My God Is Not Your God: The Role Of Media In Handling The Uproar Caused By The Used Of ‘Allah’ By Non-Muslims In Malaysia

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Abstract

In late 2007, the Home Ministry of Malaysia has banned the use of the word ‘Allah’ by the Herald, a Catholic newsletter. The ministry later confiscated 15,000 copies of Malay-language Bibles imported from Indonesia in which the word for God is translated as ‘Allah’. The reason is ‘to avoid the Muslims from being confused’ when the non-Muslims talk about their God. In other words the authorities in Malaysia consider the word ‘Allah’ is monopolized only by the Muslims. Nevertheless, on December 31, 2009 a ruling by the Kuala Lumpur High Court overruled the earlier ban, asserting constitutional guarantees regarding the freedom of religion in Malaysia. Since then, an already tense situation boiled over, largely due to incitement by a few hasty politicians, the mainstream media and a handful of non-governmental organizations linked by membership and leadership to the United Malays National Organization, the major ruling party. Consequently, Malaysians ushered the New Year by witnessing arsonists and vandal attacks on about ten places of worship, including Christian churches, a Sikh temple, Muslim prayer rooms and mosques. Though there were no physical injuries to anyone and the material damage can be repaired, the same cannot be said about the emotional and psychological wound left behind in the people. After numerous conflicting statements from political leaders and government officials, the underlying causes of the violence were still left unaddressed. Malaysia’s reputation as a nation at peace with its ethnic and religious diversity is at stake. In the light of this conflict, what is the role of communication media in the country? Specifically how has the media being used to control the uproar from being escalated into a more chaotic situation? This paper attempts to address the questions, through a study performed on main news media throughout the turbulence in January and February 2010.
The chronology of the event commenced in late 2007 when the Home Ministry of Malaysia banned the use of the word ‘Allah’ by *The Herald*, a Catholic newsletter. In line with this decision, the ministry later confiscated 15,000 copies of Malay-language Bibles imported from Indonesia, in which the word for God is translated as ‘Allah’. The reason for the action is ‘to avoid the Muslims from being confused’ when the non-Muslims talk about their God. In other words the authorities in Malaysia regard the word ‘Allah’ is monopolized only by the Muslims. *The Herald* later took the matter to the court. Consequently, on December 31, 2009 a ruling by the Kuala Lumpur High Court overruled the earlier ban. This verdict was in line with constitutional guarantees regarding the freedom of religion in Malaysia. The Christians regard this issue as about religious freedom and diversity. Moreover, they argue, the term has been in use in Sabah and Sarawak (the two states in East Malaysia where Muslims are minority) for years. On the other hand, the Muslims consider this matter as one of those non-negotiable issues and they are concerned that a liberal use or, worse, misuse of the term will lead to confusion. For many of them, the issue had a sense of heresy about it.

Protests and demonstrations have been planned and staged in several locations in the country to express the Muslims frustration over the court decision, despite warnings from the Police Inspector General that stern actions will be taken against any group staging illegal gatherings to demonstrate against the Catholic Church following the court ruling.

A few groups of Muslims took the issue to the streets to assert that the word “Allah” should only be used by Muslims and not those of other religions. To them it is a sacred word and can only be used by Muslims. The leaders of the protests maintained that the demonstrations were held to protect the sanctity and good name of Islam, and not to cause tension. According to the Home Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein, peaceful protests over the “Allah” issue were held at 10 mosques throughout the country after Friday prayers, fortunately without any untoward incidents. He said there were four protests in Selangor, three in Kuala Lumpur, two in Pahang and one in Terengganu. Nevertheless, the government’s decision to ‘allow’ such protests was strange since it has turned down so many requests to stage demonstrations before. Street demonstrations are almost a taboo in Malaysia. Earlier the minister said opinions over the “Allah” issue could be aired as long as it did not cause a threat to national security. The government’s soft stand on the gatherings to stage dissatisfaction over the court ruling has opened opportunities for certain emotional quarters to organize protest rallies. Meanwhile, in a move to allay the Muslims anger, Prime Minister Najib said the Home Ministry would appeal the court’s decision.

In the midst of the controversy, a minister in the Prime Minister Department alleged that the use of the word “Allah” is allowed for non-Muslims in the Federal Territories, Penang, Sabah and Sarawak as the head of state is not a Sultan. However, he added that the other states in the country had Islamic affairs enactments which prohibited the use of the word by non-Muslims. This statement is double standard and further bemused the people.

In the messy situation, several emotional quarters have taken the law into their hands. They launched an attack on a few worshipping places. As a result, one church was damaged and a few others were vandalized, along with a Sikh temple and Muslim prayer rooms. A church, the Metro Tabernacle church in Kuala Lumpur was firebombed at midnight and Live Chapel in Section 17, Petaling Jaya was attacked with a Molotov cocktail, causing some damage. Another Molotov cocktail failed to explode in the Church of Assumption in Petaling Jaya at 4am.
Later on the Home Ministry has managed to obtain a stay of execution from High Court Justice Lau Bee Lan on her earlier ruling allowing *The Herald* to use the word “Allah” in its Bahasa Malaysia edition. Nonetheless, the issue is far from over. There is no denying that inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations in the country have been affected by what has happened. There is still anger and frustration on both sides and the swell will continue to be felt as the legal appeal proceeds. The question is what has the communication media been telling the people on this matter?

**Arguments in the media**

The arguments in the main news media can be divided into two, pro ruling arguments and against ruling arguments.

**Arguments in favor of the ruling**

Some media reports seemed to be slanting towards supporting the decision by the court to allow non-Muslims to use the word ‘Allah’. For instance, an article in an electronic media quotes a statement by Mr. Anwar Ibrahim, an opposition leader, saying that the Muslims do not owned the word ‘Allah’. Mr. Anwar said the uproar was actually orchestrated by the ruling party, in the move to get back the people especially the Muslims to rally behind them. This move seemed important since the ruling party has lost its two-third majority in the March 2008 general election, a solid support that it has enjoyed since independent in 1957. Thus, for Mr. Anwar, the uproar was only a political propaganda used by the ruling National Front especially the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) to exploit public sentiment to garner support and to shift public attention from the embarrassing scandals involving the government, ranging from ‘controversial court decisions, to allegations of exorbitant commissions extracted from military procurements, to the theft of two jet engines from the inventory of the Royal Malaysian Air Force.”

The same report also carries Mr. Anwar’s explanation of his stand. According to him, the word “Allah” was already in the lexicon of pre-Islamic Arabs. He said “…Arabic’s sister Semitic languages also refer to God as “Allah” namely, “Elaha” in Aramaic, and “Elohim” in Hebrew.”

Harakahdaily, an organ belongs to the Pan Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) reported on February 8th, 2010 that the former *mufti* (a scholar who is an interpreter or expounder of Islamic law) of Perlis, Dr. Mohd Asri Zainal Abidin alleged that it is the Christians right to use the word ‘Allah’ and this right is recognized by Islam. He argues that the non-Muslims should be allowed to use the word since they are expected to utter the word when singing the Selangor State Anthem. He further asserted that even the logo of the Royal Police Force carries the word ‘Allah’, and the logo is also worn by the non-Muslim police personnel. The former mufti went further in the report by relating a historical event where the Emperor of Rom, Hercules, used the word ‘Allah’ in his dialogue with Abu Sufian (a non believer) during the early period of Islam. His point was even the Christian King used the word ‘Allah’ at that time and it was a non-issue.

However, the same report also carries an exposure by the former Health Minister, Mr. Chua Jui Meng that the Home Ministry started to curb the circulation of *The Herald* not because of the used of the word ‘Allah’. According to him, the actual fact is that the government was not comfortable with *The Herald* when it started to publish pro-opposition commentaries during the 12th general election in 2008. Specifically Mr. Chua claimed that when an NGO held a big rally in the capital demanding a clean and just election, *The Herald* carried in its front page write-ups and images supporting the movement. So when the Home Ministry realized that most of the Christians in the country favored the opposition and could intimidate the UMNO, it began to
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single out *The Herald*. To Mr. Chua, the decision to bar *The Herald* was not due to religious factor, but rather to safeguard UMNO.

Nonetheless, the same commentary includes a statement by the central youth leader of PAS, Mr. Nasruddin Hassan at-Tantawi who said that the Muslims in the country are apprehensive and worried that the word ‘Allah’ may be misused. To him even though the Muslims have no right to forbid the non-Muslims from using the word, they are troubled by the possibilities of the word to be used in a wrong way. Hence, he suggested the authorities to spell out clearly the circumstances where the word can be used.

A pro-opposition blog on Monday, 11 January 2010 carries a press statement issued by the advisor to the Democratic Action Party (DAP), Dr. Chen Man Hin. Dr. Chin clearly stated that UMNO’s move “…to boost its fortunes by using the ‘Allah’ controversy has backfired, and destabilised religious harmony in a multi-religious society.” According to Dr. Chin UMNO’s campaign to reverse a High Court judgment that ‘Allah’ could be used by *The Herald*, a Catholic weekly was a scheme to win back support for a misdirected party. He said that by harping on such a sensitive issue like ‘Allah’ UMNO tried to misled the public that it is a saviour of Islam. He further accused that UMNO was the one that claim that the judgment by the High Court was wrong as it would confuse Muslims and make them susceptible to conversion to the Christian faith. Dr. Chin also accused that UMNO was the one behind the planning of a day of protest rallies throughout the country, aided and abetted by the IGP with the police providing protection while the protests were held. Consequently, according to Dr. Chin, this pandemonium has stirred the emotions of the people until it rose to a high among the extremists who proceeded to attack the churches and other worshipping places. Apparently the government realized that the situation has turned dangerous and the acts were condemned by the King and the Prime Minister. But Dr. Chin stressed that condemnation is not the solution. To him the used of the word ‘Allah’ is not an issue since the Arabic word for God has been used for centuries in Arab countries by both Muslims and Christians. And in Sarawak the term ‘Allah’ has been in use by Christian natives for over a century, long before the advent of Independence or the formation of UMNO. The Muslims did not complain or protest until recently. Thus, Dr. Chin pointed his finger to UMNO for their “…misleading claim that the use of ‘Allah’ by the Christians in Malaysia would confuse Muslims and leading to conversions of Muslims to Christianity.” He asked how such a fallacy could be allowed to germinate and spread when the fact is that in Arab countries such a scenario never occurred over the centuries. Dr. Chin concluded his press statement by stressing that UMNO and its followers must shoulder the blame of what happened over the weekend of the New Year, and want them to apologise and cease spreading false news to confuse the Muslims. He also suggested a commission of enquiry to be set up to find the truth behind the display of false propaganda and deliberate lies causing and provoking the burning of places of worship.

Surprisingly a commentary published on Saturday, January 9, 2010 quoted a speech delivered by Tengku Razaleigh, a veteran UMNO leader who also transmits a similar disposition. He considered UMNO’s move in handling the ‘Allah’ issue as baseless and “digging itself into an intolerant hard line position that has no parallel that I know of in the Muslim world”. He on the other hand, praised PAS, the Islamic party and regards the effort by PAS in this issue as more appropriate to the plural society of the country. He accused his own party of fanning communal sentiment, and to him the government is taking up policy lines based on “sensitivities” rather than principle. Specifically Tengku Razaleigh said “In the controversy over whether Christians are allowed to use the term ‘Allah’ the government talks about managing sentiment when it should be talking about what is the right thing to do. This is what government
sounds like when a political system and its leadership have come unstuck from the rule of law. It goes from issue to issue, hostage to the brinksmanship of sensitivities. Small matters threaten to erupt into racial conflict. The government of a multiracial society that cannot rise above sentiment is clearly too weak or too self-interested to hold the country together. It has lost credibility and legitimacy.” Tengku Razaleh concluded from this issue that the ruling government is in crisis.

**Arguments not in favor or against the ruling**

Some news media reports seemed to carry write ups which are against the judgment of the High Court of Kuala Lumpur to grant permission to The Herald to use the word ‘Allah’.

For instance, Utusan Malaysia, the nation’s largest Malay-language daily (owned by UMNO) at the wake of the controversy has questioned the court’s decision on the issue and openly accused the non-Muslims of desecrating the name of the Muslim God. The paper also alleged the issue as a Christian conspiracy to overrun this predominantly Muslim nation through conversion.

Nevertheless, Prime Minister Najib has tried to play down the issue. An online version of the news media reported his claim that following the recent vandalism of churches and other places of worship, the true spirit of Malaysian nation has shone through. According to the media, Malaysian of all walk of lives has spoken with a unified voice in condemning the despicable acts of a few. Prime Minister Najib asserts that citizens have joined as one to assert that vandalism is never an acceptable way to express diverse views or resolve differences. He said many measures have been taken to counter the violence. Muslim groups volunteered to safeguard churches in their towns. Muslim social activists have written petitions to oppose these senseless acts of vandalism. Muslim civic groups are standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Christians, Hindus and Buddhists to ensure that all people can freely worship as they wish. Christian and civic leaders have urged calm and interfaith dialogue; they are fully aware that those who perpetrated these acts do not represent the Muslim majority in Malaysia. Mr. Najib said that he saw this spirit first hand when he visited the Metro Tabernacle Church to meet with the pastor and to commit support for rebuilding. Nonetheless, the report stressed the Prime Minister’s vow to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Harakahdaily, a newsletter of the Islamist party, PAS, on the 4th January 2010, carries a statement that the court ruling is an attempt to challenge Islam as a religion of the Federation. The statement was made by one of its leader. The source also lamented certain leaders in PAS who support the court ruling to allow the used of ‘Allah’ by the Christian newsletter. While he admitted that the word ‘Allah’ has been printed in the Bible used in the Malay Archipelago several hundred years ago, according to him the move was permitted by the then occupying rulers of Portuguese, Dutch, and English. The country was not yet gained independent or governed by the Malay-Muslim rulers at that time. He also questioned the motives of the Catholic Church to press on the used of the word ‘Allah’ when the Home Ministry since Mahathir’s era in 1986 has banned the used of several words - Allah, Kaabah, Solat and Baitullah by other religions. He further asked why are the churches so adamant to use the word ‘Allah’ when they do not even use it in the Bible in the United States or Europe.

To him the Christian should continue to use the word ‘Tuhan’ in place of ‘God’ as they are doing now, instead of replacing it with ‘Allah’. Furthermore, if they are writing the Bible in the Malay language, then the Malay word for ‘God’ is ‘Tuhan’. ‘Allah’ is not a Malay word, but an Arabic term. He further asserts, in the Malay language and culture Allah means the one and only God for Muslims.
The Star newspaper, the most popular English daily in Malaysia, owned by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), another component party in the ruling government, in its Saturday 9th January 2010 carries report that Prime Minister Najib condemned attacks on the Catholic churches following the court judgment. The report also highlighted Mr. Najib’s disappointment on a news portal reporter for saying UMNO politicians have been “fanning the flames” since the court verdict on the “Allah” issue and told the reporter not to point the finger at UMNO.

Nevertheless, the same newspaper on January 13, 2010 carries a more academic point of view. An article by Datuk Dr Shad Saleem Faruqi, an Emeritus Professor of Law at a local university entitled “Finding the middle path” appears to be more rational. Prof. Shad started his article by admitting that Bibles in Indonesian language use ‘Allah’ to refer to the Christian God. He considers the argument that the use of the word ‘Allah’ by non-Muslims will confuse the Muslim population as humiliating and giving a picture that the Muslims are exceptionally ignorant and susceptible. This notion ignores the fact that Islam took deep roots in the Malay lives hundreds of years ago and “became the identifying feature of the Malay persona.”

In Malaysia, proselytisation is considered unconstitutional. According to Prof. Shad a relevant law on public order is section 298 of the Penal Code which punishes the offence of wounding religious feelings. He asserts that “…these feelings are likely to be wounded if there is a claim that Allah was born in the manger; that Allah was born of Mary; that Allah was crucified on the cross.” Muslims believe that Allah does not beget and cannot be begotten. He cannot be depicted in any physical form. And he cannot be part of the Trinity of Father, Son and the Holy Ghost.

Another fact emphasized by Prof. Shad in the article is that the word ‘Allah’ has never been part of Christian discourse or sermons other than in the Arab Peninsula and in Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia). So the word ‘Allah’ has never been in the Christian vocabulary in the peninsular of Malaysia until now. Therefore what is the reason for The Herald to use the word? According to Prof Shad in The Herald’s case there is suspicion, although unjustified, that the use of the word Allah is an indirect attempt to proselytize Muslims, contrary to Article 11(4).

At any rate, Prof Shad maintained that in relation to The Herald case, the general Muslim reaction is too emotional and is based on lack of knowledge. On the other hand, The Herald has “lots of facts but no tact.” Their arguments in the court proceedings basically rely on logic, history and rationality but they have failed to consider the local context and its religious sensitivities.

Similar with a few other realistic stands, Prof. Shad suggests Malaysians to engage in more inter-faith dialogues to find comprehensive political and administrative solutions for their delicate inter-religious relationships.

**Conclusion**

The ‘Allah’ issue has tarnished the image of Malaysia as a rational and tolerant multiracial and multi-religious nation. The issue cannot be settled through legal proceedings alone. Communication channels should be open wide enough to make the people from both sides of the spat to fully understand the issue. As it is now, the matter is still pending the court review. At the meantime communication media should play a wise role to make the issue comprehensible to the public. The politicians from both sides of the fence are accusing each other. The ruling government parties are using print and electronic media under their control to assault the opposition. The opposition parties on the other hand are using their newsletters and internet to strike back at the government. The opposition pact is accusing the government of trying to exploit the Malays in order to regain their support and consider them as the savior of
Islam. Thus the government seemed to be against the decision of allowing the non-Muslims to use the word ‘Allah’. All government owned and controlled media (the mainstream print and electronic media) portray this stand explicitly and at times implicitly. On the contrary view, the ruling party especially UMNO regards the opposition as trying to win the votes of the non-Muslims. Thus the opposition appeared to support the court verdict by allowing the non-Muslims to use the word ‘Allah’, a word too sacred for the Muslims. The opposition newsletters and online news portals discuss their views on the matter overtly in supporting their stand on this issue. For the ruling government, the opposition parties especially the Islamic Party and the Malay dominant The Peoples’ Justice Party (PKR) have abandon their principles and willing to sacrifice their religion for the sake of some political mileage. As the politicians are condemning each other and the judges are presiding on the matter, the crack between Muslims and Christians in Malaysia are getting wider and wider. The only hope to abridge the schism lies with communication; have more inter-faith discourses and use communication media wisely. What the Malaysian media did so far was only to report the event and to transmit the politicians’ outburst to blame the other party. Definitely this is insufficient in handling such complicated conflict. Malaysian media has failed to educate the public to understand the issue and to look for the best possible ways to ease the tense situation.
References


