loudspeakers for readings, lectures, and sermons. This matter gained attention when the Islamic Religious Affairs Department of Penang (JHEAIPP) received ten complaints regarding the use of loudspeakers for all mosque or prayer hall activities. These complaints led to a proposal to restrict the use of loudspeakers in all mosques and prayer halls in Penang. Loudspeakers could only be used for the call to prayer to avoid disturbing the peace of nearby residents. This proposal was criticized by Muslim followers as an unjustifiable act, creating some dissatisfaction among Muslims towards non-Muslims.

Among other issues that have arisen among the Malaysian population are those highlighted by Zaid et al. (2014). These issues include blasphemy, custody rights, corpse claims, Malaysia as an Islamic or secular state, places of worship, hudud, jurisdiction between the Civil Court and the Sharia Court, the use of the term "Allah," the Bible in the Malay language, conversion of religion, and the propagation of other religions. Overall, all these issues are deemed important according to the perceptions of the study respondents. However, their importance varies depending on the study area. The issue of places of worship is most critical in the peninsula, while in Sabah and Sarawak, blasphemy issues are of primary concern (Zaid et al. 2014).

According to Nur Farhana & Nur Syarihah (2020), based on Abd Hakim et al. (2015) excerpt, the issue of using the term "Allah," which was once a major discussion in society, has been highlighted as a sensitive issue. This issue has become a benchmark or indicator for understanding the Christian community's attitude towards the Muslim community in Sabah. The study found that the Christian community's attitude towards the Muslim community in Sabah is positive and good, whether before or after the emergence of this issue. This is due to the strong social ties between the different religious communities in Sabah. In fact, the term "Allah" has long been used by the Christian community, especially in Borneo, and it has not caused any religious conflict. However, different findings may be obtained through research in the peninsula, as the relationship between religious followers is still unstable, and the term "Allah" is not used by any religion other than Islam.

Religious Tolerance in Malaysia's Multicultural Society

Islam is a religion that consistently practices universal values ('alamiyah), tolerance (tasamuh), and love (mahabbah) in all matters. This aligns with its meaning of "peace and prosperity." These three terms have a close relationship with each other. After achieving independence, Malaysian society has undergone various phases of change due to the clash of civilizations and religions in the past. This has led to the Malay Muslim community, in particular, losing the right to "absolute freedom," especially in engaging in any form of religious activity. Instead, they need to share the freedom with other ethnic groups and followers of different religions in the country. The government has made various efforts to control this situation, including through legislation. The government takes this matter seriously, given the increasing religious sensitivity among followers of other religions, which has become more apparent. This reality becomes clearer, especially as certain parties dare to challenge the credibility of the Federal Constitution, particularly concerning issues of human rights and religious freedom (Khadijah MohdKhambali @ Hambali&MohdHerzaliMohd Haled 2008).

Religious tolerance practiced in Malaysia has been based on Article 11(1) of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, which states that "every person has the right to profess and practice his religion subject to Clause (4), to propagate his religion." From this provision, it is clear that Muslims and followers of other religions are free to follow and practice their religious teachings, subject to the condition that they cannot engage in any form of proselytization of any religious teachings to Muslims. However, the long-enjoyed privileges are now being marred by the interference of certain malicious parties seeking to undermine the position of Islam and religious tolerance in the country. Although such issues have occurred several times, involving the judiciary in the past, the Lina Joy case is the most significant issue to date. This is because it is the first case involving Article 11 brought to the Federal Court for interpretation (Khadijah MohdKhambali @ Hambali&MohdHerzaliMohd Haled 2008).

The developments in our country remind us of the importance of maintaining social harmony among diverse religious and ethnic communities. Existing government policies such as the Rukun Negara (National Principles), National Education Policy, and New Economic Policy (DEB) are not sufficient to ensure the strength and social stability of the multicultural society in this country without being supported by high awareness and a clear understanding and appreciation by every layer of society towards these policies.

If there is turmoil created by certain parties against the sanctity of the Constitution, it indicates the existence of a handful of dishonest and malicious individuals towards the country. The issue of religious freedom should not be disputed because the multicultural society in Malaysia has never experienced any form of oppression, either from a racial or religious perspective. The position of Islam and other religions has been clarified through the Federal Constitution, Article 3(1), which stipulates that "Islam is the religion of the Federation, but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony throughout the Federation." Meanwhile, the sultans or kings are the heads of Islam in each state with a royal capital [Article 3(2)], and the Yang di-PertuanAgong is responsible as the head of Islam for the States of Melaka, Pulau Pinang, Sabah, and Sarawak [Article 3(3)], as well as for the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Labuan [Article 3(5)]. Article 12(2) also states that every religious group has the right to

establish and maintain institutions for the education of children in its own religion. However, it is valid for the Federation or any State to establish or maintain Islamic institutions or provide or assist in providing Islamic religious education and incur any expenses as required for this purpose. Nevertheless, this is emphasized in Article 12(3), which states that no one is allowed at all to compel or force any individual to follow a particular religious teaching or participate in any celebrations or activities recommended by a specific religion other than the religion they adhere to (Khadijah MohdKhambali @ Hambali&MohdHerzaliMohd Haled 2008).

The right to religious freedom, as provided in Article 11 of the Constitution, has long been the backbone of unity and harmony among different ethnic groups in Malaysia. The maintenance and construction of places of worship are evidence that the relationship between the diverse communities in Malaysia remains preserved. This condition needs to be valued, preserved, and maintained to ensure that the culture of tolerance is appreciated by the new generation. However, all of this is not an easy effort (Khadijah MohdKhambali @ Hambali&MohdHerzaliMohd Haled 2008).

Various challenges need to be faced today in maintaining the spirit of love or religious tolerance in the country. One of the main obstacles now is the generation gap. This phenomenon is also caused by changes in lifestyle due to the rapid flow of international communication and information systems. This has expanded the space for each community to adopt an individualistic approach, ultimately eroding social concern and getting trapped in a hedonistic lifestyle that reinforces the erosion of ideals and the spirit of struggle and an agnostic attitude (indifference) towards the importance of religion among Malaysians (Khadijah MohdKhambali @ Hambali&MohdHerzaliMohd Haled 2008).

Additionally, the dominance of certain ethnic groups over a particular religion sometimes affects social interactions among the multicultural society in Malaysia. This is because each ethnic or racial group will always show efforts to manifest and purify their diverse lives, which will undoubtedly lead to exaggerated exclusivist competition, causing misunderstandings and tensions (Khadijah MohdKhambali @ Hambali&MohdHerzaliMohd Haled 2008).

Therefore, a defensive approach considering religious issues highly sensitive for discussion needs to be abandoned. Conversely, an offensive approach should be taken to create religious tolerance in Malaysia by respecting the similarities and differences within each religion. Ignorance about these matters will lead to confusion and misunderstandings that can encourage the construction of self-imposed "walls," hindering religious interaction and ultimately leading to disputes and hostility (Khadijah MohdKhambali @ Hambali&MohdHerzaliMohd Haled 2008).

This desire undoubtedly requires integrated and effective actions from every layer of society. One of the best methods that can be implemented now is to increase and diversify forms of religious interaction among the people. In addition to increasing dialogue programs among religious leaders, it should be expanded to schools and higher education institutions to curb and control prejudice and misunderstandings among followers of each religion towards other religious believers at an early stage. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education should be responsible for strengthening and standardizing the study of religious disciplines across educational institutions in Malaysia. Furthermore, the government should make efforts to strengthen the understanding of all Malaysians, especially in rural areas, to respect the statements contained in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia as the identity of the Malaysian nation. For this, electronic and mass media should play a role as effective information channels in disseminating and instilling an understanding of these matters to the entire population, especially the younger generation (Khadijah MohdKhambali @ Hambali&MohdHerzaliMohd Haled 2008)

Conclusion:-

Religious practices and religious tolerance in Malaysia are crucial aspects of the country's social and cultural life. Despite being a multi-religious nation, Malaysia has successfully maintained peace and harmony among its religiously diverse communities. The following are key points in the conclusion regarding religious tolerance in Malaysia:

1. **Freedom of Religion:** Malaysia recognizes freedom of religion in its constitution, granting individuals the right to practice their respective religions without interference. This is a fundamental value that safeguards human rights.
2. **Religious Diversity:** Malaysia's status as a nation with diverse religions has created a unique cultural diversity. This stimulates cultural exchange and enriches the country's heritage.

3. Commitment to Religious Well-being: Malaysia has made significant efforts to ensure the well-being and rights of individuals from various religions are respected and protected. This includes the maintenance of places of worship, celebration of religious festivals, and laws ensuring equal treatment for all religions.
4. Interfaith Dialogue: Continuous efforts are made to encourage dialogue between various religions in Malaysia. This includes dialogues, forums, and educational programs aimed at fostering mutual understanding and addressing misunderstandings.
5. Sharing Religious Culture: Malaysian society often shares religious cultural practices, especially during religious celebrations. This serves as a positive example of how diverse religions can coexist peacefully and harmoniously.

However, despite Malaysia's strong history of religious tolerance, issues of religious sensitivity also exist and need to be addressed with tact. These include issues related to the involvement of religion in politics and tensions between different religious communities. Nevertheless, with a commitment to the values of tolerance and strong cooperation, Malaysia can continue to uphold and strengthen religious tolerance, which is the foundation of the nation's peace and harmony.

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