Women Perspective on Islamic Radicalism: A Malaysian Experience

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Abstract: The content of this study is a report prepared by a research group on the perspective of women on various issues related to Islamic radicalism, i.e., concept, phenomenon and Islamic societies. This study also examines women's level of understanding about Islam nature and the factors that led to radical behavior and effects of radical action. Results are presented based on 863 survey respondents amongst Muslim women who were selected from several states in Malaysia. Primary data collection was undertaken through a set of structured questionnaires. There are three significant findings from this study. First, this study found that women's understanding of Islam is comparatively lower than male respondents. This level of understanding has affected their perceptions of radical phenomena. Second, their perception on the phenomenon of radicalism is also lower than male respondents.

Key words: Radicalism, Islam, women perspective, Muslim, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The new millennium witnessed religion to be the main focus of international community when it is associated with events regarded as radical, militant, violent and extreme. Radicalism can be defined as a perception that Islam is able to make radical and fundamental changes in society without using violence (Esposito, 1997; Keddie, 1998).

The image of Islam as fundamentalist, fanatical and terrorist as often portrayed by the West increasingly strengthened with the attack on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September, 2001 (Haddad and Khashan, 2002). The US campaign against Islamic terrorists around the globe includes Pakistan as one of the terrorist nest (Gerges, 1999; Gunaratna, 2002; Haddad and Khashan, 2002; Byman, 2003).

Generally, this study employs two approaches; academic (Esposito, 2002) and journalistic analysis (Gunaratna, 2002). Based on academic analysis, the phenomenon of radicalism exists due to differences in interpretation of some religious concepts such as jihad, war and peace. Goldberg (1991) argued that there are some similarities between protestant ethics and Islamic radicalism. Furthermore, Sivan (1989, 1990) stated that Sunni radicalism took place before Iranian revolution in 1978.

There are differences between the official Islamic perspective (official Islam) and non-official (non-official Islam) out of the Ecclesia. Most of the actors involved in Islamic radicalism comprise of men although there are isolated cases that involve a number of women fighters. This phenomenon also happened in Mumbai, India (Hansen, 2000).

Earlier studies in Malaysia records instances of Islamic radicalism which are isolated and localized in nature (Abdullah, 1985; Mauzy and Milne, 1983). Conflicts at the time arose due to incompatibility of Islamic authorities with modern bureaucracy sponsored by the English (Roff, 1967; Mauzy and Milne, 1983; Abdullah, 2002; Abed-Kotob, 1995). Independence and national development, the process of modernization subsequently accompanied by secularism, contradictions between structural and affective Islamic doctrine and the rise of Islamic movements in Iran late in the 1970s allegedly contributed towards radicalism (Nagata, 1984; Ameer, 1984; Mauzy and Milne, 1983; Muzaffar, 1987). At this point, the study on Islam is divided into three main aspects: movement, radicalism and terrorism. This study focuses on radicalism for the reason that it is a new phenomenon in the Muslim community in Malaysia. Involvement of individuals such as Shamsiah Fakih in the communist movement in Malaya can be categorized as a terrorist movement. However, the role of individuals such as Khadijah Sidek who at a certain level of her political activity joined the opposition political party PAS (Mazrui, 1967) can be categorized as a radical.

The study carried out so far only touched indirectly aspects of radicalism while scholars have not carried out studies involving the understanding impact and forms of

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radicalism among Muslims women in Malaysia. This study hopes to establish a systematic database on the subject of radicalism particularly among Muslim women in Malaysia.

Objective of the study: The study was conducted to achieve the following objectives:

- To study the level of understanding on Islam and characteristics of radical Islam among women
- Identify factors affecting radical actions among Muslim women
- Examine the impact of radicalism on women in Malaysia

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Respondents and location of study: The survey employ purposive and strata selection of respondents throughout Malaysia to represent an overall level of Muslim women. Respondents selected consists of various categories of society taking into account variables such as age, gender, schooling stream, occupation, marital status, income and location of residence. In this study, only certain variables are taken into account such as according to states,

Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to states

States	Number
Perlis	12
Kedah	89
Perak	13
Wilayah Persekutuan	101
Johor	66
Terengganu	62
Sabah	70
Selangor	273
Melaka	29
Kelantan	100
Sarawak	69
Pahang	19
Total	863

Table 2: Occupation, marital status and income of respondents

Type of occupation	Number
Self-employed	41
Government	297
Private companies	130
Students from universities and colleges	54
Total	522
Marital status	
Single	205
Married	308
Divorced	6
Total	520
Income (RM)	
<1000	145
1001-2000	205
2001-3000	40
3001-4000	19
4001-5000	18
Total	414

occupation, marital status and income of respondents. Number of subjects reported in this study is 863 aged between 18 and 64 (Table1-2).

Questionnaires: Structured questionnaires used are paper and pencil test because respondents are allowed to answer the questionnaire themselves under the supervision of the researchers. The questionnaires consist of several parts including the nature of radicalism, views of society on the phenomenon, perception of the community towards organizations perceived to be radical and causes that triggers radical acts and their effect. Answer formatted by Likert was used with a range of scale 3-5.

Questionnaires used proved to be consistent with internal consistency reliability formula alpha from 0.80-0.90.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perception on the nature of radicalism: Perceptions on the nature of radicalism in the Muslim community in Malaysia were measured through 20 statements. Respondents were asked to state whether they agree or disagree to the statements through a yes, no or not sure answer. This study reports only on the percentage of respondents who answered yes and 5 statements with the highest percentage of a yes answer.

Generally, the answers represent a mixture of idealist and realist perception on radicalism. For example, 59.1% of respondents, the highest response perceived that those who adhere to basic principles as radicals along with those championing justice representing an idealist perception ranked third highest (52.4%) (Table 3). What is interesting is that both statements which are idealist in nature is balanced by the realist statement regarding the pressure which is often associated with the left movement.

Understanding of Islam and the radical phenomena: This study aims to assess the respondents understanding of Islamic teachings by using 13 questions. Respondents were asked to agree based on a 5 point scale. This result reported is the percentage of respondents who agreed with the statements submitted. Table 4 shows 5 statements over which the respondents had the highest knowledge.

Understanding Islam and misinterpretation of its teachings by a person are important factors determining whether one is perceived as a radical or otherwise. The majority of respondents demonstrate an understanding of mainstream Islam although the understanding can be interpreted as radical but it is moderated since they

Table 3: Respondent views regarding radicalism

Statements	Percentage
Adhere to basic principles	511 (59.1)
Consistently attempting to extend influence	491 (57.0)
Fight for social justice	450 (52.4)
To be a pressure group	448 (51.9)
Always associated with the left movement	449 (51.1)

Table 4: Understanding of Islam

Statements	Percentage
A Muslim must have good relation with non-Muslim	819 (95.2)
The covering of the aurat is an Islamic practice	808 (94.6)
Islam is a religion of peace	790 (93.6)
Adherence to Islamic teaching is an obligation	800 (93.5)
Islam is a way of life	764 (90.3)

Table 5: Perception on the phenomena of radicalism

Statements	Percentage
Action taken against Al-Maunah (a deviant group) was appropriate	364 (42.1)
Osama Bin Laden is rightly regarded as a fighter	356 (41.2)
Radicalism is related to extremist movement overseas	313 (36.3)
Anti West views are radical	257 (29.8)
To criticize government policies is radical	198 (22.9)

Table 6: Perception on organisation

Organizations	Percentage
Al-Maunah	445 (51.6)
Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM)	427 (49.5)
Parti Islam Se Malaysia (PAS)	227 (26.3)
Jemaah Islah Malaysia (JIM)	226 (26.2)
Keadilan	215 (24.9)

Table 7: View of factors causing radical action

Factors	Percentage
Influenced by friends	644 (74.6)
Pressured	619 (71.6)
Doubts over the existing system	599 (69.7)
Misunderstanding religion	598 (69.2)
No support	594 (68.8)

comply with the official conception of Islam of the state. A contradiction is manifested by the fact that most respondents (95.2%) agree to the statement that a Muslim must have good relations with a non-Muslim while also to the statement that states that Islam is a comprehensive way of life (90.3%). Similarly in other answers that may be construed as radical 93.5% of the respondent agrees that adhering to the teachings of Islam is compulsory and 94.6% agree that the covering of the aurah is an Islamic practice. However, these views are toned down when the majority (70.3%) disagree that Islam allows the labeling of others as infidels.

In the era of globalization, external factors play a hand in influencing the respondents perception regarding radicalism. Rebellion against an authority seen as legitimate explains the reason why respondents agree that action taken against the group Al-Maunah in Sauk is reasonable. This movement is associated with deviant Islamic beliefs (42.1%). On the other hand, Osama Bin Laden and his struggle is viewed positively and he is considered a freedom fighter (41.2%). Criticizing a legally appointed government is viewed as a radical activity regardless of whether it is a Western government (29.8%) or ones own government. In the context of Malaysia, to criticise the government policies is construed to be radical (22.9%) (Table 5).

Perception on organisation: To study the perception on organizations, respondents were ask to state if they regard the group as radical from a list of 18 organizations in Malaysia. The role played by organizations particularly Islamic organizations, non-governmental (e.g., ABIM) or political (e.g., PAS) to shape the ideals or mobilize its members can never be understand. This is highly logical since the formation of an organization particularly political organization aims to secure power and affect changes in society according to its principles and ideals. Based on the highest percentage, Al-Maunah ranged first (51.6%) as an organization deemed radical on the basis that it had instigated acts against the constitution. Kumpulan

Malaysia (KMM) comes second (49.5%) followed by PAS (26.3%), Jemaah Islah Malaysia (JIM) (26.2%) and lastly KeADILan (24.9%). A percentage <20% is deemed insignificant. In comparison, UMNO, the ruling government, obtained 23.6%. From the results, it is easily inferred that any political act seen as extra constitutional is conjured as radical (Table 6).

To study reasons that are likely to cause radical actions, respondents were given a list of 16 factors that may explain occurrences of radical action. Table 7 shows the 5 factors that have the highest percentage agreed by respondents.

View of factors causing radical action: An individual's character, shaped by internal and external factors, influences his attitude and subsequently his actions. The results as shown in Table 7 bears out this fact when 5 statements with the highest percentage illustrate that internal and external factors have distinct roles in shaping a person views and attitude. The highest score 74.6% influenced by friends followed by pressured (71.6%) doubts over the existing system misunderstanding of religion and no support (68.8%). Feeling pressuredis seen as internal factors and in comparison doubts over the existing system is an external factors. What is interesting to note is feeling pressured may have direct relevance to the variable doubts over the existing system.

Views on the effects of radical actions: This study attempts to evaluate further the views of respondents regarding the impact of radical action. Perceptions of respondents on their expected effects of radical actions

Table 8: Views on the effects radical acts

Effects	Percentage
Disintegration of society	680 (78.6)
Widespread misunderstanding of Islam	666 (77.0)
Misunderstanding of the concept of Jihad	660 (76.4)
Impede the creation of the Malaysian race	590 (68.4)
Muslims under increasing pressure	579 (67.0)

may assist in gaining an insight over the Malay community especially women understanding of radicalism in the society.

It is interesting to note that the results in Table 8 shows that respondents are inclined towards the mainstream, to maintain stability and harmony in society. Specifically, the respondents view the present government as highly legitimate. This can be seen when respondents view that radical actions divides society (78.6%) followed by the variable widespread misunderstanding of Islam (77.0%), misunderstanding of the concept of Jihad, impede the creation of the Malaysian race (68.4%) and finally, Muslims under increasing pressure (67.0%). Respondent perceptions may be driven by the fact that Malaysia is seen as emerging as an exemplary country that provides rays of hope for future development of the ummah at the global level.

CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed womens perception on the phenomenon of Islamic radicalism. Results obtained indicate that women have a relatively low understanding of radicalism. Those who have knowledge of Islam are likely to acquire them from religious scholars. Their relatively low understanding of the concept of radicalism may also be attributed to their inclination to be attuned to official or mainstream Islam. Mean perception of radicalism among women respondents is 23.82. On this basis, they are suspicious of efforts or political actions that are construed to be extra constitutional. However, they have a fairly significant perception regarding organizations that are categorized as radical or otherwise. This is understandable since Muslim women in Malaysia are active social agents and effective workers at grass roots level.

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