

Peran Pemerintah untuk Menghadapi Fragmentasi Otoritas Keagamaan dalam Kegiatan Dakwah: Pembelajaran dari Malaysia dan Singapura

The Government's Role for Facing the Fragmentation of Religious Authority in Da'wa Activity: Lessons Learned From Malaysia and Singapore

Fazlul Rahman

Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa Timur, Surabaya, Indonesia
fazlul.rahman.agrotek@upnjatim.ac.id

Abstract

My previous research on Pandalungan Kiai as a mediatized world shows a complicated case of negotiation between Internet and religion. From mediatization perspective, we can see a clear dynamic interplay between Internet and Pandalungan Kiai as each of them try to influence one another. This interplay is actually the nature of a mediatization process which, furthermore, leads to an interesting phenomenon of the rhizomatic fragmentation of religious authority causing many uncontrolled Islamic discourses to emerge. As corollary to that phenomenon, this article questions the role of the state in controlling the religious diversity of its people and the emergence of various Islamic discourses to be able to give a proper response to the fragmentation. This current research dedicated to critically unpack the problem by focusing on the case of Malaysia and Singapore as each share similar socio-cultural life. The data collected through observation and interview with 22 informants consisted of imams, asatizs, scholars, and local civilians in Malaysia and Singapore during my research field work in November and December 2018. This study found that the two countries implemented a strict certification policy for religious leaders to regulate the diversity of religious life. This fact leads this article to conclude the importance of the role of the government in making strict rules for religious leaders to be able to face the various consequences of the rhizomatic fragmentation of religious authority caused by the coming of (new) media in da'wa activities.

Keywords: Media, Ulama, Religious Authority, Malaysia, Singapore

Abstrak

Penelitian sebelumnya yang penulis lakukan tentang Kiai Pandalungan sebagai dunia yang termediatisasi menunjukkan kasus negosiasi yang rumit antara Internet dan agama. Dari perspektif mediatisasi, kita dapat melihat interaksi dinamis yang jelas antara Internet dan Kiai Pandalungan karena masing-masing berusaha untuk mempengaruhi satu sama lain. Proses saling mempengaruhi ini sebenarnya adalah hakikat proses mediatisasi, yang lebih jauh memunculkan fenomena menarik berupa fragmentasi rizomatik otoritas keagamaan yang menyebabkan banyak wacana keislaman yang tidak terkendali semakin bermunculan. Sebagai akibat wajar dari fenomena tersebut, artikel ini mempertanyakan peran negara dalam mengontrol keragaman agama masyarakatnya dan munculnya berbagai wacana Islam untuk dapat memberikan respon yang tepat atas fragmentasi tersebut. Penelitian saat ini didedikasikan untuk membongkar masalah secara kritis dengan berfokus pada kasus Malaysia dan Singapura karena masing-masing memiliki kehidupan sosial budaya yang serupa. Data yang dikumpulkan melalui observasi dan wawancara dengan 22 informan terdiri dari para imam, asatiz, ulama, dan warga sipil lokal di Malaysia dan Singapura selama penelitian lapangan pada bulan November dan Desember 2018. Studi ini menemukan bahwa kedua negara menerapkan kebijakan sertifikasi yang ketat untuk pemimpin agama demi mengatur keragaman kehidupan beragama. Fakta ini mengantarkan artikel ini untuk menyimpulkan pentingnya peran pemerintah dalam membuat aturan yang tegas bagi para pemuka agama agar mampu menghadapi berbagai konsekuensi dari fragmentasi rizomatik otoritas keagamaan akibat hadirnya media (baru) dalam kegiatan dakwah di masyarakat.

Kata kunci: Media, Ulama, Otoritas Keagamaan, Malaysia, dan Singapura

Introduction

My previous research on *Pandalungan Kiai* as a mediatized world shows a complicated case of negotiation between Internet and religion. The investigation on its meta-process reveals that *kiais* (Muslim local religious leaders) and the Internet are two important elements of the current Indonesian society, each has its own particular power. Unlike the Internet, which is considered as a new comer in Indonesia's social life, the existence of the *kiais* is deeply rooted in the history of Indonesian socio-cultural life. However, this newcomer, to some extent, creates challenges inside the *kiais'* lives and in their *pesantren*. At this point it is interesting to find how the *kiais* 'spiritualize' the media (Campbell, 2005) in the sense that they see it not solely as a communication tool, but it is God's mercy for the current society and use it for their religious purposes like to get blessings from God (as in the case of using it for *tabarrukan*). At the same time, we clearly see how the Internet changed the hierarchical nature of *kiai*-ness that, at the ends, modifies the way society interact with and see the *kiai'* religious authority. Here we can see the dynamic interplay between Internet and *Pandalungan Kiai* as each of them try to influence one another. This interplay is actually the nature of a mediatization process which, furthermore, gives birth to an interesting phenomenon of the contestation among two different logics (the logic of media and of *kiai*-ness) for authority.

In a broader social context, contestation can be interpreted as a clash of ideas and values to win influence in society by displaying different intellectual tendencies. (Azra, 2016) The contestation occurs in a situation of disagreement (Suparno, Basuki Agus, 2010). It, at the end, raises a clash of arguments. Accordingly, there are competing exchanges of values, facts and policies on the discourse that is conveyed (David L Vancil, 1993). The creation of meaning for a discourse does not arise from a single power, but there are other powers that also scramble to control the discourse. A discourse is the result of the expression and manipulation of different powers within the social structure which, in

practical level, contest each other (Ruth Wodak, 2001). A discourse contestation can be conveyed through words in a mass media, including social media. Inside those words, there is an obsession to influence and gain power (Bayat, 2011). However, many people accept those words as truth and this is where the discourse on those words works (Jayanto, Dian Dwi, 2019).

The contestation of Islamic discourse, for example, mainly concerns different understandings of secularism, pluralism, liberalism and democracy which are linked to practice and religious theory (Kersten, 2015). The debate regarding these matters occurred among Muslim intellectuals and institutions, even involving non-Muslim circles. That is because the issue of pluralism, for example, has consequences for religious freedom, tolerance and subsequently also human rights (HAM). So that non-Muslims also have an interest in these subjects. Islamic contestation has recently been carried out in order to gain influence on society, on the ideas and values struggled by the contesting parties.

A discourse contestation generally shows problems from various perspectives that differ in four ways. First, does each actor use the word for the same meaning and what is in their understanding. Second, include those who are for and who are against. Third, identification of the causes of controversy which is useful for deepening and sharpening motives. Fourth, what are the characteristics and history of beliefs in considering the value of the contested discourses (David L Vancil, 1993).

In the context of this research, contestation as a result of the fragmentation of religious authority, both in Malaysia and in Singapore is a necessity. Democratic governments in those two countries must have a strategy so that differences do not escalate and become a source of conflicts that later break out, as happened in Arab countries, which on several occasions, shows the bloodshed due to differences in views in religion. The policies and strategies of the government in the two countries are interesting to be investigated as an academic contribution into the field of media, religion and government policies.

The Contestation of Islamic Discourses on Social Media

A number of literature discusses the existence of Islamic social media in the internet-based new media era. In which, there is also competition for Islamic discourse on social media in particular. Gary R. Bunt's "Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments" discussed this phenomenon (Bunt, 2003). The book describes how the internet was used by Muslim groups or communities after the September 11, 2001 tragedy that destroyed the World Trade Center, United States. Each Muslim community uses internet-based social media to explain the meaning of jihad and teach the law of a practice. The terrorists, who claim to be Muslim, also use social media to raise the spirits of jihadists around the world.

In his "iMuslim," Bunt (Bunt, 2009) ensures that the internet has created an Islamic environment that can be accessed by all Muslims in the world without any restrictions, both country and culture. The existence of the internet has had real implications for the life of Muslim community. Islamic social media channels of communities affiliated with movements or views of foreign currents, particularly in the Arabian peninsula, are increasingly showing their identity to this day.

In his latest "Hashtag Islam," Bunt explains how social media has become an arena for exchanging information that cannot be separated from Muslims.(Bunt, 2018) Nowadays, the Internet has become a means of Islamic learning and spreading doctrine. This doctrine relates to Islamic groups or communities, which have different religious streams or applications. Social media is one of the channels for disseminating information about Islamic doctrine and teaching in accordance with the particular dogmas that the community admits.

Apart from becoming a space for learning religion, social media has also become a space for movement. Activism has a large space on social media and even penetrate the space and time of its users. With its coming, *da'wah* activities are more openly accessed. What is more, social media also provides promising economic opportunities. That refers to participatory culture that can be optimized through social media, so that many Internet users can benefit from incoming advertisements.

Social media has its own way of communicating through available symbols or emoticons. Thus, the delivery of Islamic messages can be more flexible and accepted by the community according to their trends. In social media, there are features such as "retweet", "like", "share", "follow", "pin", even placement of hashtags. All of these have their own interesting meanings to be used as material for in-depth analysis. In social media, there are new ways of communicating, so there needs to be a development in mapping and discourse application (Tannen & Trester, 2013).

One of some important works in that field have been conducted by Bowier in his article "What is a discourse approach to Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other social media: connecting with other academic fields ?" The article examines the intricacies of the meaning of features on a number of social media platforms, including twitter, facebook and instagram, from a multicultural perspective (Bouvier, 2015). The study confirms that the identity of a social media user can be seen from the way he or she communicates on social media. The identity in question can be described in more detailed aspects, such as cultural background, and includes the religious identity of the person concerned and his religious spirit.

The existence of different arguments on the same issue or topic is generally due to differences in sources of knowledge. The existence of technology that makes it easy to convey messages makes Islamic narrative contestation more dynamic and can be witnessed directly by the public through social media. In fact, geographic differences between one community and other are no more a barrier to the flow of information (McLuhan & Powers, 1992).

Each community has its own authority to explain how the implementation of Islam is applied in everyday life. Through their respective social media, those who are considered as leaders in the community provide Islamic learning, make movements to expand the community's wings, and explore economic potential. Only in that way, each community survives and shows its existence in a cyber environment (Bunt, 2018). Even more than that, Islam as religion with a large follower in the world actually cannot be separated from the virtual world. Religious studies, fatwas, some calls for kindness, even more specifically the call for jihad, can be submitted online (Christopher Helland, 2000). Interestingly, this phenomenon has become increasingly visible in recent everyday life.

In the current era, religious practice is spreading through social media. Not only as a medium of preaching and disseminating information, but also for branding or building a person's Islamic image. This phenomenon has led to the emergence of many Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and social

media accounts with Islamic inspiration. What is interesting is that the discourse carried out by each social media account can be different from one another. Although, the branding and content carried are both Islamic. Therefore, each group is free to carry its flag and thoughts on social media and finally fight one another in the arena. At this point, this article argues that the government should be the referee at the center of the social media stage. So the differences do not escalate into conflict and disrupt national stability.

This is the case in Singapore and Malaysia where the government is present to act as a referee in the midst of a contestation on Islamic discourse, that I see, leads to the emerging contestation of the state's religious authority vis a vis religious leaders'. Before we discuss that particular contestation, in the following sub section, I would like to discuss the construction of the state's religious authority of each country.

The Dynamics of Religious Authority in Singapore and Malaysia

As a matter of fact, in Malaysia, His Majesty the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, who elected by rotations of the existing sultans every five years, holds the Supreme Head of Malaysia that practices Parliamentary Democracy with a constitutional monarch. The Federal Constitution administratively underlines the separation of governing powers among the Executive, Judicial and Legislative Authorities both in the Federal and State level. There are 13 states (*negeri*) including the 3 federal territories (*wilayah persekutuan*) in the country; Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, and Labuan. Out of the 13 states, 9 of them (Johor Bahru, Kedah, Kelantan, Pahang, Perak, Selangor, Terengganu, Perlis, Negeri Sembilan) are hereditary monarchies with the sultan as their leader and as the head of Islam and the other 4 (Malacca, Penang, Sabah, Serawak) have no sultan, so the head of Islam in those states is the Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

In dealing with Islamic religious life affairs, both the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and the sultans helped by the States Islamic Religious Councils. In the federal level, Malaysia has JAKIM (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia) (Eng. Islamic Development Department of Malaysia) as a leading agency of Islamic religious affairs management, as well as the secretariat to the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Malaysia (MKI) that has three main functions:

1. Drafting and Standardization of Islamic Law
2. Coordination of Islamic Administration
3. Coordination and Development of Islamic Education (islam.gov.my)

In the context of religious authority, administratively, JAKIM given no authority by the constitution to issue regulation related to religious life in Malaysia. It acts more as kind of a secretariat to execute the uniform and standardized laws (Mohamed Azam Adil, personal communication, December 21, 2019).

One interesting case found in the field related to the hierarchy of religious authority in Malaysia is the fact that each state has the ultimate power to manage and regulate its own religious lives. Religious authority of a sultan is valid only inside his own state not outside it, based on the consideration from his own state religious affairs council. So, any execution of any decision can only be done inside particular sultan's state. This implies the sultan of one state cannot interfere violation

of regulation happened out of his own states. What is more, there is no such a grand mufti of a Sharia Supreme Court that can standardize regulations and has valid authority to issue national regulation and to decide constitutional decision on any religious cases across the country. What is more, there are some different regulations between one state and another. Like the case of fatwa on smoking which is *haram* in Selangor and *makruh* in Perak. (Mohamed Azam Adil, personal communication, December 21, 2019) At this point, from the FGD with the ISTAC's students, they see those different fatwas in different states are not a portrait of the Federal's inconsistency or its limitation to govern different states, but more as a contextualization of law to fit particular state's circumstances. The fatwas, however, the students feel are not so bounding, people still have freedom whether to follow or not based on their own reasoning. Except the law related to marriage. Means that if someone wants to get married, he/she should obey the marriage's rules of the state where he stays.

Another important fact, in this context of Islamic regulation in Malaysia, is the position of non-Muslim in front of Islamic law. Despite the continuous debates whether Malaysia is an Islamic state or secular (M. A. M. Adil, 2015), the fact that Islam is the official religion of Malaysia. Other than political economics implications (Centre for Islamic Development Management Studies (ISDEV) Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), 11800 Pulau Pinang et al., 2016), its consequences can be clearly seen from the fact that the non-Muslim are not supposed to interfere in the matters pertaining to Islam. Any rule in the name of the sharia and sharia law is supposed to be for Muslim only. Sharia law cannot be imposed to non-Muslim (Osman Bakar, personal communication, December 19, 2018). So, if there is non-Muslim affected by the law of Islam that will lead to a more complicated legal conformation.

This friction between the state and religion is vulnerable to community disputes. Not only among Muslim and non-Muslim community, but also among Muslim themselves. From human right's perspective, for example, Mohammad sees a clear contestation between conservative and liberal Muslim on the implementation of Syariah law and its further impact on the future Malaysian politic realm (Mohamad, 2017). The Jabatan Agama Islam, at this point, is responsible to monitor the sensitivities of people who talk about religion. (Thameem Ushama, personal communication, December 19, 2018) That is why, the "*tauliah*" law which is regulated under Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997 (Reporters, 2017), despite of some critics toward its vague definition of the term and motives, I see it as a good constitutional initiative to regulate and maintain inter-religious harmony in Malaysia.

Compared to Malaysia, that can be categorized as not a secular state nor is truly theocratic state (D. M. A. M. Adil, 2018). Singapore can be categorized as secular state, but not really secularized society (Vivienne Wee, 2005) with more diverse religious beliefs and practices. A research on "Global Religious Diversity" by Pew Research Center in 2014, points out that Singapore is the highest religiously diverse country in the world. However, with only 14% of total population, Muslims in Singapore have had to live according to their national context of multi-racial (Chua et al., 2005), multi-cultural (Noor & Leong, 2013), multi-religious society and "religion friendly"-secular city (Musa, 2016; Neo, 2016). All those characteristics of their country, furthermore, encourage Muslims to live their religion in a more "Singaporean way" of religiosity in many religious practices. The

Majelis Ugama Islam Singapore (MUIS) at this context, holds mandatory and responsibility as well as authority to regulate and manage Muslims in Singapore to be able to fulfill their religious obligations and their obligations as Singaporean proportionally (Steiner, 2011). Here, this research is not intended to delve into issues related to MUIS' appropriation to Government's secular management of religious life (Abdullah, 2013), nor how MUIS together with Government reconstruct a conception of the ideal Muslim who live in a modern world, a secular state and plural society (Tan, 2008) and nor other similar researchers discussing the contestation for religious authority among MUIS and the government in different aspects of Singaporean life. Instead, this research is more interested in seeing how people perceive religious life in Singapore which is a real implication of the dynamic contestation for religious authority between MUIS and the government.

To begin with, it is interesting to find a frank statement says that together with the fact that Singapore is a multi-religious country with a constitutional guarantee to have religious freedom (article 15 of Constitution of the Republic of Singapore), Islam is the most regulated religion in it. The two issues: the "upgrading Islam" through the *Asatizah* Recognition Scheme that regulates every religious teacher have to be registered; and the issue of an *imam* who made alleged "incendiary" supplication against Christians and Jews which is out of assigned Friday *khutbah* text provided by MUIS, imply the distrust of the Muslim religious elites and threaten their autonomy which further creates a crisis of religious authority in the country (Nasir, 2017).

Despite the above scathing critique, the *imams* I interviewed see the strict government's regulation related to *Imam* and religious teacher more in a positive way. One of the *imam* said:

Di sini bebas. Jadi ya salah besarlah kalau orang memandang "Ah, di Singapore tidak ada kebebasan." Tidak. Bebas, tapi bebas yang teratur. Kita (Umat Islam) di sini event apa yang berkaitan dengan Islam, silakan. Kita maulid, mau apa. Enggak jadi masalah. Tapi itu tadi, dalam kita membuat satu program ya pastikan program itu tidak membuat satu keresahan, tidak mengganggu otoritas setempat... Keagamaan bebas di sini semuanya. Mau khutbah, khutbah. Khutbah pun tadi diberikan kebebasan tapi, ya itu tadi, bukan sebeb-bebasnya tanpa mengacu pada panduan. Tetap terpandu.

Jadi, di sini semua khutbah harus menggunakan teks yang sudah dikeluarkan oleh MUIS, pihak otoritas. Bukan berarti harus disampaikan sesuai dengan itu, tapi kalau sekiranya ada yang perlu ditambah, tambah silakan, tapi jangan sampai keluar daripada konteks yang sudah ada. Itu saja. Ada penambahan sedikit mungkin dari kita yang kita sesuaikan dengan keadaan saat ini, selagi masih dalam koridor terpandu itu. Yang jelas jangan keluar konteks

Dan pengalaman saya setelah saya di sini, mungkin orang lain memandang "Ah, ini enggak bebas." Kan begitulah. Tapi sesungguhnya dalam ini kebajikannya sangat banyak.

Ketika keagamaan itu diatur dengan begitu rapi, dengan tertib, dan juga dengan kuasa undang-undang tadi, itu sangat baik.

Dalam hal keagamaan. Pemahaman agama. Walaupun berbeza-beza, tapi keagamaan itu terpinpin. Keagamaan itu menjadi terpinpin. Misalkan dalam kita memprogram masyarakat kita. Jadi, ada

keseragaman. Jadi, kepehaman agama misalkan tentang keluarga itu bisa seragam, karena seluruh masjid mengisinya itu. Tentang itu, dan itu baik. Dan khutbah pun tentang itu juga. Jadi, informasi yang didapat oleh masyarakat itu satu. Tidak terpecah dan juga tak simpang-siur(Rahmani, personal communication, December 4, 2018)

[It's free here. So yes it is a big mistake if people see "Ah, in Singapore there is no freedom (of religion)." It is there, but it is kind of a regular freedom. We (Muslims) here allowed to make any events related to Islam. Like *maulid*, or any other events you want. No problem. But like I said, we have to make sure that the program will not create anxieties and not to disturb the local authorities... we do have freedom of religion here. Like Friday sermons, we are given freedom but, yes, it was not freedom without referring to the guidelines. We need to stay guided]

So, here all Friday sermons must use the text that has been issued by MUIS, the authority. it doesn't mean that it must be delivered as it is, but if there is something need to be added, please add, but don't get out of the existing context. That's it. It is possible for us to add some additional information to put into the current situation context, while still have to be in accordance to the guided corridor. The clear point is not to go out of the context

And according to my experience here, for someone else might looked it "Ah, this isn't free." But actually, it has a lot of benefits. When the religion was arranged so neatly, in an orderly manner, and also supported by the power of the law, it is indeed very positive.

In religious matters. Like in term of religious understanding for example. Although there are different understandings of it, but that supposed to be guided. Like if we want to conduct religious project within our society, which supposed to be under guidance. So, there will be uniformity. By then, religious understanding, such the family matters, can be uniform, because the entire mosque does the same. And that's indeed a good thing. And so the Friday sermon is. So, the information obtained by the community is similar. It is not divided and is also not confusing](Rahmani, personal communication, December 4, 2018)

It is worth to note here that government's strict regulation does not necessarily makes people feeling threaten even though they are still feel that they are under government's surveillance. One of my Indonesian-Singaporean informant admitted that

Kalau ana sendiri sih enggak merasa terkekang. Biasa aja. Dalam artian ya udah apa adanya aja. Ya risikonya kalau misalkan ana salah mesti kena panggil. Itu pun dipanggil enggak serta-merta...Pasti ada klarifikasi. Yang kalau misalkan bukan masalah berat, todak ada masalah. Tapi misalkan masalah berat memang langsung eksekusi. Gak ada diskriminasi. Jadi, overall fine-fine aja enggak ada masalah dengan itu, orang-orang juga ngerasanya fine fine aja(Sholeh, personal communication, December 5, 2018)

[For me, I don't feel constrained. Just, easy. In a sense it's just what it is. Yes, the risk is there if you violate any rules, you then must be summoned. But that usually followed with clarification. Like, for example, if it is not a serious problem, so it will be fine. But if it is a serious problem, there should be an immediate execution. There is no discrimination. So, overall it is just fine, there is no problem with it, people also feel no big deal]

From the above response by the *imam* and local foreign informant, there are at least two interesting points I would like to underline: the uniformity of religious life and the “guided-religious freedom” in Singapore. There are some factors that enable Singaporean Muslim to have such uniformity in their religious lives, first is the small number of Muslims in the area. The other, the most significant is, the strict regulation the country has and the people who do not easily accept religious information from un-certified *asatizah*. This, according to one of my local informant:

Because both of them would be in trouble, by law. And you can't not go wrong, you can not go far in Singapore... In Singapore we don't do that. We don't jailed them. We find them or we tell them this is not the right ustaz. We will make an acknowledgement (that) he is not certified ustaz, when he is not the certified ustaz everybody will not follow him, everybody will follow the law (Leyaket Ali, personal communication, November 9, 2018)

From the above statement, we can clearly see the strong power of the government's authority in defining and creating society's social circumstances, including in religious realms. This, for me, is a clear implication of a “guided-religious freedom” acknowledged by the government and embraced unavoidably by the society. However, this uniformity implies two different implication: positive and negative. It can be positive, if it based on the society's collective understanding toward the common good that can be reach by embracing that uniformity. In contrary, it will create negative implication if that uniformity is actually based on cutting forcibly the parties and understandings that are not a line with government. If that so, the uniformity is actually hiding a time bomb that may explodes anytime it gains its momentum.

Following that reminder, I found there are some silent voices, particularly from the elder generation who experienced Singapore before and after the establishment of MUIS, that do not agree with some of MUIS' regulations or even with the establishment of MUIS itself. It than becomes a clear challenge for MUIS to be able to respond to community's needs, in its different layers. As it is realized by Dr. Yacoob Ibrahim that

MUIS' key priority should be to respond to the changing socio-economic conditions of the Malay/ Muslim community. The need for more prayer spaces, better information on halal outlets, and well-organized haj and korban exercises reflect a community growing in affluence and aspirations. Trust in MUIS would be bolstered by its response to these new needs (Yacoob Ibrahim, 2018)

From the above explanation, I would like to re-emphasize that the conception of religious authority in the two countries is actually very dynamic. This means that the tug of war between the religious authority of the state and the people is a normal consequence. In the following section, this

article will look specifically at the position of the religious authority of the *imams* and *asatizah* under the shadow of the state authority

Imams and Asatizah's Religious Authority: What and How?

To begin with, I would like to recall Joseph Raz's conception on the types usually used to explain the nature of authority; first, explaining supporting conditions to hold authority (answering under what conditions people can obtain or hold authority, under what circumstances a community is likely to accept the authority of some persons, and what these conditions are for, what it is to have authority or to be in authority conditions), second, describing conditions to justify the legitimate authority (answering how they are to be justified), third, describing a system of rules that confer authority to the person (Raz, 2009).

In Malaysia, as previously mentioned, the king, Yang di-Pertuan Agong holds the Supreme Head of Malaysia. There are 14 states (*negeri*) including the 3 federal territories (*wilayah persekutuan*). Among the 13 states, 9 of them are led by the sultans as their leader and as the head of Islam and the other 4 have no sultan, so the head of Islam in those states is the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. Administratively, both the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and the sultans helped by the States Islamic Religious Councils when dealing with religious affairs. In the federal level, there is JAKIM (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia) (Eng. Islamic Development Department of Malaysia) and in the states level, they have Department of Federal Territory Islamic Affairs or known as JAWI (Jabatan Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan). Every states has its own department of religious affair like *negeri* Selangor that has JAIS (Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor) (Eng. Selangor Islamic Religion Department), *negeri* Johor that has JAINJ (Jabatan Agama Islam Negeri Johor) (Eng. Johor Islamic Religion Department), etc.

Before we talk about the position of *imam* in Malaysia, we first have to understand the different kinds of mosques in Malaysia because the appointment of *imams* and the legitimation of their authority are very much based on the mosques where the *imam* appointed at. There are six different kinds of mosque in Malaysia: Masjid Kerajaan or Masjid Negara, Masjid Negeri, Masjid Daerah, Masjid Mukim/ Kariah, *Surau sholat Jum'at*, Surau. The other thing worth to note in the first place is that according to Mutalib:

the term *imam* in Malaysia refers to a position held by a person in a mosque institution. The *imams* in Malaysia do not have the legal authority and power to function in the local community as the government officers, for example, the district officers. The functions of *imams* are only limited to the activities of mosques, like leading the five times daily prayers, delivering sermons during the *Jumah* prayer, reciting the dua' (prayers), administering funeral processes, managing the process of *nikah* (marriage), leading the activity of Quranic recitation (i.e the recitation of Yasin and Tahlil at every Friday night conducted at the mosque) and to conduct *fard ulain* (compulsory Islamic subjects) classes (Mutalib, et al. 2017).

For this research I have interviewed *imams* of those different kinds of mosques; Masjid Negara, Masjid Wilayah, Masjid Negeri Selangor, Masjid Mukim/ Kariah, and *Surau sholat Jum'at* to

get a complete picture of the justification of *imam*'s religious authority. From the interview, it is clear that for the mosques that are under Federal authority, like Masjid Wilayah Persekutuan, its *imams* are authorized by the Federal and appointed under the Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam Malaysia (Public Service Department of Malaysia). For the states, the JAWI has the authority to appoint the *imams* for their own states' mosques but still they have to report it to the Central Authority, or the JAKIM. The appointed *imams* required to have *tauliah* certification from the states' muftis. This *tauliah* acknowledges *imam*'s certified ability in religious matter, be it leading the prayer only or more than that, certified to teach about Islam. According to my informants, especially for *imams*, to be certified to lead the prayer, it is required that *imams* have a good voice and master *tajwid*. What is more, the *tauliah* issued in one state is not valid for the other state. That means if an *imam* of Selangor mosque, for example, invited to lead prayer or to teach or to give talk in other states, he has to apply for the *tauliah* from that state of destination to be certified to do so.

As it is previously mentioned that each state has its own authority to manage its regulation, including in the area of religious life. The interview with an *imam* of Masjid Negeri Shah Alam, Selangor, reveals that there are different kinds of *imams*. First, *imams* who are the Federal's employee. Those *imams* appointed directly by the government, all of fees, contract, inauguration, and other administrative things are coming from the government. As its employee, the *imams* may move out of the mosque and appointed to other section in the government offices if it order them to do so. Also, there is another kind of *imam* that appointed directly by the Sultan to be an *imam* in the government's mosque. (Luqman, personal communication, December 27, 2018)

Different from the above mosques, there is what so called *Masjid Kariah*, or in my understanding, it is kind of community's small mosques. *Imams* for *Masjid Kariah* are usually chosen by the surrounding community and will be officially legitimated later by the government for every three years. My interview with an *imam* in a "*Surau sholat Jum'at*" (small mosques but still used to hold Friday prayer), reveals that *imams* for this kind of mosque are appointed by its Mosque's Committee Member who will interview and test the proposed *imam*'s candidates. The committee will then discuss their ability to issue final decision and, at the end, report it to the JAIS. The appointed *imams* are not allowed to move to other mosques except with the permission of the Mosques Committee Member and that means they have to propose and get interview again (Ihsan, personal communication, December 27, 2018).

Another important point this research found is the ethical side of being an *imam*. According to my informant who is an *imam* of a *masjid negeri* in Selangor, the code of ethics of an *imam* is written by the mosque's grand *imam* not the government. But that usually related to dress codes when they have to lead the prayer. Other than that, there is no written text regulate them how to behave outside the mosque. It is their own obligation to remind themselves to behave accordingly. What is more, among the *imams* and mosques' staffs of the state, they have a regular forum meeting and training to upgrade their religious competencies and to ensure the *imams*' individual behaviors. Also, the regular meeting held to discuss issues related to every detail of religious activities in the mosques, so there will be uniformity in the state and will not confuse society of differences in doing their religious rituals.

Especially when there is big religious event or Ramadhan coming, there will be a long discussion of the details of how to uniform the religious activities.

The above interview with *imams* of different kinds of mosques in Malaysia for me is a clear evident of how conditions of *imams* are subject to government systems that leaves very limited power to community to involve. Only those *imams* of small community's mosques that involves society to take part to propose. Even though society sometimes involve the *imams* in their religious lives like asking for their *dua* for the success of their life matters, (Ali Ghadafi, personal communication, December 20, 2018) still, *imam's* activities in the community should be in line with government's certification system or the *tauliah* laws. These are, among many, important reasons behind the possibility to have uniformity of religious life (and of religious rituals) in Malaysia. While in Singapore, with the same even more restricting government, we will see not so different reality.

The *imam* in Malaysia, as it is explained previously, is actually a title given as he is attached to his institution, the mosque. Outside it, in a general interaction with the society, the *imam* usually called as *ustaz* (Ar. Teacher). While in Singapore, according to my informant, the title of *ustaz* was first given by the society to individuals who learned Islamic sciences, began education in madrasahs and graduated from top overseas Islamic universities, like Al-Azhar, Egypt or Ummul Qura, Medina. Individuals graduated from those universities will automatically called as *ustaz*. But as time goes by, that *ustaz*-ness becomes more organized (Rahmani, personal communication, December 4, 2018).

For individuals to be recognized as *ustaz* in Singapore nowadays should be certified by the ARB (*Asatizah* Recognition Board) through the ARS (*Asatizah* Recognition Scheme) of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS). The idea of accrediting *asatizah* was raised by PERGAS (Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association) for the first time in the mid-1990s to respond to religious teachers who did not have enough capability to teach Islamic sciences and even deviated from Islamic teachings. The main purpose of the establishment of ARS was not only to increase the credibility of the *asatizah* but also to ensure the quality they possessed to be able to teach Islam appropriately in the community. Accordingly, it can be distinguished between those unqualified *asatiz* from those who have high competence. (Mohammad Hannan Hassan & Irwan Hadi Mohd Shuhaimy, 2018) According to MUIS website, this scheme was established:

to enhance the standing of religious teachers (*Asatizah*) and serve as a credible source of reference for the Singapore Muslim community. Recognition is granted only to qualified Islamic religious teachers and scholars who meet the minimum standards of qualification and are considered fit and proper to preach and teach Islamic religious knowledge. The application for recognition is assessed and approved by the ARB. The Board comprises senior *asatizah* and is appointed by MUIS for a period of three years (<https://www.muis.gov.sg/ARS-and-IECP/About>).

A complete detail information of the ARS, from its history until the list of the certified *asatizah*, can easily be found in MUIS website. Of all the information included on the website about ARS, one interesting thing is that ARS, in this case the MUIS, also regulates the code of ethics that all *asatiz* must adhere to without exception. In contrast to religious teachers in Malaysia who do not

have specific written guidelines about ethics that they must have, religious teachers in Singapore must adhere to the ethical codes outlined by MUIS as follow:

CODE OF ETHICS FOR THE PROVISION OF ISLAMIC INSTRUCTION

1. An Islamic teacher or a Quranic teacher

- 1.1 must adhere to the moderate teachings of Islam;
- 1.2 must exhibit a sound grasp of religious knowledge while being mindful of contextual considerations in the interpretation of religious teachings;
- 1.3 must always act in ways that retain the trust and confidence of the Muslim community of Singapore towards religious teachers, and that does not bring the profession into disrepute;
- 1.4 must recognise that there are diverse opinions and schools of thought in Islam, and may choose to adopt and teach any of these so long as this is not likely to be prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony between different religious or racial groups or to cause public disorder;
- 1.5 must be guided in matters of religious doctrine by the rulings of the Legal (Fatwa) Committee.

2. An Islamic teacher or a Quranic teacher MUST NOT

- 2.1. state that any opinion concerning Islam or any practice of Islam is deviant or unacceptable unless the Legal (Fatwa) Committee has pronounced it to be so in a ruling
- 2.2. do anything that directly or indirectly denigrate any racial or religious group, or that is likely to be prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony between different religious or racial groups or cause public disorder;
- 2.3. advocate any idea that is likely to encourage extremism or violence, whether directly or indirectly.

The unity and stability of the country is the main concern of the government and the people of Singapore in general. This is certainly supported by various layers of society from various fields including from the religious field. From the above ethical code outlined by MUIS, it is very clear that MUIS as the highest authority in regulating Islamic matters in Singapore is at the forefront of guarding and maintaining the stability of the country. In the midst of dynamic religious life in Singapore, MUIS took part and did their best to regulate Islamic religious life in accordance with Singapore's context. MUIS, accordingly, has a hard task to ensure the community fabric remains cohesive that it needs to make sure that it creates religious guidelines that support healthy respect for others.(Yacoob Ibrahim, 2018) The fact that the ARS Code of Ethics was not developed in a vacuum (it took religious and civic moral values into consideration and also based on values and principles drawn from established documents drafted by both local and regional scholars)(Mohammad Hannan Hassan & Irwan Hadi Mohd Shuhaimy, 2018) confirms MUIS' big effort to contextualize its policies. This idealism is then firmly implanted into the minds of the *asatiz* and even made it as mandatory. Despite the controversy that arose due to the mandatory of ARS issue (Firdaus Bin Yahya, 2018),

ARS was felt to be a good initiative for the continuity of harmony in the country as it is explicitly acknowledged by most of the Singaporean *imams* I interviewed.

In the context of our discussion on religious authority, it is very clear that Singapore adheres to the notion of division of authority, not centralized authority. Where MUIS is given full power to regulate religious affairs and all decisions regarding religious affairs always based on MUIS' considerations. This refers to the fact that even though Singapore supports secularism, it still supports freedom of religion at the same time, including making the mandatory of the ARS, simply because it greatly affects the harmony of people and the safety of the nation.

The strict supervision from the government, like in the ARS case, on the other hand also makes the community feel they are always watched by the government. Even they showed some kind of worries. From the field research experience, I found some *imams* who were reluctant to be interviewed and suggested asking directly to MUIS because they were afraid that the information they would give would be disputed by the existing laws. This leads me to conclude that in the case of Malaysia we see how the nation left little room for community's authority to contribute, while in Singapore, we did not find any space for people's authority to negotiate religious affairs. Everything is regulated by government's authority, the MUIS' authority. Including the matter of *imam's* religious authority. Everything has been regulated and subject to the system created by the government.

From the above sub-discussion, it is clear that the position of religious authority of the *Imams* and *Asatizah* is very much influenced by the state authority. Although both countries have different configurations in constructing their religious authority and its application in guarding the contestation of Islamic discourse that develops in each country (Akhmetova & Jaafar, 2020; Bin Hassan & Pereire, 2006; Camroux, 1996; Shashi Jayakumar, 2020; Yusoff, 2010), the two countries seem to be more ready and able to control the swift flow of Islamic discourse and anticipate the various consequences that arise from it.

Conclusion

This article explores the issue of the role of the state in controlling religious life as well as religious discourses that has emerged in society as a result of the fragmentation of religious authority. From the two countries discussed in this article, namely Malaysia and Singapore, this article concludes two important points; first, that friction between individual religious authorities, particularly the religious leaders, and state authorities will always exist and this is a common thing and has happened for a long time throughout history (Anthony Black, 2009; Lefebure, 2016). The main problem is not why this friction occurs, but rather how to respond to this friction. From Malaysia we learn that the configuration of the concentration of religious affairs at the state level under the religious authority of a state's sultan and the arrangement of inter-state religious affairs under the direct authority of His Majesty the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. Apart from having a negative impact on the vulnerability of differences in the application of laws in each country, on the other hand, it has a positive impact on uniformity of practice and legal provisions related to certain religious affairs at the country level. The same thing was found in Singapore. Even it is very much clearer. The concentration of religious authority under the state's authority represented by the Majelis

Ugama Islam Singapore (MUIS) creates a "guided freedom" pattern of religious affairs. This pattern makes Singapore not only able to accommodate the diversity of its people and their religious lives, but also to control various Islamic discourses that have the potential to destroy the country's stability and security. Among the similar patterns carried out by the two countries are the certification system for religious leaders, such as *tawlyiah* in Malaysia and the establishment of ARS (Asatizah Recognition Scheme) in Singapore. Finally, this research sees the significant role of the government in making firm policies in regulating the diversity of its people, especially in terms of religious diversity, as one of the effective answers to face the rhizomatic fragmentation of religious authority caused by the coming of (new) media.

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