

## A BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT IN A MALAY-MUSLIM COMMUNITY: A CASE STUDY PRESENTATION

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### ABSTRACT

*This article discusses the city of Kota Bharu, the capital city of the Malaysian state of Kelantan. It is the only capital city in Malaysia that is known as Bandaraya Islam. From the observer's point of view Kota Bharu is special for its continuous improvement by the State Government that propagates Islam as a way of life - in the case of Kota Bharu, this is also translated into the development of human capital. The philosophical pillar of the state's development is based in the concept of Tauhid. The process of such transformation into deeper Islamic doctrines in Kelantan is seen as significant and almost always picked-up in research interviews. Islamic mosaics in the life of this city are also indicated from direct observation and academic and popular literature. The concept of 'Developing with Islam' has been relentlessly promoted in the past 18 years and is an important factor that gives the Islamic image to this state. It was also observed that part of the city are developed with emphasis given on the landscape under the concept currently known as the Lanskap Kerohanian Islam (Islamic-spiritual-based landscape). The symbols of Islam in the Islamic city of Kota Bharu are found to be widespread e.g. along roads, shopping complex, wet markets and open spaces. The efforts of the State Government to adhere to and promote Islamic values in this state are seen as dominant factors that allow for a conducive and continuous process of Islamization.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Kota Bharu, the capital city of the Malaysian state of Kelantan was chosen for the field site of this topic. During the study data from Malay businesspeople in field were collected in real time.<sup>1</sup> In this research a Malay-Muslim society with a special consideration on the respondent's background was examined.

### THE PORTRAIT OF ISLAM IN KELANTAN DAR AL-NA'IM

Since 1990 the state government has been trying to govern the state according to the principles of Islam. With this in mind, the state introduced a development policy called *Membangun Bersama Islam* (Developing with Islam). This development policy reaffirms the Islamic ethos that the Holy *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* (tradition) of Prophet Muhammad as the highest and authentic references as far as Islamic way of life is concerned. The main philosophical idea is to establish *Tauhid* (the Oneness of God) in daily practice. Every single plan of the development policy should adhere to the principles of the development policy. In short, the philosophical approach toward the state's development can be categorized into three concepts;

1. *Ubudiyyah* - Referring to the essence that man is the vicegerent of *Allah* in this world. Man is created to worship *Allah*, therefore the whole of his body and soul must be kept in the obedience of *Allah*. Consequently, the administration of the state must be realized through the concept of *Ubudiyyah*.
2. *Masuliyah* - Referring to the sense of accountability and integrity, in which, a job is a responsibility and must be fulfilled as a duty towards *Allah*. For every action, a man is to be accountable and will be asked about it on the Day of Judgement.
3. *Itqan*- Referring to the quality at work. This will include qualities such as hardworking, commitment and focus. It also includes continuity at work without any failure such as the feeling of taking for granted.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of 'Developing with Islam' was the important factor that gave the Islamic image to this state in general and to the city of Kota Bharu in particular. Dinsman (Othman) admits the importance of the Municipal council to establish the *Shari'ah* in the state.<sup>3</sup> He further admits; "...We conclude that Kota Bharu is an Islamic city because here we see the obligations to *Allah* are fulfilled and administrated by the City Council. We see that all the infrastructure and public facilities are developed in a way to usher people to the remembrance of *Allah* and to stop

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<sup>2</sup>Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat. (2005). 'Amanat Menteri Besar Kelantan', in Pejabat Setiausaha Kerajaan Negeri (ed) *Dasar-dasar Kerajaan Negeri Kelantan*, Kota Bharu: Pusat Kajian Strategik, p2-3. The same book also illustrates more details on the implementation of the concepts, see *ibid*, pp 3-6

<sup>3</sup> C.S. Othman. (2004) *Kota Bharu Bandar Raya Islam*, Kota Bharu: Majlis Perbandaran Kota Bharu, p ii

themselves from doing what Allah forbids. We can see that this city always maintains its cleanliness, far from being a place of sin, *Mungkar* and injustice...<sup>4</sup>

Islamisation policy in the state leadership has changed the phenomenon in which public entertainments have been taking place. Respondent (TR-30) reported;

“... Sure! There are a lot of changes leaning to Islam. The chief minister was adamant in eradicating *Khurafaat*, i.e., superstitious notions in the society. Take *Makyong* (an ancient dance-theatre form incorporating the elements of ritual, stylized dance and acting, vocal and instrumental music, story, song, formal as well as improvised spoken text) and, *Wayangkulit* (shadow puppetry), the mantras in those activities. In the old days, there were mantras before any performance. Many names were invoked but all these names have nothing to do with Islam...”

Asked on the reaction from the Kelantanese he said; “... Local performers were angry initially, the policy hurt their income, of course. They have been living that way for so long. In time, they adapted and found ways to bring their work closer to Islam. I think they are not too bad at the moment...”

Kota Bharu is the only capital city in Malaysia known as *Bandaraya Islam*.<sup>5</sup> In Malaysia the title “city” (*Bandaraya*) is given once population of place reaches 500,000 or more. This is not the case in Kota Bharu that has a population of less than half a million people. However, the State Government names it *Bandaraya* without linking the name to the standard qualification. It is more towards image building rather than to qualify its status as a city.<sup>6</sup> In the following section the author will discuss the Islamic image of this place. This will be done by looking from the angle of how the Islamic culture runs amongst the people and the environs.

Visual images of Islamic quality can be seen in various forms in the city; symbols, giant billboards, architecture, posters etc.<sup>7</sup> In many ways, the name that it carries i.e. *Bandaraya Islam* goes along in parallel with the state’s administration policy.

Not far from the central bus station leading to a well known beach, *Pantai Cahaya Bulan*, there is an open area which is famously known as *Padang Bas* or *Dataran Rehal*. It is within a walking distance from the *Muhammadi* Mosque and located just in front of the state Museum. The name *Padang Bas* (Field for busses) is given for its function; chartered buses are usually parked in this space especially during school holidays and weekends. *Dataran Rehal* (*Rehalsquare*) is its alternative name, which was derived from the replica of a *Rehal*.<sup>8</sup> The entrance has to gigantic arches known as *Pintu Gerbang Sultan Ismail Putra* (*The Sultan Ismail Putra Gate*). They are crafted with Kelantanese Malay traditional motifs blended with *Qur’anic* versus carved in gold-coloured Arabic *Khat* (calligraphy).

On the right and left hand sides of these arches are several pillars standing 10-12 meters high, each with an opened image of the holy *Qur’an* on a *Rehal*. Immediately underneath the opened *Qur’an* is the word “*Iqra*” written in Arabic calligraphy, also in gold colour. Apart from that lamp posts stand high with the name of *Allah* and *Muhammad* crafted in green colour of Arabic calligraphy, which are very attractive especially at night. This landscape is illustrated to express a meaning *inter-alia* “...the important message to call people to appreciate the *Qur’an* and to hold it firmly as a guidance.”<sup>9</sup> In addition, another part of the city is developed with emphasis given on the landscape, currently known as the *Lanskap Kerohanian Islam* (Islamic spiritual landscape). The site was formerly known as *Tanah Serendah Sekebun Bunga* (The garden of flower blossoms).<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the difference of Kota Bharu as compared to other cities in Malaysia can be felt and clearly seen. The combination of structures, architecture and the culture of Islam is significantly abundant and is presented in many forms. A giant billboard at a junction displays the *Asma’ al-Husna*<sup>11</sup> (all The 99 Beautiful Names of Allah). It is big enough and can clearly be seen from some hundred metres away. In many places there were notice boards advising people to wear proper clothes<sup>12</sup>, to pray and to do good deeds. Most of the advices on the notice boards are from the holy *Qur’an* or *Hadith*.

In many ways, billboards in Kelantan, in general, and in Kota Bharu in particular (for the sheer reason of Kota Bharu having the largest number of billboards in the state) are different from billboards outside of Kelantan. As the case in many advertisements, popular figures (film stars, comedians, television personalities) are used to promote advertised products, most of whom, however, are women. In Kelantan, all the figures are pictured in attires conforming to the Islamic dress codes; in many cases, this involved the head-scarf or the *Hijab*. In other states, similar personalities, promoting similar products, in similar poses, are often pictured without head-scarf.

Apart from giant billboards, arches and banners, most of which promote and uphold two of the most frequently written names i.e. Allah and Muhammad, the verses of the *Qur’an* are also written or carved in many types and colours of Arabic calligraphy. Included are also the pictures

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* (2004), p 10

<sup>5</sup> Although there are other cities in Malaysia known as *Bandaraya* none of them is called *Bandaraya Islam*. Other Malaysian cities are; Georgetown (Penang), Miri (Sarawak) Kuala Lumpur, Putra Jaya (Federal Territory), Shah Alam (Selangor) and Kuala Trengganu (Trengganu).

<sup>6</sup> Respondent MP-07.

<sup>7</sup> From cultural studies point of view culture is very important because “a symbol expresses a culture’s ideology”. This ideology guides the members of the culture to orientate, interpret, transform and legitimise their everyday concerns. See M. Rosaldo and J. Atkinson. (1972) ‘Man the Hunter and Women’, in W. Lesse and E. Z. Vogt (eds) *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, New York: Harper and Row, p 130

<sup>8</sup> It roots are from the Arabic word; *RAHIL* “That which is fit for travelling.” A small book stand made so as to fold up for convenience in travelling. See T.P. Hughes. (1895) ‘A Dictionary Of Islam’. : W.H. Allen & Co, <http://www.answering-islam.org/Books/Hughes/index.htm> (23.06.2008). From the Malay view it is made from woods and beautifully decorated where the Holy *Qur’an* is placed on. The idea is to place the holy book higher than one’s foot while in sitting position. It is one way how *Qur’an* is honoured by Muslims.

<sup>9</sup> C.S. Othman. (2004) *Kota Bharu Bandar Raya Islam*, Kota Bharu: Majlis Perbandaran Kota Bharu, p 18

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p19

<sup>11</sup> The 99 Beautiful Names of Allah, also known as The 99 Beautiful Attributes of God.

<sup>12</sup> In the Malay language it is always referred to as *Tutup Aurat*.

of the *Sultan* (the King) and *Raja Perempuan* (the Queen). In general, all things that promote the idea of the Islamic State follow a certain protocol. The emblem of the State is usually placed at centre top. Otherwise, it is replaced by various references to the King e.g. “*DaulatTuanku*”, “*Raja TonggakKedaulatanBangsa*” (The King is the pillar of the nation) and “*YaTuhankuLanjutkanUsia al-Sultan dan Raja Perempuan Kami*” (May Allah bless the life of our King and Queen). Basically, all articles point to the expression of the people’s love for the religion and the King. All of these are blended very well in yet various forms of the culture of the people. Other Islamic articles include words depicting the names of *Allah* and advices.

In many places locals do not usually bother about knowing the directions of north, south, east and west or the state of the weather. Because of this, finding the direction of the *Kaabah*, which is essential for prayers can be a continuous problem especially for travellers who just arrived. In the city of Kota Bharu the direction of *Kaabah* are found in many places in this city.<sup>13</sup> Generally they are found in hotel rooms throughout Malaysia but uniquely in Kota Bharu, they are found in many open places, even on soccer pitches. For example in this city the *Kaabah* direction was shown by an arrow symbol in *Padang Bandaran* (municipal court). This is because the *Jamaah* (congregation) prayer has been held here especially on certain occasions when the chief minister is present. Moreover *SolatHajat*(prayer to fulfil one’s need) for the purpose of the state administration became familiar since *PAS* came into power.<sup>14</sup> But the most attractive example of the *Kaabah* direction structure can be found in front of the *MPKB-BRI* ( KotaBharu-Islamic City Municipal Council) building. Here the direction of *Kaabah* is a structure built with an attractive traditional Malay carving, with an arrow pointing towards the direction of the *Kaabah*. Just below the arrow are digital monitors on each face of the square-shaped column indicating date and time as well the times for the five daily prayers. Nik Abdul Aziz the Chief Minister of the state has given serious consideration about the importance of daily prayers for Muslims in this state. He once said; “It has been part of culture for people in this region to pray and ask from Allah when they are in need...”<sup>15</sup> With this in mind it is not difficult to understand why the Chief Minister emphasises the importance of prayers. *Medan SeleraBuluhKubu* i.e., a famous food court, in its opening ceremony on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2004 for example was started with the *Jamaah* prayer and the speech from the Chief Minister afterwards.<sup>16</sup>

There is a certain feeling, or at least, a noticeable change in the atmosphere within the *PasarSitiKhadijah*, whenever the *Azan* (the call for prayers) is heard. A particularly noticeable change takes places during *Maghrib* (the early evening prayer). There is a food court just outside the market called *Medan SeleraBuluhKubu*(the BuluhKubu Food Court). In the morning, the place is used as an open market where villagers come in to sell all sorts of vegetables, fruits and groceries. It turns into a food court sometimes around 5pm. Fifteen minutes before *Maghrib* prayer time, officers from the *MajlisPerbandaran KotaBharu-Bandaraya Islam* will come to make a patrol. Using a loud speaker, an announcement is made that all activities are to stop in respect of the *Azan* and *Maghrib* prayer time; this will be a break of half an hour. This is usually given in the general order as follows;

“...*A’uzubillahimnashshaitanirrajimBismillahirrahmanirrahim*, good afternoon brothers and sisters who are coming from far or from nearby area of *Medan SeleraBuluhKubu*. And good afternoon to all traders who are running businesses this afternoon...Please be informed that now you are advised to halt your work temporarily prior to *Azan* for the in coming*Maghrib*prayer. It is wise for everyone to take a short break preparing for the prayer and to the remembrance of *Allah*...” It was observed that people from outside of Kelantan were a little confused with the announcement, especially for those who have just arrived.

Changes from the old regulations to the present ones did not come into place without argument. Respondent (MP-02) said; “... It was not easy when imposed for the first time in 1990. It is not a problem now. We inform tourists politely. We implement this regulations for *Maghrib* prayer only. As you know, *Maghrib* is very short and we take it as an obligation for them not to be carried away and miss the prayer altogether. ...They (the traders) have to obey this regulation; if any of them are found to be multiple offenders, their license will not be renewed”

His view was supported by respondent (MP-05) who used to be in charge of the Implementation Division of MPKB-BRI; “...Yes, there was a little problematic at first. It got better after sometimes, as all things do. People made a little fuss here and there but I think the situation is ok now...”

The respondent (MP-05) further commented that although the regulation has been implemented, some people are still reluctant to observe their prayers seriously “...Yes, we know there are people who do not perform prayers, do not fast, but we have our limitations. We do not take actions on offence related to prayers, there is no regulation for that. We do take actions on non-fasting offenders because this is under the enforcement of the powers of the *Shariah* court...” His experience also showed that most offences only involved small cases such as not wearing *Hijab*, late renewals of licenses and selling goods outside of their allocated premises.

Further observation showed that *Azan* is dearly respected particularly during *Maghrib* by the big stores such as *MYDIN*<sup>17</sup> and *The Store*<sup>18</sup>. Both were observed to be giving respects as they should. *MYDIN* store, for example, stops business activities when *Azan* was aired through loud speakers. Cashiers at the checkout counters were observed to temporary stop working and only continue with their work after they recite *AzanDo’a*. Prior to the *Azan* an announcement was made, clearly heard from the loud speakers; “... Muslim brothers and sisters, the *Azans* should be aired shortly for ‘*Asr*’ prayer for zone one of Kota Bharu and similar area of zone times. All counters are now temporarily closed during the

<sup>13</sup> When the Islamic party took control of Kelantan among the important changes in the administration was to put in guidelines on official programmes. The programmes should be stopped prior to the time for prayers or should be started after finishing prayers. See, Dinsman (2000) *SepuluhTahunMembangunBersama Islam-Kelantan di BawahPimpinanUlamak*, Kota Bharu: PusatKajianStrategik, p 57

<sup>14</sup> For explanation on the *SolatHajat* in the Kelantan administration see C.S. Othman. (2000) *SepuluhTahunMembangunBersama Islam-Kelantan di BawahPimpinanUlamak*, Kota Bharu: PusatKajianStrategik, pp 65-72

<sup>15</sup> NikAbdulAziz NikMat. (1995) *Kelantan UniversitiPolitik Terbuka*, NilamPuri: Maahad al-Dakwahwa-al Imamah, pp 17-20 and foot note 17 in page 229.

<sup>16</sup> C.S. Othman. (2004) *KotaBharu Bandar Raya Islam*, KotaBharu: MajlisPerbandaranKotaBharu, p 16

<sup>17</sup> *MYDIN* currently has 40 outlets nationwide inclusive of two Hypermarkets, 24 Emporiums, one Superstore, seven Mini Markets and six Convenient Stores. The stores are located all over the KlangValley, Terengganu, Kota Bharu, Seremban, Nilai, Johor, Alor Setar, Melaka, Penang, Pahang and Kelantan. The two Hypermarkets are located at USJ, Subang Jaya and Kuala Terengganu. See <http://www.mydin.com.my/mydin/catalog/exchange/c22.html> (4/12/2008)

<sup>18</sup> The Store Corporation *Berhad* is a leading operator of supermarkets, departmental stores and hypermarkets in the country. It is the only Malaysian retailer with outlets established in every state of the Peninsular Malaysia, with 53 supermarkets & departmental stores operating in the name of ‘The Store’ under the legal entity The Store (Malaysia) *Sdn. Bhd.* The Store Group also operates hypermarkets through its wholly-owned subsidiary Pacific Hypermarket & Departmental Store *Sdn. Bhd.* See <http://www.tstore.com.my/profiles.htm> and <http://www.tstore.com.my/bod.htm> (4/12/2008)

*Azan...*” Shortly after the *Azan* has finished there was another announcement telling the customers that counter operations are resumed. It was observed that supermarket such as *The Store* in this city went a bit further by broadcasting the recital of the *Qur’an* and Islamic songs from Malaysian *Nashid* group before and after the *Azan*.

There is also a clear segregation of sexes for many activities including providing separate check-out counters for ladies and men at supermarkets. It is noted that in big stores checkout counters for women are labelled *Perempuan* (Ladies) or *Lelaki* (men) with the signage of man and woman wearing *Songkok* i.e., velvet cap and *Tudung* i.e., Muslim woman head cover, respectively. However the regulation only applies during busy hours where hundreds of people are queuing to make payment. Outside peak hours customers can still pay at any counter they feel convenient.

## CONCLUSION

The efforts of the State Government to adhere to and promote Islamic values in this state are seen as dominant factors that allow for a conducive and continuous process of Islamization. The concept of ‘Developing with Islam’ has been relentlessly promoted in the past 18 years and is an important factor that gives the Islamic image to this state.

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