

SOCIAL MEDIA THREATS TO THE EMERGENCE OF “KHAYR UMMAH”, A MALAYSIAN EXPERIENCE

KHAYR UMMAH

كُنْتُمْ خَيْرَ أُمَّةٍ أُخْرِجَتْ لِلنَّاسِ تَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَتَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَذُومُونَ بِاللَّهِ ۗ وَلَوْ آمَنَ أَهْلُ الْكِتَابِ لَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَهُمْ ۚ مِنْهُمْ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَأَكْثَرُ هُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ

“You are the best community (umma) which has ever been raised for the guidance of mankind. You enjoin good, forbid evil, and believe in Allah. Had the People of the Book believed, it would surely have been better for them; among them some are believers but most of them are transgressors” - Al-Imran: 110

THE UNIQUENESS OF MALAYSIA

Malaysia is a unique country. In spite of diversity in religion and the multiracial nature of her people, the Federal Constitution of Malaysia has decreed, **“Islam is the religion of the Federation”**; as the religion of the country and exalted Islam to a dignified position above all else.

It is not specified in the Constitution and nor it is in the democracy practiced in Malaysia that the Prime Minister must be elected among the Muslims or that the administrative government of Malaysia must be run by the party dominated by Muslims only and neither by the party that champions Islam in its charter.

Nevertheless, it was stipulated in the Constitution that the *Yang Di Pertuan Agong*, or the King, must be from among the Malay rulers; a Muslim of royal birth and of the Malay race. The *Yang Di Pertuan Agong* is the Head of the religion of Islam in Malaysia and in the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya while the Sultans are the Head of the religion of Islam in their own states and are the protectors of the faith.

The Muslim faith is protected under Article 11(4) – **“State law and in respect of the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya, federal law may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam”**.

The Constitution defined “Malay” as **“a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, and conforms to Malay customs.”**

The Constitution also acknowledges the *Syariah* Court and the Civil Court does not have jurisdiction in respect of any matters within the jurisdiction of the *Syariah* Courts. Muslims are subject to two judiciary systems namely the Civil Court and the

Syariah Court while the non-Muslims come under the jurisdiction of the Civil Court only.

Malaysia is the first country to have a Malaysian *Syariah* Index, which is a benchmark for fulfillment of the five aspects of *Maqasid Syariah*, or the objectives of Islamic principles. The five aspects of *Maqasid Syariah* are protection of the faith, protection of life, protection of the mind, protection of the lineage and protection of wealth, encompass eight main areas of judicial, economy, education, infrastructure and environment, health, culture, politics and social.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN MALAYSIA

“The Digital News Report 2017” by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University disclosed that 58% of Malaysians use Facebook for sourcing, browsing, and have online discussions, 51% use the WhatsApp, 26% use YouTube while WeChat and Instagram recorded 13% usage. In addition, 86% of Malaysians use the social media or sourcing the news, 54% use the TV, 45% use the print media while only 15% source for news via the radio.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS SHARING AND CHATTING PLATFORM

The social media is merely a platform for conversation and sharing of information, regardless of its vice or virtue and it is depending on WHO the users are and WHAT the purposes of using this platform are.

The social media is an interactive platform for the amalgamation of social networking and sharing of texts, photographs or images, videos and audios among individuals in a community and organizations. Via Internet technology, applications and hardware, humankind is now able to connect with each other, regardless of time and day, locality and comfort, right here in Malaysia and around the world.

If used accordingly, the social media would help in fulfilling Allah’s command of acquaintanceship as ordained in *Surah Al-Hujurat*: 13,

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا ۗ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

“O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you might get to know one another. Surely the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is he who is the most righteous. Allah is All-Knowledgeable, All-Aware” – **Al-Hujurat: 13**

Dakwah will also be accomplished via the social media as His command in *Surah an-Nahl*: 125,

ادْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحُكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ ۗ وَجَادِلْهُمْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ ضَلَّ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ ۗ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِالْمُهْتَدِينَ

“Call people to the Way of your Rabb with wisdom and best advice, and reason with them, if you have to, in the most courteous manner: for your Rabb knows best who strays from His Way and He knows best who is rightly guided” – An-Nahl: 125

Apart from spreading *dakwah* and knowledge, the social media has proven that it can be used to boost business and income.

SOCIAL MEDIA THREATS IN MALAYSIA

Social media threats in Malaysia could be categorized into four areas:

1. Cyber crimes
2. National security
3. National stability
4. Hoaxes and fabricated news

1. CYBER CRIMES

Crime of this nature includes online crimes and their sequels. The highest form are fraud and intrusion followed by spam, malicious-code, cyber-bullying, identity theft, pornography and related crimes committed outside of the cyber space and as a sequel to cyber crimes i.e. rape.

2. NATIONAL SECURITY

The threats are involving act of infiltration and terrorism, such as propagating militant's ideology, heresy, and deviation of Islam, which includes recruiting for Daesh. Disseminating Daesh propaganda materials and videos would easily entice the youth who lacks a strong Islamic foundation and resorting them to the easy way out to attain paradise via atrocity.

3. NATIONAL STABILITY

National stability is threatened by efforts that falter or reduce the people's trust in the government. Sedition is executed via the social media by the liberals and socialists; creating doubts against Islamic teachings and disputing the special position of the Islam in the constitution, instigating the Muslims and initiating clashes between the Muslims and the non-Muslims. Sedition also includes inciting issues pertaining to

privileges conferred to the Malay rulers, natives, judiciary system and the police force, including the constitution and laws of Malaysia, that are continuously meted out via the social media. The pinnacle of this attempt is to overthrow the government elected democratically via street rallies by executing the methodology designed by Gene Sharp, author of the 198 Methods of Nonviolent Action, and also via training and sponsorship received from foreign organizations such as the Open Society Foundation (OSF) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI).

4. HOAXES AND FAKE NEWS

Broadcasting of hoaxes and fabricated news by social media addicts are done for various reasons by or against many individuals, community members and organizations. Some are with the aim of smearing and to character assassinate individuals such as the celebrities, top government officials and political leaders. It is also done to destroy the reputation of business rivals and rivals in office politics and partisan politics. The hoaxes and fabricated news are also being initiated to provoke religious and racial sentiment as well as to paint negative perceptions against the government as if it failed to curb and reduce crimes such as kidnapping or carjacking thus instilling fear to the people. Fabricated news is also being spread during disastrous times to create the perception the government that is unable to provide aid urgently and effectively to the victims. The spread of hoaxes could also cause individuals being victimized, businesses and economy being sabotaged, unrest and anarchy in the country, which would eventually lead to the collapse of a government.

GUIDANCE FROM THE AL-QURAN

Allah SWT has bestowed us with guidance from the Holy Book on handling hoaxes and fabricated news through the principle of ‘*TABAYYUN*’ in His words from Al-Hujurat: 6,

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِن جَاءَكُمْ فَاسِقٌ بِنَبَأٍ فَتَبَيَّنُوا أَن تُصِيبُوا قَوْمًا
بِجَهَالَةٍ فَتُصَدِّحُوا عَلَىٰ مَا فَعَلْتُمْ نَادِمِينَ

“O believers, if an evildoer comes to you with some news, verify it (investigate to ascertain the truth), lest you should harm others unwittingly and then regret what you have done” – al-Hujurat: 6

Allah SWT has commanded all believers to evaluate on validity of the news spread by the sinners (FASIK), especially news spread by enemies of Islam. It is indeed baffling to learn that Muslims, and their proxies, are quick to accept without hesitation such news being propagated by the enemies of Islam whilst Allah SWT has forbidden this by saying:

وَلَنْ تَرْضَىٰ عَدُوَّ الْيَهُودِ وَلَا النَّصَارَىٰ حَتَّىٰ تَتَّبِعَ مِلَّتَهُمْ ۗ قُلْ إِنْ هَدَىٰ اللَّهُ هُوَ الْهُدَىٰ ۗ وَلَئِن آتَبَعْتَ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ بَعْدَ الَّذِي جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ ۖ مَا لَكَ مِنَ اللَّهِ مِن وَلِيٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ

“The Jews and the Christians will never be pleased with you, until you follow their faith. O Muhammad, tell them: "Allah's guidance is the only guidance;" and if after all the knowledge you have received, you yield to their desires, Allah will no longer be a protector nor a helper to you” – al-Baqarah: 120

In today’s context, the social media could be used as a powerful weapon to topple leaders and bring disasters to countries and their economy. In the Malaysian Muslims’ context, “the enemy” is the proposers of ideologies that are against the Islamic teachings, either by the enemies of Islam or their proxies, including those who are the proposers of liberalism, pluralism, socialism and evangelism.

THE MALAYSIAN EXPERIENCE

False and fabricated news have been spread in the Malaysian cyber sphere as early as the arrival of Internet in the late 1990s. Propagated as the “alternative medium” by the anti-establishment groups, social media has become the medium of choice for spreading anti-government news. The Internet power via the use of web sites, mailing groups, chat rooms, was capitalized to the maximum to spread anti-government messages and sedition against the government. Among the earliest fake news circulated online in the late 1990s was after the expulsion of the then Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim; that he was to be injected with HIV virus and fed food laid with arsenic poison during his incarceration. It was a blessing that the Internet was still in its infancy stage in Malaysia at that time – slow speed, limited access and coverage, unfriendly gadgets, social media applications were still unthinkable – to allow the virality of such fake news and cause unimaginable damages to the country.

In 2008, due to government inability to combat negativity, false news and hoaxes on YouTube, news portals and blogs, not only the then government has lost the people’s faith but also lost five states in the General Election held that year.

Although there were efforts to strengthen the party machinery to face fierce battle in the political cyber war zone in 2004 General Election, but it was only after the disappointing performance in 2008 General Election that the governing party was perceived to be more committed and has put in abundance of efforts to propel its role in social media.

In 2009, after taking over the premiership, on the side of the ruling party and government, Prime Minister Najib Razak has led by example in using the social

media. Younger and more social media savvy leader such as Khairy Jamaluddin Abu Bakar has taken bolder steps, not only in creating his own unique brand in social media but also established a special unit under the youth wing which he led to take on the political cyber warfare against the opposition party. Whole lot of other ministers also took to social media via Facebook dan Twitter to engage better the social media users and to enhance further their social presence. As an initiative to improve communication and engagement with the people, the ministry and government agencies too were instructed to fortify organization presence and communication in the social media.

Learning from Malaysia own experience and series of events, such as the Arab Spring, that have taken some countries by storm post 2010 and Malaysians involvement in Daesh and terrorism, efforts in handling social media threats, including the spread of false news, sedition and terrorists' propaganda have taken a new turn.

This phenomenon must not be taken lightly and it is not enough to conduct only campaigns to educate the people to use social media ethically and responsibly. The threats need to be handled in a more multifaceted and far-reaching manner and at times the abuse of social media must be classified as a crime in which punishments must be swift and stern before the nation and its economy collapse.

HOLISTIC AND CONTINUOUS APPROACH

At the early stage, there were some weaknesses in terms of enforcement even though there are already numerous acts and laws to curb these so-called social media misconduct and crimes especially when it comes to handling fake news, seditious materials and terrorist activities.

However, through various improvements taken by the government from time to time, the steps are getting more organized and effective. Some of the measures took by the government to handle social media threats and to take care of the greater '*maslahah*' are:

1. Enactment of Acts and Laws
2. Awareness campaigns and education
3. Government's Communication and Coordination Team
4. Strengthen enforcement
5. Establish a special cyber court.

1. Enactment of Acts and Laws

Malaysia had already enacted various acts and laws even before social media misconduct evolved to become a real threat. Among them are *Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (Act 588)*, *Computer Crimes Act 1997 (Act 563)*, *Sedition Act 1948 (Act 15)*, *Defamation Act 1957 (Act 286)* and *The Panel Code (Act 574)*.

Furthermore, the government had also made a few amendments to the *Evidence Act 1950 (Act 56)* by adding Section 114A entitled “*Presumption of fact in publication*” which presumes any owner, administrator, host, editor, subscriber of a network or website, or owner of computer or mobile device to be responsible for the contents published or re-published on their network, website, computer or mobile device.

In the early stage, there were weaknesses in regards of investigation capabilities and enforcement. To correct these, more investigation officers were recruited and trained. Agencies with specific areas of expertise, such as religious authority, Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) or any other related state level authority will be rope in when there are cases on heresy related to Islam. If it is related to terrorism, preventive laws such as *Security Offences (Special Measures) (SOSMA) Act 2012 (act 747)* and *Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015 (POTA) (Act 769)* will be referred to.

Peaceful Assembly Act 2012 (Act 736) was also enacted as recognition of the people’s right to assemble peacefully. However, the assembly must be regulated to prevent it from turning into riots, which could give negative impression towards the nation stability and affect investors’ confidence, incoming investments, tourism and economic activities. Such riots could also bring damage to the country and be abused to topple a democratically elected government.

2. Awareness Campaigns And Education

One of the main awareness campaign implemented by the government through Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) was the ***Click Wisely*** campaign that was launched in 2012. This initiative aims to educate the public on positive, responsible and safe usage of the Internet. The campaign was advocated by many local celebrities and implemented at various level of communities, which includes education institutions, government departments and the private sectors.

3. Government Communications And Coordination Team

To curb the dissemination of fake news, the government and governing party had implemented steps to increase the effectiveness of communications and information dissemination. Apart from strengthening the communication machineries at the governmental level and political party level, coordination of communications is done at the ministerial level as well as at the governmental departments and agencies levels. This is to ensure that correct information or responses will be available at the fastest speed as an effort to counter negative and false news. Other than engaging

news portal admins and social media activists to disseminate correct information, the government through MCMC also has developed a reference portal, *Sebenarnya.my* to counter fake news.

4. Strengthening The Enforcement

In order to allow enforcement to be implemented effectively, other than amending the Evidence Act 1950, and appoint and train more investigation officers, Special Cyber Court was established and began its operations in September 2016. This special court was established to enable cyber related crimes to be tried and prosecuted efficiently. Judges and related officers are given sufficient training to ensure that they are capable to handle cyber crimes cases effectively. A Cabinet Committee To Tackle Cyber Crime Issues was also formed in November 2017 to enable concerted execution across various ministry and government agencies.

On the terrorism aspect, police investigations have discovered that the terrorist organization, Daesh has been actively recruiting new members through social media applications such as Facebook, Whatsapp and recently Telegram. Since 2013, 315 individuals have been arrested and 14 terrorist attempts have been thwarted. Among those who were tried, was a trader, who has been sentenced to eight-year imprisonment for uploading Daesh activities via Telegram, and there was another involving an online forex trader, who pledged support and gave his solemn vows (*bai'ah*) to Daesh leadership in a Telegram group.

CONCLUSION

The improper and irresponsible use of social media can pose significant a threat to the creation of *Khayr Ummah*, which is a community that enjoins right conduct and forbids indecency, and placing their faith in Allah SWT. Although education and campaigns are the ideal approaches in this era of openness, a more integrated approach including the use of effective communication strategy, stern action and swift enforcement, and serving justice are also needed to protect the *ummah* and to uphold the five principles of *Maqasid Syariah*.

Knowing that malicious and irresponsible use of social media could lead to the destruction of a country's economy, the unity of the *ummah* and the faith of the believers, and has the potential to cause disunity and enmity among the Muslims' countries, the leaders of Muslims' countries must therefore be more cautious and practice *tabayyun* when ever they receive news from the western-owned news portals or social media activists, who receive funds from quarters that show hostility against Islam. There is a need for leaders of these Muslims' countries to create an effective communication network to enable them to share the facts and truths about their respective countries, thus helping them to counter false news and malicious

propaganda against Islam, Muslims' countries and their leaders.

Acknowledging that “data and information is power”, and the fact that those who are in control of social media applications are in control of the data and information of the users, there must be a concerted efforts and initiatives from the Muslims' leaders, business owners or technocrats to develop their own social media applications or to take ownership of the widely used social media applications to benefit the *ummah*.