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The Role and Challenges of Selangor Islamic Affairs Council (MAIS) in Managing Issues Related to Newly Converted Muslims

Syahrul Faizaz Binti Abdullah and Ssuna Salim

Pusat Pengajian Umum Kolej Sastera dan Sains Universiti Utara Malaysia.

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ABSTRACT

According to The Federal Constitution each state government is given the authority and responsibility of administering its religious affairs through its religious institutions. These institutions are in charge of taking care of Muslim affairs, among which, the affairs related to newly converted Muslims. This study critically analyses the role and challenges of Selangor Islamic Affairs Council in managing the issues related to converts in the state of Selangor. This is a qualitative study and it used a triangulation method in data collection which included: textual analysis of annual reports, pamphlets, news paper reports, periodical and circulations for the secondary data. The primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews and observations which were used to double check the secondary data. The data was qualitatively analyzed. The study found out that Selangor Islamic Affairs Council plays a crucial role in guiding and monitoring the new converts and in taking care of their well fare, and also in following up cases related to application to renounce religion. Selangor Islamic Affairs Council also strengthens the belief of the converts through Aqida Rehabilitation Center, Selangor Islamic Affairs Council is faced with the challenge of lack of sufficient skilled and experienced staf, finace , infrastrutute as well as the of converts who were not sincere in their conversion but had other vested personal interests.

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INTRODUCTION

The missionary efforts to the newly converted Muslims are not only intended to increase the number of followers to Islam but it is one of the ways to bridge Malaysian inter-ethnic differences which are ethno-religiously oriented. According to the provisions of the Malaysian law, managing the affairs related to converts formally falls under the responsibility of the state government through its agencies whether the Islamic Council or Islamic Religious Department. In addition, there are non- government organizations (NGOs) such as the Islamic Welfare Association of Malaysia (religious association), the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM) and Darul Fitrah who volunteer voluntarily to nurture and take care of the converts.

Problem Statement:

Converts are those individuals who have pronounced the word of testimony (shahadah) and consequently will be guided by those who are more knowledgeable in Islam (Othman Puteh 2005). The programs implemented for the newly converted Muslims aim at strengthening their faith in order to lead a life based on true Islamic principles (NurA'Thiroh & Fariza, 2009). However, among the converts are those who do not strive to learn Islam and master its basic teachings because their conversion to Islam was not for the sake of the faith but for other personal interest and gains; such as marriage. When these personal benefits are not achieved or cease, the converts will turn away from Islam (Faizal Ariff 2013, and Ann Wang Seng 2009). According to Ann Wan Seng (2009), the problem of apostasy among converts is not given serious attention due to a common belief that the newly converted Muslim's faith is Islam is yet to be strengthened. Apostasy cases involving converts begin to attract attention when controversies appear in the media and judiciary, and eventually turn into a political issue. A case in point is that of Fatimah Tan in Penang and Revathi Fatimah in Malacca.

A study carried out by Syahrul Faizaz (2013) noted that there are variation in the implementation and provision of guidance and welfare to converts in Selangor and the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. Among these difference is the imbalance of authority between the state and religious institutions and the federal territory

Corresponding Author: Syahrul Faizaz Binti Abdullah, Pusat Pengajian Umum Kolej Sastera dan Sains Universiti Utara Malaysia.
E-mail: faizaz@uum.edu.my

among various states in Malaysia in charge of the affairs of the converts. These differences have an impact on the effective management and operation of welfare programs and guidance to converts. The study continued to note that the mechanism implemented by Islamic institutions in monitoring converts affairs was not systematic; this consequently gave rise to the improper guidance and welfare provision for the converts.

According to the statistics of 2000-2010 released by the Prime Minister's Department, Sabah had the highest number of applications for apostates which stood at 238, followed by Negeri Sembilan 172, then Selangor 99. (Azhan 2011). Thus, this study will critically scrutinize the type of guidance and welfare extended to the converts by the state government institutions and non-government institutions (NGO) for the converts in the state of Selangor and its implications on their understanding of Islamic principles as well as implementation of the Islamic teachings in their daily life.

Operation Definition

Newly converted Muslim – (also known as muallaf) are those individuals who have pronounced the two words of testimony (*kalima shahadah*) and consequently they will be guided by those who are more knowledgeable in Islam (Anuar Puteh 2005).

Apostate refers to an individual who want to turn away from Islam (Saeed Abdullah 2004). In Selangor, apostate is against the law under No 9 Section 10 Syariah Criminal Law Enactment (State of Selangor) 1995.

Selangor Islamic Affairs Council - MAIS is a corporation entity according to Section 5(1) Islamic Religious Administration Enactment (Selangor) 2003. Under Section 81(3) Islamic Religious Administration Enactment (Selangor) 2003, MAIS is empowered to govern and have the rights towards all monies and property of Baitulmal. This study was carried out in these departments which constituted the study sample; Human Development Department (Dakwah Global Division and Muallaf Management Division) are known as Intisyar Development including Muallaf Management Division, al-Riqab Rehabilitation Division and Wakaf Library, the Department Of Faith Strengthening Baitul Iman is known as al-Riqab Rehabilitation Division and Department Of Law.

Methodology:

The study used a triangulation method in data collection which included interviews, and document analysis. Six MAIS officers from Human Development Department, the Department of Faith Strengthening and Department Of Law involved in dakwah activities were interviewed, in order to provide undocumented information. Data were qualitatively analyzed.

Result Findings:

Data analysis shows that MAIS uses a number of approaches in dealing with the affairs of converts in the state of Selangor.

Guidance to Converts:

MAIS uses various approaches in guiding as well as teaching the converts, which begins immediately after their conversion. The converts are placed in an intensive course for five days and four nights consecutively (Saturday to Wednesday). This course focusses on the introduction of the basic *fard 'ain* (principles of the faith, belief, and worship). Thereafter, MAIS continues to provide classes open to all interested converts. These classes are held between one to three times a week, normally in the evening and night in the District Religious office (PAID) (Informan 1 2010)

In addition to that, MAIS organizes programs and forums for the converts which include faith enhancement course which is also conducted in Tamil language, inheritance management, marriage, funeral management and worship courses are also conducted. Other programs in form of forums are conducted in conjunction with the beginning of the New Year according to the Islamic calendar and other public forums related to faith. Besides that, MAIS in collaboration with relevant organizations or institutions has implemented mini-forums for the converts, through which the officers will listen to the problems raised such that solutions to them will be found (Informan 2 2010).

Monitoring:

In addition to providing guidance, MAIS goes to the ground to monitor converts commitment to these programs. However, no action will be taken against those who do not attend them, in spite of NGOs proposal to make them compulsory, something MAIS decided not to enforce for the fear of disturbing converts daily life, which may be considered burdensome and an inconvenience. To ensure proper guidance to converts, MAIS monitors them through a progress report which begun in 2008 after the recommendation by SIRIM in its ISO report of 2008. In this report SIRIM recommended that converts who have at least attended intensive level course should be monitored in order to track where they continued receiving religious guidance (Informan 2 2010).

SIRIM also suggested that MAIS should prepare another report of absence of converts from these programs, indicating reasons for their absence. The converts who cannot attend have to fill up an application form for the permission to be absent and this can be done only at the convert's registrar's office. MAIS approach is comprehensive because it is protected by the law of the State of Selangor under the registration regulations, care and converts Enactment of 2009. These provisions have enabled MAIS to carry out its task by effectively monitoring its programs in order to ensure converts proper guidance on the basic principles of Islam. Therefore, this law is a necessary tool to further strengthen the education and guidance of converts (Informan 2 2010).

Welfare:

The results show that MAIS plays a significant role in taking care of the welfare of converts as well as administering their conversion process and registration in the state of Selangor. The conversion process begins when the interested individual goes to the center of converts department with two witnesses. After filling up the forms, the convert will pronounce the two statements of shahadah. Then, he will be given a summarized meaning of the two statements of shahadah, roles and responsibilities in Islam, the effects of conversion and his responsibilities towards his Muslim family. After conversion, the newly converted Muslim is required to follow the convert's intensive foundation program by MAIS. It is only the convert's registrar who has the authority to give permission to the converts not to attend the foundation program with valid reasons. This is because, in case MAIS finds out that a convert did not attend the intensive foundation program may decide to withdraw the extended assistance (Informan 2 2010).

Through the Department Of Human Development, MAIS prepares various forms of assistance specifically for the converts, more so to those who have been just newly converted. There are two types of assistance to the converts; Convert's assistance for all converts which include; circumcision, prayer materials and burial expenses. The second form of assistance is assistance specified by MAIS and it is applied for, this include; accommodation, medication, marriage expenses and legal assistance. Before the modification of this act, assistance given out consisted; transportation, house construction, house renting, marriage expenses, monthly keep ups, debts settling and conversion assistance. In 2008 this assistance was expanded to include business and the converts who had accommodation problems. For the converts who had accommodation problem, 4 houses were provided by MAIS in Shah Alam, Gombak Barat, Klang and Kuala Selangor (MAIS 2008).

In order to improve the educational standards of the converts, MAIS also gives educational assistance; from primary level to university levels, besides making arrangements for those who are interested in furthering their studies either at certificate or diploma levels (MAIS 2008).

Pay Visit (Ziarah)

MAIS also make visits to the convert's homes which are done by district religious officers. However, the head quarter officers will be involved in special cases admitted to hospital and the elderly. These visits are meant to strengthen brotherhood besides extending assistance. In addition to that, there are two approaches utilized by MAIS in making these brotherly visits to converts. First, MAIS cooperates with volunteers in paying visits from house to house, in order to identify those in need of assistance and the type of assistance needed. Then assistance in form of rice and money will be given (Informan 2 2010). Second, community service assistance in form of medical, eye, collateral level, and dental check ups (MAIS 2006). Through the visiting program brotherhood is strengthened, this will in turn ease MAIS'S closeness to the converts thus making it easy for them to convey the required knowledge and information to their converts in order to strengthen their belief (aqidah). This in turn assists MAIS in drawing new dakwah plans for the future as well improving the existing ones.

Laws:

The process of renouncing religion has no specific laws governing it. The convert who want to renounce religion will file a case against MAIS, Selangor Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) and Registration Department to the Sharia High Court which will be identified as a civil case not a crime. In order to ease the process, the defendant is called to the court by summons to give his statement against the plaintiff (Sec 63 Syariah Court Civil Procedure (State of Selangor) Enactment 2003).

After that MAIS will apply for interlocutory proceedings; an application in the course of any proceedings, whether before or after judgement is expressed or by implication authorized to be made to the court be heard in chamber before a Judge. MAIS will then make an application to give time to the applicant to undergo counseling in order to repent (*istitabah*) (Sec 187 (1, 2 dan 3) Syariah Court Civil Procedure (State of Selangor) Enactment 2003). Consequently, the Sharia Court will make an order to applicants to proceed for the designated period. The process of counselling is carried out by Aqidah Consultation Section under Mufti Department. A panel of advisers will be appointed to carry out counselling in order to persuade the applicant to change his mind. However, after the counselling session, if the applicant still persists to renounce Islam, and the courts realize that he does not have a strong evidence to indicate that he is not a Muslim and did not practice Islam at

all, the judge will make a verdict to place him under the Center of Aqidah Strengthening (Informant 3 2011). It is crucial to note that in Selangor no application for apostates has ever been approved. In case the applicant still persists the case will be left hanging.

Aqidah Strengthening

MAIS is also responsible for the converts' aqidah. The trainees (are those who have problem with aqidah) will be placed under the Center of Aqidah Strengthening Baitul Iman currently known as Ar-Riqab Rehabilitation Division. There are three types of trainees; those under the Court Order, those under the protection by MAIS and those who voluntarily (Informant 4 2011).

The trainees are handled to the trainee operation and counselling units to start time tabbed guidance and counselling process. There are two temporary modules used by MAIS for *fard 'ain*; Modul *fardu 'ain* used by JAIS and *Halal dan Haram* book by al-Qardhawi. Since most of the trainees had social problems as opposed to *aqidah* the focus was therefore mainly on *fardu 'ain*. However, the module for *aqidah* strengthening was still under the process. It is interesting to note that most of aqidah problem cases were under court order, thus, they were sent to the Aqidah Consultation Section under Mufti Department (Informant 4 2012).

Training Dakwah Cadres:

MAIS will provide training to those interested converts as cadres to assist in carrying out dakwah work. This method is used in order to qualify capable cadres in conveying the Islamic message to their societies. After completing the preparatory intensive and advanced intensive courses, the cadre will be required to attend the convert cadre course (Informant 5 2010).

Cooperation with Non Government Organizations:

MAIS also cooperates with religious organizations, government and private institutions and NGO'S in carrying out comprehensive, well organized, and well coordinated and effective dakwah work through simposiums, workshops, course and conferences. Besides that, MAIS also established a visiting secretariat with NGO'S in order to facilitate visiting the converts (informant 6 2010).

Challenges faced by Dakwah Organization:

MAIS challenges in dealing with issues related to converts, are divided into two; challenges related to dakwah approach and general challenges. The most critical challenge faced in making dakwah is the challenge of human resources in terms of quantity, skills as well as experience in executing their duties and their attitude towards their work (Informant 2 2010). Besides that, the technical challenge is the most critical challenge faced by MAIS from the point of view of the infrastructure; counselling rooms, finance, security (Informant 2 2010; Informant 4 2011; Informant 5 2010), converts attitude most especially those whose conversion for other material benefits (Informant 2 2010) and people's negative perception of dakwah approach (Informant 4 2011).

Fortunately enough, MAIS managed to overcome the problem of human resource in terms of numbers and skills in guiding and counselling of converts through systematically cooperating with Islamic NGO'S and other Islamic agencies. Although there are no specific laws governing apostation, MAIS succeed in using the available laws with the power of Sharia High Court in dealing with this matter. It important to note that in addition to that MAIS is in the process of coming up with a comprehensive module on aqidah as well as improving the infrastructure. On top of that, MAIS is trying its best to find solutions to these challenges; however, this to a greater extent depends on the convert and society's attitude towards the adapted approaches.

Implications of The Study and Suggestion:

Implications to The Government:

MAIS is facing an acute problem of human resources, infrastructure and finance. As a result, the government should give serious attention in finding solutions to these challenges.

Implications to MAIS:

This study acts as an eye opener to problems facing converts to MAIS, thus, finding solutions by drawing new, feasible and effective plans in teaching, guiding and counselling as well as proper management of converts related issues.

Conclusion:

The challenges faced by MAIS need concerted efforts of everybody including the government, and non-government institutions as well as the public. With this initiative, continuous struggle, technical, financial, infrastructural and administrative improvement, it is hoped that MAIS will be in a better position to play a significant role in properly managing converts affairs.

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