

A Study of Islamic Conversion in Malaysia

SAYYID BUHAR MUSAL KASSIM, MOHD SYUKRI YEOH ABDULLAH & ZAWIYAH BABA

ABSTRACT

The 'religious conversion' would describe the abandoning of adherence to one denomination and affiliating with another. It precedes a transformation of lifestyle and thought patterns often taking place over a long period of time and requiring a significant level of effort and commitment as described in the spiritual teachings of the world's great religions. In Islam the Conversion is a voluntary rohani acceptance of Islamic faith and hence it is very personal. The religious condition of the true conversion is the acceptance of the truth of Islam after knowledge, realization, confirmation and voluntary declaration of Kalimah shahadah. In Malaysia Islamic conversion is a common daily activity. Individual Arab traders and including prophet's companions (peace be upon them) preached in Malay Archipelago. What factors motivate non-Muslims to embrace Islam and Malaysian society's perceptions of such conversions need to be examined so that harmony is maintained in multi-religious Malaysia. Islam transcends nationality, ideology, race, language and territory. It is guidance for all mankind. Since independence, Malaysia declared Islam as the religion of federal (official religion). Islam is not a forceful energy to be imposed on the human being for acceptance, but it is a love gift from Allah. Islam is the only perfect destination for man to achieve felicity in this life and also in hereafter. This truth is the reason behind Islam rooted to spread rapidly in Malaysia.

Key words: religious conversion, Muslim converts, conversion laws, process of change, Malaysian converts

ABSTRAK

Pertukaran agama adalah satu transformasi kejiwaan menerusi pembuangan kepercayaan lama yang diikuti penerimaan satu kepercayaan baru. Pertukaran ini dilakukan secara peribadi dan tanpa paksaan mana-mana pihak. Senario pertukaran ini turut melibatkan proses penerimaan kepercayaan Islam di kalangan masyarakat bukan Islam. Penerimaan ini adalah penerimaan dalaman terhadap akidah Islam dan berlaku secara sukarela. Ia boleh dilakukan pada bila-bila masa dengan cara tersembunyi atau terbuka menerusi ucapan Kalimah Syahadah selepas mempunyai pengetahuan keIslaman, menyedari sepenuhnya tindakan menerima kepercayaan Islam dan melafazkan Kalimah Shahadah. Di Malaysia, pertukaran kepercayaan iaitu pengislaman adalah satu fenomena biasa dan berlaku setiap hari. Namun, usaha suci ini sering melahirkan pelbagai masalah di kalangan Saudara Baru, malah turut melibatkan pelbagai pihak lain. Oleh itu, faktor yang menjadi pendorong ke arah pengislaman oleh seorang bukan Islam, di samping persepsi masyarakat Malaysia terhadap penerimaan Islam perlu dikaji secara mendalam. Kajian ini akan menghasilkan satu garis panduan pembinaan personaliti Saudara Baru yang yakin dengan kepercayaan baru, mampu meneruskan kehidupan dalam scenario baru dan bijak menyeimbangkan antara persekitaran lama dan baru. Kajian ini dapat menyumbang kepada usaha mengekalkan keharmonian masyarakat majmuk di Malaysia khususnya yang terdiri dari pelbagai agama dan kepercayaan.

Kata kunci: pertukaran agama, Saudara Baru, Undang-undang Pengislaman, proses perubahan, Saudara Baru Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Religious conversion in popular usage refers to the adoption, wholesale, of a set of beliefs identified with one particular religious denomination to the exclusion of others. Thus 'religious conversion' would describe the abandoning of adherence to one denomination and affiliating with another. It precedes a transformation of lifestyle and thought patterns often taking place over a long period of time and requiring

a significant level of effort and commitment as described in the spiritual teachings of the world's great religions. This transformation is the first and basic meaning of religious conversion.

Many religions have developed particular methods of conversion for the incorporation of new members. The respective prerequisites and initiations underlie the internal directions and tendencies of a religion, and are variously regulated by religious law, as well as nationally and institutionally. In Buddhism,

the concept of ‘conversion’ denotes entry into monastic Buddhism, which entails a renunciation of secular life, and dissolves all social bonds. Whether conversion also represents a Buddhist’s exchange of one school of Buddhism for another is disputed. The same holds true for the various ways of salvation in the Hindu religious system, or for the guru movements of Sikhism. In Judaism, ‘conversion’ designates the process of entry into the Jewish community.

In Christianity conversion is expected to be more than a simple change in religious identity, but a change in nature (regeneration), evidenced by a change in values. The Latin word *conversio*, translating the Greek *metanoia*, literally means “going the other way” or “changing one’s mind”. According to Christianity a convert is one who renounces sin as worthless and treasures instead the supreme worth of Jesus Christ; the convert sees the worth of Christ in Jesus’ sacrificial death and resurrection and renounces sin (Piper 1983)

A special case is represented by simultaneous membership in several religions, as we find, for example, in Japan (frequently, Shintô and Buddhism). We can also, however, speak of conversion in the case of a complementation of one ‘religious truth’ with one or more others, since a conversion always implies leaving the ‘old faith,’ and dissolving one’s current community membership. Over the course of religious history, religions have repeatedly introduced conversion under various degrees of constraint. Especially in the case of aggressive confrontations, or in theocracies, the prevailing power has forced subjects or minorities to make a change in religions (clash/fighting). But even disadvantages of tolerated religions, such as special social, juridical positions or, economic, have led to conversions to the dominating religion, from which one has then hoped for protection and improvement of one’s own situation. An extraordinary mass conversion occurred in the modern age, when some five million Indians emulated the adoption of Buddhism by attorney B. B. Ambadkar (d. 1956), to demonstrate opposition to Hindu discrimination against the casteless.

Conversion in Islam

There is no proper word for conversion in Arabic other than the idea of becoming a Muslim. Muslim means one who submits, a submitter; Islam means

submitting, submission. Grammatically, Islam is a verbal noun but behind it has a distinct verbal force. So, Islam is not just a simple name to represent a religion, like Christianity, Buddhism or Hinduism or other religions, but Islam actually indicates an action through submission. Hence, conversion to Islam is the act of true acceptance by heart and declaration by lips to be an obedient servant of Allah.

In Islam conversion is a voluntary *ruhani* acceptance of Islamic faith and hence it is very personal. It could be done at any time by a non-Muslim, privately or publically. He or she simply needs to declare the *kalimah shahdah* after understanding its meaning and accepting its message. The religious condition of the true conversion is the acceptance of the truth of Islam after knowledge, realization, confirmation and voluntary declaration of *kalimah Shahadah* that is to declare “*I bear witness that there is no god to be worshipped except Allah and I bear witness that Prophet Muhammad is the final Messenger of Allah*”. Islamic conversion is an act of God and is decided by God in the spiritual world, but the man has been given the choice to work for it as his responsibility to his Creator. And for those who convert without the real intention of accepting Islam they are in fact not receiving the light of Allah, so they will be in the dark.

Islam is not a forceful energy to be imposed on the human being for acceptance, but it is a love gift from Allah. Islam is the only perfect destination for man to achieve felicity in this life and also in hereafter. Whoever is eager to achieve a perfect life destination both physically and spiritually will have destiny in Islam and whoever does not like to be a pleased servant of Allah the One Who Created him to form a balanced human society on earth and to achieve the perfect life destination and its goal both physically and spiritually may certainly dislike to be a Muslim. Allah s.w.t says:

وَمَنْ يَتَّبِعْ غَيْرَ الْإِسْلَامِ دِينًا فَلَنْ يُقْبَلَ مِنْهُ وَهُوَ فِي الْآخِرَةِ
مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ

Meaning:

If anyone desires a religion [way of life] other than Islam, never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter, he will be in the ranks of those who have lost (their selves in the Hellfire). (al-Quran ali- Imran verse 85)

Religious Conversion in International Law

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights defines religious conversion as a human right: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief,” (Article 18). This is controversial because some groups either forbid or restrict religious conversion.

Based on the declaration the The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNCHR) drafted the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a legally binding treaty. It states that “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, ...” (Article 18.1). “No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.” (Article 18.2).

Then issued a General Comment on this Article in 1993: “The Committee observes that the freedom to ‘have or to adopt’ a religion or belief necessarily entails the freedom to choose a religion or belief, including the right to replace one’s current religion or belief with another or to adopt atheistic views. Article 18.2 bars coercion that would impair the right to have or adopt a religion or belief, including the use of threat of physical force or penal sanctions to compel believers or non-believers to adhere to their religious beliefs and congregations, to recant their religion or belief or to convert.”

ISLAMIC CONVERSION IN MALAYSIA

Individual Arab traders and including *sahabas* (Prophet Muhammad’s companions) (peace be upon them) preached in Malay Archipelago, Indo-China and China in the early seventh century (Groeneveldt 1877). The Islamic people “Chams” of Cambodia trace their origin to Jahsh (Geys), the father of Zainab r.a and thus one of the father-in-laws of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w). Islam was introduced in Sumatra coast by Arabs in 674 CE (Arnold 1913/1997).

Islam was also introduced in Sumatra probably by Jahsh. Islam was also brought to Malaysia by Indian Muslim traders in the 12th Century AD. It is commonly held that Islam first arrived in Malay territories since Sultan Muzaffar Shah 1 (12th Century) of Kedah, the first ruler to be known to convert to Islam after being introduced to it by Indian

traders who themselves were recent converts. In the 13th Century, the Terengganu Stone Monument was found at Kuala Berang, Terengganu which was the first Malay state to receive Islam in 1303. Sultan Megat Iskandar Shah, known as Parameswara prior to his conversion, was the first Sultan of Melaka. He converted to Islam after marrying a princess from Pasai, of present day Indonesia. The religion was adopted peacefully by the coastal trading ports people of Malaysia and Indonesia, absorbing rather than conquering existing beliefs. By the 15th and 16th centuries it was the majority faith of the Malay people.

Islam in Malaysia

Since independence, Malaysia declared Islam as the religion of federal (official religion). Originally, the draft Constitution of Malaysia did not specify any official religion for the state. This move was supported by the rulers of the nine Malay states, who felt that it was sufficient that Islam was the official religion of each of their individual states. However, Justice Hakim Abdul Hamid of the Reid Commission which drafted the Constitution came out strongly in favour of making Islam the official religion, and as a result the final Constitution named Islam as the official religion of Malaysia (Wu & Hickling 1997). All ethnic Malays are Muslim (100%) as defined by Article 160 of the Constitution of Malaysia (Ooi 2007). As required by Malaysian law and defined in the Constitution of Malaysia, a Malay would surrender his ethnic status if he was not a Muslim.

Other Religions

All the other religions are also constitutionally granted the freedom of practice. On the occasion of al-Marhum Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj, Malaysia’s first prime minister - 80th birthday, he stated in the 9 February 1983 edition of the newspaper *The Star* that the “country has a multi-racial population with various beliefs. Malaysia must continue as a secular State with Islam as the official religion.” In the same issue of *The Star*, al-Marhum Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj was supported by the third Malaysian Prime Minister, Tun Hussein Onn, who stated that the “nation can still be functional as a secular state with Islam as the official religion” (Cia.gov; Malaysian government statistics department 2001); General Report of the Population

and Housing Census 2000. Putrajaya: Department of Statistics, Malaysia 2005). In 2008, Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad declared that Malaysia is an Islamic state.

Islamic Religion Is Under The Sultans

Nine of the Malaysian states, namely Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang, Kedah Perak, Perlis, Selangor, Johor and Negeri Sembilan have constitutional Malay monarchs (*Sultans*). These Malay rulers still maintain authority over religious affairs in the states. The states of Penang, Malacca, Sarawak and Sabah do not have any sultan, but the king (Yang di-Pertuan Agong) plays the role of head of Islam in each of those states as well as in each of the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya.

Malay Population

Article 160 of the Constitution of Malaysia defines various terms used in the Constitution. It has an important impact on Islam in Malaysia and the Malay people due to its definition of a Malay person under clause 2. It took effect after August 31, 1957 ("Merdeka Day" or "Independence Day") in West Malaysia, and took effect in Singapore and East Malaysia when they merged with Malaya in 1963. The article no longer applies to Singapore, as it declared independence from Malaysia in 1965; however, it does affect the legal status of Malay Singaporeans when they enter Malaysia. The Malaysian constitution guarantees freedom of religion and makes Islam the official religion. According to the Population and Housing Census 2000 figures, approximately 60.4% of the population practiced Islam of which only the Sunni branch is allowed (Constitution of Malaysia, Article 160 (2)-1). Buddhism 19.2%; Christianity 9.1%; Hinduism 6.3%; and 2.6%, practice Confucianism Taoism and other traditional Chinese religions. The remainder was accounted for by other faiths including animism, folk religion, and Sikhism while 0.8% either reported having no religion or did not provide any information (MZ Mahari 2000)

All ethnic Malays are considered Muslim by Article 160 of the Constitution. Statistics from the 2000 Census indicate that 75.9% of the Chinese population are identified as Buddhist, with significant numbers of adherents following Taoism (10.6%) and Christianity (9.6%), along with small Hui-Muslim populations in areas like Penang (Frith 2000). The

majority of the Indian population follows Hinduism (84.5%), with a significant minority identifying as Christians (7.7%), Muslims (3.8%), over 150,000 are Sikhs, and 1,000 Jains. Christianity is the predominant religion of the non-Malay Bumiputera community (50.1%) with an additional 36.3% identifying as Muslims and 7.3% follow folk religion.

Muslims are obliged to follow the decisions of *Syariah* courts in matters concerning their religion. The Islamic judges are expected to follow the *Syafi'i* legal school of Islam, which is the main *madhhab* of Malaysia ("Federal Court rejects Lina's appeal in a majority decision". *The Star*. May 31, 2007. <http://thestar.com.my/news/story>.). The jurisdiction of *Syariah* courts is limited only to Muslims in matters such as marriage, inheritance, divorce, apostasy, religious conversion, and custody among others. No other criminal or civil offences are under the jurisdiction of the *Syariah* courts, which have a similar hierarchy to the Civil Courts. Despite being the supreme courts of the land, the Civil Courts (including the Federal Court) do not hear matters related to Islamic practices.

Definition of a Malay

The Article defines a Malay as a Malaysian citizen born to a Malaysian citizen who professes to be a Muslim, habitually speaks the Malay language, adheres to Malay customs, and is domiciled in Malaysia or Singapore. As a result, Malay citizens who convert out of Islam are no longer considered Malay under the law. Hence, the Bumiputera privileges afforded to Malays under Article 153 of the Constitution, the New Economic Policy (NEP) are forfeit for such converts.

Likewise, a non-Malay Malaysian who converts to Islam can lay claim to Bumiputera privileges, provided he meets the other conditions. In Malaysia, the Malay population is defined by Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution as someone born to a Malaysian citizen who professes to be a Muslim, habitually speaks the Malay language, adheres to Malay customs, and is domiciled in Malaysia or Singapore. This definition is loose enough to include people of a variety of ethnic backgrounds, and it therefore differs from the anthropological understanding of what constitutes an ethnic Malay.

This understanding of the meaning of "Malay" in Malaysia has led to the creation of an ethno religious identity where it has been suggested that a Malay cannot convert out of Islam as illustrated in

the Federal Court decision in the case of Lina Joy. As of 2020, Malays made up an estimated 64.5% of the population of Malaysia. It is predicted that this proportion will rise due to birth rates higher than other ethnic groups.

Bumiputera Status

Bumiputera means the people of the land; the population of Malaysia is made up of many ethnic groups. Malays make up 50.4% of the population, with other Bumiputera making up another 11%. According to constitutional definition, Malays are Muslims who practice Malay customs (*adat*) and culture. They play a dominant role politically. Bumiputera status is also accorded to certain non-Malay indigenous people, including ethnic Thais, Khmers, Chams and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak. Non-Malay Bumiputera make up more than half of Sarawak's population and over two thirds of Sabah's population. There also exist aboriginal groups in much smaller numbers on the peninsula, where they are collectively known as *Orang Asli*. Laws over who gets Bumiputera status vary between states.

Various other minorities who lack Bumiputera status have established themselves in Malaysia. 23.7% of the population is of Chinese descent, while those of Indian descent comprise 7.1% of the population. The Chinese have historically been dominant in the business and commerce community, and form the majority of the population of Penang. Indians began migrating to Malaysia in the early 19th century. The majority of the Indian community is Tamils. Many Europeans and Middle Easterners assimilated through inter-marriage into the Christian and Muslim communities respectively. Most Eurasian Malaysians trace their ancestry to British, Dutch or Portuguese colonists.

Effectiveness of Islamic Da'wah Movements

Malaysia is certainly blessed with her multi-religious harmony where all people live together peacefully. Major religions of Malaysia are Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, Animism, while Baha'ism, secularism and pluralisms also co-exist. Since Islam is the official religion of Malaysia and the administration under Muslim government always assures the well being of all other religions, even the major festivities of other religions are also recognised as official celebrations or national celebrations, for

example X-mas of Christianity, Chinese new year celebration of Chinese/Visak celebrations of Buddhists, Deepavali and Thaipusam celebrations of Hinduism are all considered as national celebrations. These festivities are also taken as an opportunity for all races to come close together with religious tolerance. Almost all of these festivals are participated by the prime minister himself. Through all these religions Malaysians can come close to Malaysian national religion Islam. Almost every non-Muslims of Malaysia are aware of the fundamental teachings of Islam from the early school education itself as national schools students can easily access to Islamic knowledge, its harmonious beauties and its truth message.

Every citizen of Malaysia is aware of historical facts of the Malay Sultanate. The first Sultan of Malaysia, Parameswara's conversion to Islam was followed by all other rulers of the country. So the conversion was established as an important fact in Malaysian history and stays in the hearts of every student of Malaysia; hence Islamic conversion is not a strange subject for Malaysians.

In a multi-racial country like Malaysia those who love peace, stability, harmony and noble values are always keen to know more about Islam. Islam with evidence of sociological and psychological balance preaches these human values with its al-Qur'anic wisdom and Prophetic approach. Somehow every non-Muslim in the country consciously accepts the truth that Islam is good and teaches hygiene, as a way of life. Islam has an official authority of moral law enforcement (*syariat* law) while other religions in the country are free to practice whatever they wish such as alcoholism, free sex, gambling. So, intellectually Islam is acceptable as its messages are towards the establishment of hygienic society with its great wisdom of spiritual and moral behavioural therapies of five times daily prayers. States often organize religious forums to establish healthy society with emphasis on national stability and a healthy Malaysian society comprising multi-racial religious faiths and beliefs. The positive values are easily accepted by the intellectuals of every religion and its leaders.

Islamic concepts of nation developments and human developments are accepted by other religious leaders and political leaders. The al-Qur'anic sociological transformations are even promoted by non-Muslim leaders of the country to establish peace and stability among their followers. Al-Qur'an introduces the sociological balance towards a peaceful

country with the sincere devotional contributes of its people with their faith in Allah as a God of All Forgiving and Most Merciful. These positive and truthful value orientated principles will attract people of other faiths towards Islam. Allah says:

كُلُوا مِنْ رِزْقِ رَبِّكُمْ وَاشْكُرُوا لَهُ بَلَدَةٌ طَيِّبَةٌ وَرَبٌّ غَفُورٌ

Meaning:

There was, for Saba, aforesaid, a Sign in their home-land - two Gardens to the right and to the left. "Eat of the Sustenance (provided) by your Lord, and be grateful to Him: a territory fair and happy, and a Lord Oft-Forgiving!. (al-Qur'an, chapter 34: verse 15)

Sociological Acceptance of Islam By the Other Religions

The basic principles of Islam are accepted by all other religions in their sociological theories, for example Islam is Truth, and all its messages are towards Justice and Truth and everyone believes in Truth and its formulas. Islam stands for peace as everyone wants peace. Islam emphasizes personal purification which is accepted by everyone. Islam prohibits injustice with religious doctrines and ethics and everyone desires justice. This helps non-Muslims to understand that Islam is not spread by sword. In fact in Islam there is no compulsion; it is a friendly religion and can be accepted by every human being. For example, many non-Muslim thinkers and philosophers and world leaders support Islam and its Messenger Muhammad peace be upon him. Below, are among those who have given their statements and opinion about Islam and Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w).

Sir George Bernard Shaw said: "If any religion had the chance of ruling over England, nay Europe within the next hundred years it could be Islam." "I have always held the religion of Muhammad in high estimation because of its wonderful vitality. It is the only religion which appears to me to possess that assimilating capacity to the changing phase of existence which can make itself appeal to every age. I have studied him - the wonderful man and in my opinion for being an anti-Christ, he must be called the Saviour of Humanity. I believe that if a man like him were to assume the dictatorship of the modern world he would succeed in solving its problems in a way that would bring it the much needed peace and happiness: I have prophesied about the faith of

Muhammad that it would be acceptable to the Europe of tomorrow as it is beginning to be acceptable to the Europe of today."

Michael Hart said, "My choice of Muhammad to lead the list of the world's most influential persons may surprise some readers and may be questioned by others, but he was the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the religious and secular levels. Of humble origins, Muhammad founded and promulgated one of the world's great religions, and became an immensely effective political leader. Today, thirteen centuries after his death, his influence is still powerful and pervasive.

Dr. William Draper said: in four years after the death of Justinian, A.D. 569, "Muhammad" was born in Mecca, in Arabia; the man who, of all men, has exercised the greatest influence upon the human race ... To be the religious head of many empires, to guide the daily life of one-third of the human race, may perhaps justify the title of a Messenger of God.

Mahatma Gandhi said : I wanted to know the best of the life of one who holds today an undisputed sway over the hearts of millions of mankind ... I became more than ever convinced that it was not the sword that won a place for Islam in those days in the scheme of life. It was the rigid simplicity, the utter self-effacement of the Prophet the scrupulous regard for pledges, his intense devotion to his friends and followers, his intrepidity, his fearlessness, his absolute trust in God and in his own mission. These and not the sword carried everything before them and surmounted every obstacle. When I closed the second volume (of the Prophet's biography), I was sorry there was not more for me to read of that great life.

Reverend Bosworth Smith said : "Head of the State as well as the Church, he was Caesar and Pope in one; but he was Pope without the Pope's pretensions, and Caesar without the legions of Caesar, without a standing army, without a bodyguard, without a police force, without a fixed revenue. If ever a man ruled by a right divine, it was Muhammad, for he had all the powers without their supports. He cared not for the dressings of power. The simplicity of his private life was in keeping with his public life." "In Mohammadanism everything is different here. Instead of the shadowy and the mysterious, we have history... We know of the external history of Muhammad ... while for his internal history after his mission had been proclaimed, we have a book absolutely unique in its origin, in its preservation ... on the Substantial authority of which no one has ever been able to cast a serious doubt."

S. Tritton said : in 'Islam: "The picture of the Muslim soldier advancing with a sword in one hand and the Qur'an in the other is quite false". James Michener: "No other religion in history spread so rapidly as Islam. The West has widely believed that this surge of religion was made possible by the sword. But no modern scholar accepts this idea, and the Qur'an is explicit in the support of the freedom of conscience." "Like almost every major prophet before him, Muhammad fought shy of serving as the transmitter of God's word sensing his own inadequacy. But the Angel commanded 'Read'. So far as we know, Muhammad was unable to read or write, but he began to dictate those inspired words which would soon revolutionize a large segment of the earth: "There is one God"." "In all things Muhammad was profoundly practical. When his beloved son Ibrahim died, an eclipse occurred and rumours of God's personal condolence quickly arose.

Whereupon Muhammad is said to have announced, 'An eclipse is a phenomenon of nature. It is foolish to attribute such things to the death or birth of a human being'. "At Muhammad's own death an attempt was made to deify him, but the man who was to become his administrative successor killed the hysteria with one of the noblest speeches in religious history: 'If there are any among you who worshiped Muhammad, he is dead. But if it is God you worshiped, He lives forever'."

Arthur Glyn Leonard said: "It was the genius of Muhammad, the spirit that he breathed into the Arabs through the soul of Islam that exalted them. That raised them out of the lethargy and low level of tribal stagnation up to the high watermark of national unity and empire. It was in the sublimity of Muhammad's deism, the simplicity, the sobriety and purity it inculcated the fidelity of its founder to his own tenets that acted on their moral and intellectual fibre with all the magnetism of true inspiration". K. S. Ramakrishna Rao: "My problem to write this monograph is easier, because we are not generally fed now on that (distorted) kind of history and much time need not be spent on pointing out our misrepresentations of Islam. The theory of Islam and sword, for instance, is not heard now in any quarter worth the name. The principle of Islam that "there is no compulsion in religion" is well known".

Islam loves mercy and compassion as part of religious duty. Every religion endorses this. Islam hates hypocrisy and it is the major sin which everyone hates. Islam teaches hygiene both spiritually and physically which is everyone's wish.

In Islam, all good things and bad things are distinguished and separated with a perfect and decent order in all aspects, be it in politics, in family, in social, in economics or in judiciary. Islam establishes justice and enforcement of laws towards establishing a healthy society irrespective of race, colour, nationality, and religion. Islam establishes all these values on human race so whoever loves humanity and justice will accept Islamic teachings, without bias and prejudice. Furthermore all Islamic teachings are from al-Quran and Prophetic traditions with no human involvements and are always stable and unchangeable, being accepted by every nation irrespective of geographical variations or time changes as they are always perfect.

The world Muslim population is 1.65 billion which is twenty-four percent (24%) of the world's population. The presented data show that Asia has 69% of the world Muslim population while Africa has 27%. This is expected to increase by over one percentage point each decade, reaching one out of four by 2020 and one out of three by 2075 (Houssain Kattani 2001).

Political Scenarios in Malaysia

Malaysia is practicing a monarchical democratic coalition government since independence. It has always been an elected parliamentarian government with its multi-racial coalition of parliament where the majority voices are always from Malays as UMNO The United Malays National Organization, in Malay: *Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu* is Malaysia's largest political party; a founding member of the Barisan Nasional coalition. The vast majority of Barisan Nasional's seats are held by its three largest race-based parties - the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) - each of which is sectarian in nature, though officially supporting racial harmony. In the view of some scholars, "Since its inception the Alliance remained a coalition of communal parties. Each of the component party operated to all intents and purposes, save that of elections, as a separate party. Their membership was communal, except perhaps Gerakan, and their success was measured in terms of their ability to achieve the essentially parochial demands of their constituents" (Rachagan & Gordon 1993). Umno has played a dominant role in Malaysian politics since independence. UMNO emphasizes protecting Malay

culture and Islamic values and supporting pro-business policies. In recent years, UMNO, under Prime Minister Mohd Najib bin Tun Abdul Razak has increasingly emphasized reducing ethnic tensions and protecting minority rights. The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (Malay: *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*) commonly known as PAS or Pas, is an Islamist political party in Malaysia and is currently headed by Dato' Seri Abdul Hadi Awang. PAS positions itself as a political party that aims to establish Malaysia as a country based on Islamic legal theory derived from the primary sources of Islam, the Quran, Sunnah as well as Hadith. The party enjoys strong support from the northern rural and conservative states such as Kelantan and Terengganu. It is also the first opposition party in independent Malaysia's history to defeat the Barisan Nasional coalition in a Malay dominated state. PAS, together with Parti Keadilan Rakyat (known as PKR), and Democratic Action Party (known as DAP) formed part of a coalition called *Pakatan Rakyat* following the 2008 election (Table 1). Together, *Pakatan Rakyat* now controls four states in Malaysia which are Kelantan, Kedah, Selangor and Penang.

Table 1. Political Parties in Malaysia

Barisan Nasional (DN: 54, DR: 136)	United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB), Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), Parti Gerakan Rakyat (Gerakan), People's Progressive Party (PPP), Sarawak United Peoples' Party (SUPP), Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS), United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO), Sarawak Progressive Democratic Party (SPDP), Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS).
Pakatan Rakyat (DN: 8, DR: 80)	Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). Democratic Action Party (DAP), Sarawak National Party (SNAP).
Other parties	Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM), Malaysian Workers' Party (PPM) , Malaysian Dayak Congress (MDC), Pan-Malaysian Islamic Front (BERJASA), Malaysian Indian Muslim Congress (KIMMA), United Pasok Nunukragang National Organization (PASOK), Community Coalition Congress (CCC), Federated Sabah People's Front (BERSEKUTU), United Democratic Sabah People's Power Party (SETIA), State Reform Party (STAR), Malaysian People's

Wellbeing Party (KITA), Malaysian Democratic Party (MDP), All Malaysian Indian Progressive Front (AMIPF), Punjabi Party of Malaysia (PPM), Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM), Parti Bangsa Dayak Sarawak (PBDS), Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP), Malaysian Indian United Party (MIUP), Parti Cinta Malaysia (PCM), Malaysian Makkal Sakhti Party, Human Rights Party (HRP).

AUTHORITY OF ISLAMIC CONVERSION IN MALAYSIA

Any non-Muslim can convert to Islam voluntarily at the registrar of the Muslim converts departments of the country in every state of Malaysia. In every state there is an Islamic religious department known as Pejabat Agama Islam Negeri. The state Islamic religious department office and the branches are governed by JAKIM and responsible for the conversion of Muslims as well as the welfare of the converts. Some recognized NGOs as PERKIM, ABIM and KAGAT are appointed by the religious departments to do the religious conversion and then to proceed to the departments to legalize the conversion.

Since Islamic Conversion is a voluntary spiritual acceptance of Islamic faith by a non-Muslim, it is very personal and this could be done at any time in the country. He or she just needs to declare the *kalimah shahadah* after understanding its meaning and accepting its message and later on he or she can register the conversion at religious departments or recognized NGOs, finally at the national registration department JPN for legal endorsements as a Muslim. He will be provided the Muslim Identity Card indicating Islam as his religion in the ID card while non-Muslim citizens are also provided the Malaysian ID cards stating their respective religion.

Ministry of Islamic Religious Affairs: A cabinet minister under the prime minister is in charge of Islamic religious affairs and reports to the prime minister. Muslim interests are always protected by the Constitution. Islam is always safeguarded by the Palace as the Sultans are the heads of Islamic religious affairs in every state. The state religious office is known as Jabatan Agama Islam Negeri; every district of the state also has the regional Islamic department to monitor and operate religious affairs. In the federal territories Islamic affairs are under the King directly and are administrated under the minister of religious affairs.

The Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia (JAKIM): There is a centralised office in the country for the Departments of Islamic affairs known as The Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia (JAKIM). In 1968, the Malaysian Council of Rulers decided that there was a need for a body that could mobilise the development and progress of Muslims in Malaysia, in line with the country's status as an Islamic country which was growing in strength as well as fast gaining worldwide recognition. In realising the fact, a secretariat for the National Council of Islamic Affairs of Malaysia was formed to protect the purity of faith and the teachings of Islam. This secretariat was later expanded to become the Religious Division, Prime Minister's Department which was later upgraded to become the Islamic Affairs Division (*BAHEIS*). On 1st January 1997, in line with the country's steadfast Islamic development and progress, the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) was established by the Government of Malaysia to take over the role of *BAHEIS*.

Functions of JAKIM

As the main agency managing Islamic affairs at the Federal level and the Secretariat to the National Council for Islamic Affairs Malaysia (MKI), JAKIM performs three (3) main functions below.

a. Function 1: Legislation and Standardisation of Islamic Law

1. To streamline and implement the directives of the Council of Rulers on Islamic matters through the National Council for Islamic Affairs Malaysia.
2. To legislate, review and amend Islamic laws for standardisation amongst the states.
3. To streamline and standardise Islamic law throughout Malaysia.
4. To legislate act and Islamic law for the Federal territories.
5. To streamline the enforcement of states' Islamic law.
6. To streamline *fatwa* and the implementation compliance.

b. Function 2: Islamic and Islamic Administration Coordination

1. To control deviation of faith ('*aqidah*) of deviated groups that threatens national security.

2. To streamline the administration of Islamic affairs for the states.
3. To plan administration policies and Islamic affairs management based on the provision in the Federal Constitution.
4. To build well-established Islamic thinking amongst the people (*ummah*) based on the beliefs of the *Ahl al- Sunnah wal- Jama'ah*.
5. To lead research efforts on current issues in the field of faith (*aqidah*), Islamic law, astronomy and finance (*mu'amalat*) at the national, regional and international levels.
6. To produce missionary cadres and Islamic scholars through training programmes at Islamic training institutions.
7. To monitor and streamline the implementation of Islamic policies, namely the Assertion of Islamic Values Policy (PNI) and Approach of Islam *Hadhari* (PIH) at the ministries and states levels and to strengthen their understanding and appreciation amongst the society.
8. To create a benchmark in the practice and service of Islam through legislation of *Hadhari* Standards.
9. To become the reference and advice service centre related to Islam to the Government and private agencies.
10. To become the main monitoring agency in Islamic law compliance of various Islamic product services and consumerism specifically in the fields of Islamic financial systems and *halal* industry.
11. To highlight Islam divinity at the national, regional and international levels through the National and International al-Quran Recital Competition, and the celebration of Islamic festive days.
12. To become the information and documentation one-stop centre related to Islamic thinking and knowledge generated through various forums and conferences at the national and international levels.
13. To increase *da'wah* network collaboration with non-Governmental organisations at the national and international levels.
14. To lead *da'wah* movement to the target groups in an integrated way through community services (*bil-hal*), printed media, electronic media and the new media.

15. To strengthen the survival of Muslims in Sabah and Sarawak in the education, *da'wah* and socio-economic fields.
16. To strengthen unity amongst Muslims in order to become the ultimate community (*khayr ummah*).
17. To strengthen *da'wah* to the non-Muslim society, the aborigines and the minority groups.
18. To strengthen the management of new converts through the aspects of guidance, welfare and protection.
19. To expand Islamic programmes through radio and television stations.
20. To expand programmes with good Islamic values and personality elements to curb social problems.
21. To strengthen the family institution and neighbourhood through education and parenting skills with the concept of Islamic upbringing (*tarbiyah*).
22. To develop and provide comprehensive Islamic information system through information technology and communication.
23. To strengthen the management of Islamic affairs at the Federal agencies and states through in service-training programmes.

c. Function 3: Adjustment and the Development of Islamic Education

1. To develop a team of experts in various fields of Islamic knowledge.
2. To make Malaysia the hub of higher learning and research for al-Quran and *hadith* at the regional and international levels.
3. To develop and streamline Islamic education management of state and national religious schools.
4. To develop and streamline the al-Quran and *Fardhu 'Ain* classes (KAFA) in the current national education.
5. To strengthen the role and *'imarah* programme of the mosque institution as the knowledge and community (*ummah*) civilisation development centre which involves various levels of the society.

Islamic Syariah Courts

The Syariah Court system is one of the two separate systems of courts which exist in Malaysian legal

system. *Syariah* refers to syariah law in Islamic religious law and deals with exclusively Islamic laws, having jurisdiction upon every Muslim in Malaysia. The dual-system of law in Malaysia is provided for in Article 121(1A) of the Constitution of Malaysia. Unlike the civil courts in Malaysia, which is a federalized court system, the Syariah Court is a creature of state law. Similarly syariah or Islamic law is a matter of state law, with the exception of the Federal Territories of Malaysia, as provided in Article 3 of the Constitution. Thus syariah law in one state might differ from that of another state. There are 13 state syariah law departments and 1 syariah law department for the Federal Territories.

There is a parallel system of state Syariah Courts which has limited jurisdiction over matters of state Islamic (syariah) law. Fundamental affairs and faith, declaration of faith, deciding authority of Islamic religious faith, jurisdictions on faith and practice, apostasy or renouncement of Islamic faith, personal laws such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and etc, are settled in syariah courts. Religious enforcement also directly under the departments of Jabatan Agama Islam Negeri and is referred to the syariah court for verdicts and judgements. The Syariah Courts have jurisdiction only over matters involving Muslims, and can generally only pass sentences of not more than three years imprisonment, a fine of up to RM5,000.00 and/or up to six strokes of the cane.

Law and regulations of conversions

Any normal sensible person of 18 years and above [if below 18 years need to get the written permission of his father or mother or legal guardian] can do their conversion in the presence of 2 Muslim witnesses at the department of Islamic religious conversion or at the authorised agency like PERKIM (The Muslim welfare organization of Malaysia) or ABIM (The Muslim youth movement of Malaysia) or any other authorised offices.

According to the administration of the religion of Islam (State of Malacca) Enactment 2002 And Regulations are equal to other states of Malaysia with regard to conversion and its regulations:

Section 95: Requirements for conversion to the religion of Islam.

1. The following requirements shall be complied with for a valid conversion of a person to the religion of Islam;

2. The person must utter in reasonably intelligible Arabic the two clauses of the Affirmation of Faith.
3. At the time of uttering the two clauses of the affirmation of Faith the person must be aware that they mean “ I bear witness that there is no God but Allah and I bear witness that the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w) is the Messenger of Allah” and
4. The utterance must be made of the person’s own free will. A person who is incapable of speech may, for the purpose of fulfilling the requirement of paragraph (1) (a), utter the two clauses of the Affirmation of Faith by means of signs that convey the meaning specified in paragraph (1)(b).

Section 96: Moment of conversion to the religion of Islam

A person is converted to the religion of Islam and becomes a Muslim as soon as he finished uttering the two clauses of the Affirmation of Faith provided that the requirements of section 95 are fulfilled; and that person shall thereupon be referred to as a *muallaf*.

Section 97: Duties and obligations of a *muallaf*

From the moment of his conversion, a *muallaf* becomes subject to the same duties and obligations as any other Muslim.

Section 98: Registrar of *muallafs*

The Majlis shall appoint a Registrar of *muallafs* to maintain a Register of *muallafs* in the prescribed form for the registration of *muallaf*.

Section 99: Registration of *muallafs*

1. A person who has converted to the religion of Islam may apply to the Registrar in the prescribed form for registration as a *muallaf*.
2. If the Registrar is satisfied that the requirements of section 95 have been fulfilled in respect of the applicant, the Registrar may register the applicant’s conversion to the religion of Islam by entering in the Register of *muallafs* the name of the applicant and other particulars as indicated in the Register of *muallafs*.

3. The Registrar shall also determine the date of the applicant’s conversion to the religion of Islam and enter the date in the Register of *muallafs*.
4. In order to satisfy himself of the fact and date of conversion to the religion of Islam by the applicant and the other particulars to be entered in the Register of *muallafs*, the Registrar may make such inquiries and call for such evidence as he considers necessary; but this subsection shall not be construed as precluding the Registrar from relying solely on the words of the applicant as far as the fact and date of conversion are concerned.
5. If the Registrar is not satisfied that the requirements of section 95 have been fulfilled in respect of the applicant, he may permit the applicant to utter, in his presence or in the presence of any of his officers, the two clauses of the Affirmation of Faith in accordance with the requirements of that section.

Section 100: Certificates of Conversion to the Religion of Islam

1. The Registrar shall furnish every person whose conversion to the religion of Islam has been registered a Certificate of Conversion to the Religion of Islam in the prescribed form.
2. A Certificate of Conversion to Religion of Islam shall be conclusive proof of the facts stated in the certificate.

Section 101: Recognition of *muallafs* as Muslims

1. A person who has converted to the religion of Islam and has been registered in the Register of *muallafs* shall, for the purpose of any Federal or State Law, and for all time, be treated as a Muslim.
2. A person whose conversion to the religion of Islam has been registered under any law of any State shall, for all purposes in the State of Malacca and for the purposes of implementing the provisions of any law in the State of Malacca, be treated as a Muslim.

Section 102: Determination whether a non-registered person is a *muallaf*

If any question arises as to whether a person is a *muallaf*, and the person is not registered in the Register of *muallafs* or under any law of

any State as a *muallaf*, that question shall be decided on the merits of the case in accordance with section 95.

Section 103: Offence of giving false information

Any person who, in an applicant for registration under section 99, or in response to any request for information or evidence made by the Registrar under that section, wilfully furnishes to the Registrar any false or misleading information or evidence commits an offence and shall on conviction be liable to a fine not exceeding one thousand ringgit or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months or to both.

Section 104: Power to make regulations

The Majlis may make regulations for the carrying into effect of the provisions of this Part. Section 105: Capacity to convert to the religion of Islam. For the purpose of this Part, a person who is not a Muslim may convert to the religion of Islam if he is of sound mind and –has attained the age of eighteen years; or if he has not attained the age of eighteen years, his parent or guardian consents to his conversion. (*Enactment and regulations: Administration of the religion of Islam [state of Malacca]*. International Law Book Services 2002).

CONCLUSION

Islamic conversion is a divinely blessed act of an individual. Conversion is the acceptance of the Truth. The first step to become a Muslim is to declare the *kalimah shahadah* (testimony of faith). This declaration is a voluntary affirmation of Islamic faith. Allah s.w.t. says:

فَمَنْ يُرِدِ اللَّهُ أَنْ يَهْدِيَهُ يَشْرَحْ صَدْرَهُ لِلْإِسْلَامِ وَمَنْ يُرِدْ أَنْ يُضِلَّهُ يَجْعَلْ صَدْرَهُ ضَيِّقًا حَرَجًا كَأَنَّمَا يَصْعَدُ فِي السَّمَاءِ كَذَلِكَ يَجْعَلُ اللَّهُ الرَّجْسَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ

Meaning:

Those whom Allah (in His plan) willeth to guide, - He openeth their breast to Islam; those whom He willeth to leave straying, - He maketh their breast close and constricted, as if they had to

climb up to the skies: thus doth Allah (heap) the penalty on those who refuse to believe. (Al-Quran al-An'am, Verse: 125.)

In Malaysia Islamic conversion is a common daily activity in religious departments of all states in the federation. What factors motivate non-Muslims to embrace Islam and Malaysian society's perceptions of such conversions need to be examined so that harmony is maintained in multi-religious Malaysia. Islam transcends nationality, ideology, race, language and territory. It is guidance for all mankind. It is the only guidance revealed by The Almighty for all time from the beginning of time till the Day of Judgment.

While we can use our intellect to come up with any number of reasons for conversion, the truth is there is only one reason at all times and in all places, that is, those who are blessed and chosen to receive this great Mercy of Allah will become Muslims. Nothing more can be said as Islamic conversion is an act of Allah (s.w.t) and is decided by Allah (s.w.t.) in the spiritual world and man has been given the freedom of choice to seek the truth. Islam means the way of life through total submission to Allah (s.w.t.) to achieve the tranquillity in human life. And those who convert without the real intention of accepting Islam are in fact not receiving the light of Allah so they will be in the dark. Allah s.w.t. says:

أَفَمَنْ شَرَحَ اللَّهُ صَدْرَهُ لِلْإِسْلَامِ فَهُوَ عَلَى نُورٍ مِنْ رَبِّهِ فَوَيْلٌ لِلْقَاسِيَةِ قُلُوبُهُمْ مِنْ ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ أُولَئِكَ فِي ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ

Meaning:

Is one whose heart Allah has opened to Islam, so that he has received Enlightenment from Allah, (no better than one hard-hearted)? Woe to those whose hearts are hardened against celebrating the praises of Allah. they are manifestly wandering (in error)!. (al-Quran, al-Zumar, Verse: 22)

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Sayyid Buhar Musal Kassim
Pelajar Ph.D.
Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu (ATMA)
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
43600 UKM, Bangi, Selangor, MALAYSIA.
E-mail: sayyid@hotmail.com

Mohd Syukri Yeoh Abdullah, Ph.D.
Felo Penyelidik Kanan
Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu (ATMA)
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
43600 UKM, Bangi, Selangor, MALAYSIA.
E-mail: syukri@ukm.my

Zawiyah Baba
Felo Penyelidik Utama
Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu (ATMA)
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
43600 UKM, Bangi, Selangor, MALAYSIA.
E-mail: zawiyah@gmail.com / z.baba@ukm.my

