

## **A NOTE ON THE POLITICS OF ISLAMIC – BASED DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper deals with an analysis of the politics of Islamic-based development strategy of three non-governmental organizations in Southeast Asia that is the Darul Arqam in Malaysia, the Daarul Tauhiid in Indonesia, and the Ban Nua Community in Thailand. The research and writing of this paper originates from the curiosity on why Daarut Tauhiid and the Ban Nua Community are able to pursue their endeavours till today while Darul Arqam was not? Is this related to any politics or politicking in these Islamic-based development processes? The objective of the paper is to seek answer for this research question. Based on library and field research, the latter of which include observation, participant-observation, and interviews with the adoption of purposive sampling, the answer is sought. Almost all discussions in this paper are mainly based on the result of the field research.

**Keywords:** Islamic-Based Development, Politics, Darul Arqam, Daarul Tauhiid, Ban Nua Community, Southeast Asia

## INTRODUCTION:

This paper is a preliminary thinking of, and more precisely a note on, the politics of three Islamic-based development strategies in three countries in Southeast Asia. They are the Islamic-based development strategies of Darul Arqam in Malaysia, Daarut Tauhiid in Indonesia, and Ban Nua community in Thailand. All these three organizations in these three Southeast Asian countries adopt self-initiated and bottom-up approach to Islamic-based development strategies.

Darul Arqam was established by Ustaz Ashaari Muhammad, an Islamic religious teacher, in the year 1969 at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (Muhammad Syukri Salleh, 1992, 1995). Daarut Tauhiid was initiated by Abdullah Gymnastiar, an engineering graduate, in 1990 at Gegerkalong, Bandung, Indonesia (Muhammad Tahir, 2011), while the Ban Nua Community by Dr Wisot bin Lateh, a graduate of Arabic language (Bachelor and Master) and cultural studies (PhD), in 1997 at Ban Nua village, Songkhla, Thailand (Tobrani @ Wisoot bin Lateh, 2011; Wafdi Auni bin Mohamed, 2012; Mohd Hanif Hazahari (2012). In spite of different academic background of their founders, all the three initiatives aim at one similar goal, that is to uphold Islam in its holistic applicable way via various development approaches. Darul Arqam and Daarut Tauhiid realised this goal by emphasising on the purification of heart and managing the *qalb* (also heart as termed by Daarut Tauhiid) respectively, and operating Islamic business activities, apart from having almost all aspects of human development, from education to health, welfare, and economic development ((Muhammad Syukri Salleh, 1992, 1995; Muhammad Tahir, 2011). Ban Nua Community, on the other hand, emphasises on the realisation and application of *solah* (prayers) and zakat, entailing with the building of a huge mosque as a centre of Islamic socio-economic activities, from education to zakat, homestay, food catering, and cooperative (Tobrani @ Wisoot bin Lateh, 2011; Muhammad Syukri Salleh, 2015a).

All the three development strategies of Daarut Tauhiid, Ban Nua Community and Darul Arqam have achieved a significant success. For instance, Daarut Tauhiid's revenue of its cooperative (Koperasi Pasentren, or Kopontren) alone rose from RM 1,205,146.553 (USD 272,526.26) in 2001 to RM 9,333,082.497 (USD 2,110,540.06) in 2014, let alone its other economic activities such as those within its training agency Manajemen Qolbu Corporation (MQ Corp), *et cetera* (Ade Yunita Mafruhat, 2015). Ban Nua Community has been able to self-reliantly build its huge 30 million Baht (USD 1,021,647.96) mosque which not only houses prayer hall but also its socio-economic offices, library and conference room. The Community operates its own school, Mosque Cooperative, zakat management (Baitul Zakat), and a Mosque Welfare Fund. As a result of the accomplishment of these activities, the Community has been able to reduce the rate of poverty of its people from 30% to 5% (Tobrani @ Wisoot bin Lateh, 2011; Muhammad Syukri Salleh, 2015). Darul Arqam has to its merit about 44 self-contained villages all over Malaysia in which their own self-reliant schools, health, agriculture, economic centers, *et cetera* with their own Islamic system are respectively located and operated, apart from their global centers and 250 business linkages in other countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, Australia, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, and Japan (Muhammad Syukri Salleh, 1992, 2003).

Ironically, although all the three Islamic-based development strategies have direct or indirectly contributed to the economy of their respective countries, Darul Arqam was banned by the Malaysian government in 1994 (Ahmad Fauzi bin Abdul Hamid, 1998, 2003), while Daarut Tauhiid and Ban Nua Community have been able to maintain the pursuance of their Islamic-based development without apprehensiveness from their respective governments until now.

The question is, why is it so? What is wrong with Darul Arqam and what is right with Daarut Tauhiid and Ban Nua Community that led to their distinctive fates? Did and how, if there is any, politics involved in the process of these Islamic-based development endeavors?

Based on observations, participant observations and informal interviews with those involved with these organizations, this paper attempts to analyze the politics of Islamic-based development strategy by observing three aspects of the Islamic-based development, viz. the approaches, the leader-followers relationship, and the politics of the Islamic-based development strategies themselves. In doing so, this paper is divided into three main sections. The first deals with the approaches of the Islamic-based development strategy, the second with the leader-followers relationship, and finally, the politics of their Islamic-based development. While the first and the second sections lay a platform for the deliberation on the politics of the Islamic-based development strategies, the third concentrates on the critical analysis of the politics of these three organizations themselves.

## APPROACHES OF ISLAMIC-BASED DEVELOPMENT:

The implementation of Islamic-based development in Southeast Asia is not a rare phenomenon. It has been

undertaken both via top-down and bottom-up approaches, by Islamic non-governmental organizations, the states as well by the country itself. Top-down approach here refers to the approach undertaken by the authority, be it a nation, a state, or an organization of bureaucrats, while bottom-up approach refers to approach initiated from grassroots, be it a non-governmental organization, a movement, or an organization of a community<sup>1</sup>.

The top-down approach to Islamic-based development for instance have been attempted by the States of Kelantan and Terengganu in Malaysia through their *Membangun Bersama Islam* (Developing With Islam) and *Wawasan SIHAT* (SIHAT Vision) approaches respectively (Muhammad Syukri Salleh, 1999b, 2013b). At country level, Malaysia itself has attempted an Islamic-based development strategy through her *Islam Hadhari* (Civilisational Islam) (Muhammad Syukri, 2013b), while Negara Brunei Darussalam through her *Wawasan Brunei 2035* (Brunei Vision, 2035) entrenched within the state philosophical framework of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB, Malay Islam Monarchy) and *Negara Zikir* (Zikir Nation) (Awang Mohd Jamil Al-Sufri 2004, 2007, Duraman Tuah 2001, Muhammad Syukri Salleh, 2015b).

As for the bottom-up approach, one witnessed the attempts by dakwah organizations such as Darul Arqam in Malaysia (Masudul Alam Choudhury and Muhammad Syukri Salleh, 1993, Muhammad Syukri Salleh 1991, 1992, 1993a, 1993c, 1994a) and Daarut Tauhiid in Indonesia (Muhammad Tahir, 2011, Ade Yunita Mafruhat, 2015), as well as by community-based organization such as the Ban Nua Community in Thailand (Muhammad Syukri Salleh, 2015a). As mentioned earlier, Darul Arqam began its endeavour in 1969 in Kuala Lumpur and was banned by the Malaysian government in 1994, while Daarut Tauhiid and Ban Nua Community began in 1990 and 1997 in Gegerkalong, Bandung and Ban Nua, Songkhla respectively, and continue to prosper till now. Darul Arqam was led by Ustaz Ashaari Muhammad (passionately known as Abuya amongst his followers), while Daarul Tauhiid by Abdullah Gymnastiar (passionately known as AA Gym) and Ban Nua Community by Dr Wisot bin Lateh (passionately known as Dr Tobrani).

All these three organizations share at least four characteristics. Firstly, they are self-initiated and self-reliant organizations independent of their states. Secondly, they are grassroots in nature, emerging from the very bottom of the society. Thirdly, they considered themselves as apolitical organization. And fourthly, all of them founded and operated their endeavours through what could be considered as villagization process. Darul Arqam created its self-contained villages all over Malaysia totaling about 44 altogether when it was banned, while Daarut Tauhiid created their community in the midst of existing Gegerkalong village in Bandung, Indonesia, and Ban Nua Community created their own existing Ban Nua village by collectively developing with self-contained facilities.

### LEADER-FOLLOWERS RELATIONSHIP:

Of the three organizations, Darul Arqam seems to be relatively enjoying a tight leader-followers relationship. This was so as they are bonded by a practice of a *tariqah* called Tariqah Muhammadiyah. Like other *tariqah* organizations, loyalty to the leader therefore is at its maximum vis-à-vis the more relax leader-followers relationship of Daarul Tauhiid and Ban Nua Community. Both Daarul Tauhiid and Ban Nua Community are bonded by normal Islamic teachings.

Although the level of the formal academic qualifications of Ustaz Ashaari Muhammad of Darul Arqam, AA Gym of Daarul Tauhiid, and Dr Tobrani of Ban Nua Community are different from each other, all of them could be considered as knowledgeable in their own ways. Ustaz Ashaari Muhammad was educated at religious secondary schools, while AA Gym was graduated as an engineer, and Dr Tobrani holds Bachelor and Master degree in Arabic and a PhD degree in cultural studies. Similar merit that they share is not only the knowledge, but more important is the ability to manage, disseminate, and stimulate their followers to translate the knowledge into practice. The Islamic-based development strategy is one of the consequences of such ability.

Amongst these three leaders, Dr Tobrani of the Ban Nua Community is the only one who holds positions in the government office outside his community. While Ustaz Ashaari Muhammad of Darul Arqam and AA Gym of Daarul Tauhiid concentrate fully on their respective organizations, Dr Tobrani of Ban Nua Community is also the Head of Department of the Academic and Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Religious Committee of Songkla Province and the Director at the Sheikhu Islam Office of the Southern Thailand Region covering 14 Provinces. How far these positions are attributable to the success of his Islamic-based development strategy is yet to be confirmed.

However, all the three leaders are said to be apolitical as they do not involve in party politics. In fact, they could be considered as do not really believe in accomplishing Islamic-based development through political power.

<sup>1</sup> For discussions on the top-down and bottom-up approaches to development, see Muhammad Syukri Salleh, 1997a, 1997b, 1999a.

What they are more interested lies in instilling a God-conscious sense in themselves and their followers, so as their endeavors are helped by Allah SWT (Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala).

### THE POLITICS OF ISLAMIC-BASED DEVELOPMENT:

Even though the leaders and the organizations under study are said to be apolitical<sup>2</sup>, in reality, politics could not be totally detached from the Islamic-based development strategy. For instance, the significant success of Darul Arqam's Islamic-based development through its villagization programmes was considered as the creation of a Darul Arqam state within the Malaysian state, a system within a system, and a Darul Arqam sub-culture within the Malaysian larger culture (Muhammad Syukri Salleh, 1992). This was so as the Darul Arqam self-contained villages were consisted of its own distinctive systems of administration, education, welfare, politics and socio-economic that was different from the state's administration, education, welfare, politics and socio-economic systems. To some, such a phenomenon is considered as a parallel government.

These were worsened by another three facts. Firstly, the leader-followers intimate relationship tied together by strong *tariqah* loyalty in Darul Arqam were dangerous to the eyes of the state. It could be used at any time for any reasons (Nagata, 1984). Secondly, the penetration of Darul Arqam minds and influence into the political factions (both in the government and the oppositions, known as *Arqam Batik*) and into the corporate society (known as *Arqam Bush Jacket*) were also seen as eroding the full commitments of their respective organizations. It could eventually not only breaking up the organizations, but also giving way to Darul Arqam to have a kind of power that enables it to control the members of these organizations. Thirdly, the rapid accomplishment of Darul Arqam businesses that sprouted from its Islamic-based development strategy has become a significant challenge to non-Islamic businesses. It was not impossible that the non-Islamic businesses have reacted in a way that led, amongst other reasons, to the demise of Darul Arqam (Muhammad Syukri Salleh (1993b, 1994b, 1994c).

One probably wonders why such a fate did not befall Daarut Tauhiid and Ban Nua Community. The most probable reasons are as follows.

Firstly, leader-followers relationship in both organizations is relatively rather looser as compared to Darul Arqam. One may just leave the organization without any bond nor restrictions as what has happened when AA Gym was involved in polygamous practice. Many Daarul Tauhiid's members, especially women, freely left the organization for not agreeing with AA Gym's marriage with a second wife (Ade Yunita Mafruhat, 2015).

Secondly, AA Gym of Daarul Tauhiid and Dr Tobrani of Ban Nua Community did not portray their individual or organizational political inclination, while Ustaz Ashaari Muhammad of Darul Arqam disclosed publicly his individual and organizational political inclination against the Malaysian ruling authorities (Muhammad Syukri Salleh, 1994b). Ustaz Ashaari Muhammad used to challenge the Malaysian religious authority (then called *Pusat Islam*, or Islamic Centre) to let Darul Arqam administer the religious affairs of the state. He even challenged the then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad to run a referendum so as to allow Malaysians to choose between two of them as the leader of Malaysia. Moreover, Ustaz Ashaari Muhammad too has frequently talked on the establishment of *Daulah Islamiah* (Islamic State) through an invisible rare way.

Thirdly, Daarut Tauhiid and Ban Nua Community have not adopted a confrontational approach as adopted by Darul Arqam, especially in the later part of Darul Arqam struggle. Actually, in the earlier part of its struggle, Darul Arqam too held a harmonious approach that led to its rapid success. But this rapid success has attracted intense accusations and attacks from the authority, hence the changing of the harmonious to the confrontational approach which eventually led to its demise.

Fourthly, the Islamic-based development strategy of Daarut Tauhiid and Ban Nua Community has yet to emerge as a challenge to the prevailing dominant state development systems. In contrary, due to the socio-economic environment of the society around them, the Islamic-based strategy prevailing both in Daarut Tauhiid and Ban Nua Community has been seen as complementary to the efforts of their respective governments.

### CONCLUSION:

Islamic-based development strategy though may appear as apolitical but in reality could not be detached from the play of politics. Darul Arqam has been banned because of politics, while Daarut Tauhiid and Ban Nua Community are still prospering also because of politics. The deliberations above are the proofs of this stance.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Dr Tobrani, the Head of Ban Nua Community on 8 December 2012 at Ban Nua Mosque, Thailand, Aa Gym, the founder-leader of Daarut Tauhiid on 21 August 2014 at his office in Darut Tauhiid, Bandung, Indonesia, and Pak Gatot, the Managing Director of Daarut Tauhiid Foundation on 17 February 2015 at Daarut Tauhiid meeting room, Bandung, Indonesia.

The question on the short life of Islamic-based development strategy of Darul Arqam in Malaysia and the sustainability of the Daarut Tauhiid in Indonesia and the Ban Nua Community in Thailand is therefore answered.

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