

Factors Contributing to Religious Sensitivity Issues: Malaysian Religious Leaders' Perspective

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i3/20955>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i3/20955

Published Date: 21 March 2024

Abstract

The increasing instances of concerns related to religious sensitivity across diverse ethnic groups are causing significant unease in Malaysia. The possibility of conflicts or challenges to the sanctity of religion, particularly Islam, has the potential to escalate into disputes, posing a matter of considerable concern. Therefore, it is essential in identifying the factors in handling issues related to religious sensitivities. This paper aims to explore the multifaceted factors contributing to the emergence of religious sensitivity issues by conducting interviews with religious leaders in Malaysia actively involved in interfaith dialogue activities. The study identifies five main factors influencing religious sensitivity issues, including misunderstandings of other religions, social media manipulation, emotional approaches, the attitude of non-Muslims towards Muslims' rights, and a demeaning attitude towards various religions. Despite these challenges, the research unveils a prevailing atmosphere of harmony and positive interaction within Malaysia's diverse communities. This is characterized by mutual respect, mutual assistance, and a notable level of tolerance among followers of different religions. These findings suggest that areas for improvement in fostering ethical interaction must be further explored in enhancing understanding and empathy among religious communities.

Keyword: Religious Sensitivity, Religious Leaders, Malaysia, Religious Harmony

Introduction

In the year 2020, Malaysia witnessed a shift in its Global Peace Index (GPI) ranking, a comprehensive international evaluation conducted by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) that assesses security, order, and conflict dynamics. The country's position descended from 16th to 20th among 163 nations, with a numerical adjustment from 1,529 to 1,525. This decline serves as an indirect indicator, shedding light on the fragility present within Malaysia's unity ecosystem, as elucidated in the Global Peace Index Report spanning from 2015 to 2020.

An exploration into the nation's endeavors to grapple with religious and racial conflicts reveals the existence of 28 hotspots distributed across Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Kedah, and Johor, where frequent clashes are observed. The epicenter of these conflicts, particularly within Kuala Lumpur's Sentul district—specifically Segambut, Sentul Pasar, North and South Jinjang—witnessed a staggering 909 incidents involving 306 individuals throughout the entirety of 2006. In a single month, October 2007, 44 confrontations between Malay-Indians were recorded. Notable flashpoints within Selangor include Klang, Petaling Jaya, Gombak, Shah Alam, Sepang, Kuala Selangor, Banting, Hulu Selangor, and Sabak Bernam (Yusuff, 2015).

The escalating instances of religious sensitivity issues, spanning across diverse ethnicities, raise significant concerns, as conflicts or challenges to the sanctity of religion, particularly Islam, have the potential to escalate into disputes. Despite Article 3 of the Malaysian Constitution designating Islam as the state religion and allowing followers of other religions to practice freely, and Article 11 affirming the right of every citizen to profess and practice their religion, inter-religious conflicts persist. This persistence is irrespective of the religious affiliations of the individuals involved.

Previous scholarly investigations accentuate the profound impact of religious conflicts on sensitivities. Khoo (2007) posits that religion continues to play a pivotal role in influencing inter-ethnic relations. Religious matters remain a sensitive facet of Malaysian life, with issues such as the Islamic State, hudud law, the use of the name Allah in the Malay Bible, halal markings, and body seizures significantly shaping the perspective of the Chinese community (Ramli, 2018; Ashaari, 2019). Azam (2000) further substantiates this argument by underscoring the role of non-Muslim activists who actively question and stimulate discussions on Islamic conversion among non-bumiputera individuals (Yasin & Adam, 2017). Considering these complexities, this paper seeks to delve into the multifaceted factors contributing to issues of religious sensitivity by examining the perspectives of religious leaders.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design using a case study approach. Qualitative research commonly adopts approaches such as ethnography, case studies, phenomenology, and the like. The case study approach was chosen to examine issues of religious sensitivity due to the diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds of the Malaysian population. The case study in this research involves an investigation into religious sensitivity issues as perceived by religious leaders in Selangor. The study informants consist of religious leaders actively engaged in interfaith dialogue activities, including Muslim, Christian, and Hindu leaders.

The study utilizes a semi-structured interview technique to gather information. This method offers flexibility in considering the input and responses provided by each informant. The interview process is recorded and later transcribed. Through the transcriptions, the researcher conducts an analysis to identify the main themes emerging from the interviews. Once the themes are identified, the researcher extracts themes and sub-themes for analytical purposes. This iterative process is repeated until the filtering of information from the transcriptions is completed.

Factors Contributing to Religious Sensitivity Issues According to Religious Leaders

Various factors can contribute to the emergence of religious sensitivity issues apart from differences between the religions themselves. The interview results outline that these religious sensitivity issues exist in Malaysian society due to several factors, including

misunderstandings towards followers of other religions, the non-Muslim community's attitudes towards the special status of Islam and Malays in the Constitution, the dissemination of inaccurate information on social media, and attitudes that ridicule other religions.

Misunderstanding of other religions

The issue of religious sensitivity arises from a misunderstanding of other religions. This problem can be associated with either the perception of followers of their own religion or their attitudes towards other religions. It depends on their exposure to other religions and how their thoughts are shaped from an early age. Informant 1 sees that the teachings of Islam stating that other religions are polytheistic and inferior to Islam contribute to the misunderstanding of Islamic society towards other religions. The following is his statement, *In Islam, there is a teaching that the practices and beliefs of all other religions, especially Hinduism, are polytheistic and of a lower status. This is taught from childhood. Therefore, the perception of other religions is skewed. (Informant 1)*

Furthermore, the informant also believes that the attitude of not being interested or not studying other religions due to concerns about one's own faith is a factor in the emergence of religious sensitivity issues. Informant 2 states, *Islamic residents view lightly or do not take the initiative to learn about the religion or beliefs of other residents because it is considered a form of spiritual deviation in themselves. (Informant 2)*

Based on both of these responses, it can be concluded that an educational approach is crucial for the harmony of the lives of people of different religions. The most suitable knowledge in the context of religious harmony is the knowledge of comparative religion. Among the importance of this knowledge, as listed by researchers, is to raise awareness of beliefs and religions other than strengthening one's own beliefs and religion (Senin, 2019). Society will have respect for the beliefs and religions of others, show tolerance, and prevent any form of violence against others on humanitarian grounds (Muthaliff et al., 2016; Rahman, 2016). The harmonious interaction among members of society further contributes to socio-religious harmony in the community (Meerangi et al., 2018; Rahman, 2020).

It is apparent that one of the primary contributors to religious sensitivity issues is the prevalence of misunderstandings among individuals pertaining to followers of different faiths. This phenomenon is intricately linked to the perceptions and attitudes individuals hold towards religions other than their own. The interview findings underscore that these perceptions are shaped by early exposure to teachings about other religions, contributing to a biased perspective.

Attitudes of the non-Muslim community towards the special privileges of Islam and Malays

The complexity of issues surrounding religious sensitivity in Malaysia extends to the dissatisfaction expressed by the non-Muslim community regarding the special privileges afforded to Islam and Malays as stipulated in the Malaysian Constitution. These privileges, perceived by some as exclusive, are viewed as impediments to the religious freedom of other communities within the nation. The nuanced debate revolves around the question of the country's status — whether it should be defined as a secular or Islamic state — a topic that remains a source of controversy and contention.

The constitutional provisions outlining special privileges for Islam and Malays have become focal points of discussion, sparking concerns about their implications for the overall religious landscape and societal harmony. Non-Muslim communities express discontent, contending

that these privileges may compromise the principle of equal religious freedom for all citizens. This sentiment further fuels debates regarding the delicate balance between safeguarding the rights of the majority and upholding the rights of minority religious groups.

The contentious issue of whether Malaysia is construed as a secular or Islamic state adds another layer of complexity to the discourse. The interpretation of Article 3 in the Malaysian Constitution, which designates Islam as the religion of the Federation, is subject to varying perspectives. While some argue for a more secular interpretation that guarantees equal rights for all religions, others advocate for a more Islamic-centric approach in governance. This ongoing debate contributes to the overarching theme of religious sensitivity, as it reflects divergent views on the role of religion in shaping the nation's identity and governance.

As Malaysia grapples with these intricate issues, finding a middle ground that respects the constitutional framework, ensures religious freedom for all, and fosters a sense of inclusivity is paramount. Addressing these concerns through open dialogue, legal frameworks that safeguard the rights of all communities, and a commitment to pluralism is essential for fostering understanding and harmony among the diverse religious communities that constitute the rich tapestry of Malaysian society. According to Informant 2,

The status of religious freedom in Malaysia is a controversial issue. Questions, including whether Malaysia is an Islamic state or a secular state, remain unresolved. (Informant 2)

This is because Article 3 of the Malaysian Constitution is often understood literally by the general public. However, in legal terms, it is interpreted in various ways. For example, studies by Muslim & Hidayat (2012) state that the purpose of making Islam the religion of the Federation is for formal ceremonies only, such as allowing prayers to be performed properly, the inauguration ceremony of the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong, setting the date for fasting, and so on. This provision also allows for the implementation of Islamic values but not in a fully enforceable manner. In addition to Islam as the religion of the Federation, Islam is also used as a guide to determine whether a person is Malay or not.

The position of Islam is also associated with the special privileges of Malays in Malaysia, where their relationship is rooted in historical factors. It cannot be denied that historically, the administrative system in Malaysia is recognized as inheriting the politics of the Malay Sultanate, fundamentally based on Islam. Therefore, it is justified for Islam to be elevated as the religion of the Federation considering that the Constitution also elevates the Malay Sultanate. In fact, it is a common practice in any country in the world that the official religion of the country follows the religion of its monarch or leader, as seen in England and Thailand (Muslim & Hidayat, 2012).

Social Media Manipulation

The advancement of technology today showcases the widespread use of social media in society. Besides serving as a means of information acquisition, social media is also found to be a factor in the occurrence of problems related to religious sensitivity issues. This is because the open nature of social media allows anyone to upload content according to their preferences. Consequently, the content on social media will be understood based on individual perceptions, even if it may not align with the intended purpose of the content. This is found to contribute to misunderstandings between parties, as explained by the following informant,

What is a problem now in Malaysia in the post-modern, post-digital era, often the sermons in mosques that should not be released to the public, will be leaked... But when it is released, it

is viralized by certain parties, certainly from a surface perspective, such sermons appear guilty. (Informant 3)

This scenario accentuates the pressing need for recalibrating communication channels among individuals from diverse religious backgrounds. Effective communication, essential for fostering harmony among religions, necessitates a nuanced understanding of the backgrounds and perspectives of all involved parties. This approach ensures that communication aligns with the predetermined objectives and does not inadvertently deviate, thereby minimizing the potential for misunderstanding.

The recommended approach to navigate these challenges is through wisdom and advice, as advocated by Islamic teachings (Meerangi et al., 2020). Wisdom in communication entails a judicious consideration of the context, tone, and intended impact of the message, fostering an environment conducive to understanding and cooperation. Additionally, the relationship between social media usage and responsible discretion is a critical aspect of this discourse. Promoting calls for harmony on social media platforms, coupled with heightened awareness among users, can contribute to creating an online environment that fosters mutual understanding. This involves advocating for the wise selection of information and news, steering society away from provocative content, and harnessing social media as a constructive tool for building and maintaining harmony among followers of different religions.

Social media platforms, being open and easily accessible, play a pivotal role in exacerbating religious sensitivity issues. The rapid dissemination of information, often without proper verification, contributes to the spread of inaccuracies and misconceptions. Furthermore, the adoption of attitudes that ridicule and belittle other religions is identified as a catalyst for religious sensitivity issues. The interviewees emphasize instances where individuals, particularly in Malaysia, mock and make light of religious practices, not only of religions other than their own but also within their own faith community. This behavior, which goes against the principles of respect and tolerance, contributes to a climate of heightened sensitivities, and can lead to conflicts and disputes.

Emotional Approach in Religious Sensitivity Issues

The occurrence of conflicts stemming from religious differences is intricately tied to the community's perspective on religion. It is imperative to recognize that the understanding of religion ought to be grounded in sound and rational judgment, transcending mere reliance on emotions and sentiments. The informant sheds light on a significant aspect of this dynamic, emphasizing that individuals often embrace religion driven by emotions rather than intellectual discernment.

Because they adopt religion through emotions, not through intellect. (Informant 3)

The choice to adopt religion through emotional impulses, as opposed to intellectual deliberation, underscores a complex interplay between individual psychology and religious belief systems. Given that religion significantly shapes the lifestyle and cognitive processes of its adherents, the connection between religion and human emotions becomes inherently intertwined. The emotive aspect of religious adherence can contribute to a deep sense of personal connection and identification with one's faith.

Furthermore, religion serves a pivotal role in fostering a sense of solidarity among its followers. Beyond individual beliefs, it becomes a unifying force that binds a community together. This solidarity is not solely a matter of shared intellectual doctrines but extends to an emotional and communal experience. Psychologically, individuals sharing the same

religious beliefs are likely to develop a profound sense of unity, grounded in their shared faith and belief systems.

In essence, the nexus between religion, emotions, and community solidarity is a nuanced interplay that shapes the dynamics of religious interactions. Recognizing the psychological underpinnings of religious adherence is crucial for fostering understanding and dialogue, as it allows for a more holistic comprehension of the multifaceted nature of religious identity and its impact on individuals and communities. This awareness can, in turn, contribute to the development of strategies for promoting interfaith harmony and cooperation (Ismail, 2018).

Disparaging Attitudes Towards Other Religions

While differences in religious beliefs are inherent in societal diversity, the perilous path to conflicts emerges when individuals adopt an attitude of belittling others, presuming that their own beliefs are superior. This mindset becomes a primary catalyst for disputes surrounding sensitive religious issues. This is acknowledged by Informant 1, *Often in Malaysia, they don't understand, but they will make fun of it; not other religions, including our religion, including the Hindus. So that is why, we feel very sensitive and we feel that is not the right thing to do. (Informant 1)*

Informant 1 sheds light on this issue by noting that, particularly in Malaysia, individuals may not comprehend other religions, yet they mock them, including their own religion and that of the Hindus. This attitude, as expressed by the informant, induces a heightened sensitivity and a realization that such behavior is inappropriate.

Such actions are explicitly prohibited in the Quran, as Allah mentions, *“And do not insult those they invoke other than Allah, lest they insult Allah in enmity without knowledge. Thus We have made pleasing to every community their deeds. Then to their Lord is their return, and He will inform them about what they used to do.” (Surah al-An’am 6:108)* This scriptural prohibition serves as a clear directive against insulting and ridiculing the beliefs of others. The Quran emphasizes the importance of avoiding such behavior, highlighting the potential consequences: the reciprocal insult of Allah and the generation of enmity without understanding. The verse also emphasizes the diversity of good deeds in every community, reinforcing the idea that each community is shaped by its own unique practices and beliefs. The rationale behind this prohibition is grounded in the understanding that insulting and reviling others brings no benefit. On the contrary, it is likely to provoke extreme and serious reactions, escalating tensions and contributing to a hostile environment. The guidance extends to every follower of a religion, emphasizing the importance of refraining from making demands or objections concerning the practices, symbols, and beliefs of other religions (Arfah, 2020; Shafiq, 2007). This principle, underscores the need for mutual respect and tolerance in the realm of religious diversity, fostering an atmosphere where individuals can coexist harmoniously despite their differing beliefs.

In summary, the multifaceted nature of religious sensitivity issues in Malaysia is deeply rooted in misunderstandings, perceptions towards constitutional privileges, social media dynamics, and attitudes that undermine the sanctity of religious beliefs. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive and nuanced approach that encompasses education, interfaith dialogue, media literacy, and fostering a culture of mutual respect and understanding among Malaysia's diverse religious communities.

Conclusion

The research outcomes underscore a comprehensive array of factors that contribute to the emergence of religious sensitivity issues, encompassing misunderstandings, social media manipulation, emotional approaches, and the demeaning attitude towards various religions. It is crucial to recognize the potential ramifications if religious conflicts are not addressed effectively. Left unattended, these conflicts have the potential to disrupt the harmony and unity of society, fostering negative perceptions towards authoritative bodies.

Despite the challenges posed by these sensitivity issues, the study reveals a prevailing atmosphere of harmony and positive interaction within Malaysia's diverse communities. This is characterized by mutual respect, a spirit of mutual assistance, and a notable level of tolerance among followers of different religions. It highlights the resilience of societal bonds and the ability of communities to coexist harmoniously despite the multifaceted religious landscape.

Nevertheless, the study also identifies areas for improvement, particularly in fostering ethical interaction among religious followers. Enhancing understanding and empathy between different religious communities is essential for cultivating a more inclusive and tolerant society. Moreover, the empowerment of collaborative programs is imperative to ensure the sustainability of religious harmony in Malaysia. These programs should focus on promoting interfaith dialogue, facilitating cultural exchanges, and instilling values of tolerance and respect for diversity. Through concerted efforts, Malaysia can continue to build on its foundation of harmony, creating a model for inclusive coexistence that can inspire societies worldwide.

Acknowledgement

The research was funded by the UIS research and Innovation Grant (GPIU) with Project Code 2021/P/GPIK/GPI-008.

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