

Dunia Melayu Dunia Islam: Adopting a *Wasaṭīyah* Strategy

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Abstract

Dunia Melayu Dunia Islam (Malay World Islam World) may be considered one of the State of Melaka's flagship NGOs. It has worked hard to forge fraternal ties among the region's Melayu-speaking communities and build religious relations between itself and the larger Muslim world. Since its formation in 2000, it has connected these diverse groups through mutual projects and programs. In addition, DMDI has been in the vanguard, along with other Malaysian universities and other national and regional stakeholders that subscribe to the *wasatīyah* (moderation) approach. As a result, this has now become a rallying call for the entire nation to adhere to and support moderation. This essay reflects upon DMDI's application of moderation toward various socio-political and religious issues by tying it to Malaysia's specific socio-cultural religious NGOs.

Key words: Malaysia, NGO, DMDI, Wasatīyah

Introduction: DMDI in Context

Muslim NGOs gradually spread throughout the Muslim world with the general purpose of making connections between Muslim-majority societies and Muslim-minority communities.¹ In this regard, two key Saudi organizations come to mind: the Makkah-based World Muslim League (MWL, est. 1962) and the Riyadh-based World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY, est. 1972). At the time of their formation they had no rivals, and thus became interna-

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tionally influential players by building bridges between themselves (representing largely Saudi interests) and the plethora of Muslim minorities around the globe. For example, in the 1970s the MWL went on an international “tour” to create Muslim councils (e.g., the Islamic Council of South Africa [ICSA, est. 1976]), and WAMY set up offices in Africa and Europe to maintain its presence among these minority communities. These structures operated closely with the respective leaderships of both organizations who, in turn, adhered to Riyadh’s interests.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, their position became problematic in some countries due to internal challenges and external factors. Regrettably, Islamophobes produced spurious evidence to illustrate to what extent they had had been responsible for radicalizing Muslim individuals in and beyond the minority communities.² They consequently lost their voice and influence by the turn of the century. Their energy also seems to have dissipated because they have been replaced and, in some cases, taken over by inter-governmental structures such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (formerly the Organization of Islamic Conference [OIC], est. 1969³), in which the MWL has an observer role.

Apart from these developments, similar progressive changes have been underway in Malaysia and other OIC member countries. This essay places Dunia Melayu Dunia Islam (DMDI [Malay World Islam World]),⁴ one of Malaysia’s many NGOs, within a broad context and thereafter briefly reflects upon its *wasatīyah* strategy toward socio-political and religious issues.

From GAPENA to DMDI: Malaysia’s Socio-Cultural and Religious NGOs⁵

Malaysia has had a reasonably dynamic economy, despite the economic meltdowns toward the end of the 1990s and 2000s, respectively. Its influential position in ASEAN has also made its civil society sector pro-active in the developmental sector, an arena that has witnessed the emergence and advancement of broad-based organizations that have connected with the Malay diaspora and Muslim communities. One such organizations is the Gabungan Persatuan Penulis Nasional (the National Malaysian Writers Union; GAPENA),⁶ a writers’ association that has formed relationships with various Malay diaspora communities. This connection has enabled it to subtly forge international ties and contribute to the country’s international relations agenda. Under the charismatic leadership of Ismail Hussein (d. 2014), this active NGO established strong ties with those government departments that were working to build ties with the Malay diaspora. Two success stories in this regard was its connection with

Malay diaspora in the nearby Champa region (Thailand) and with the far-flung Cape Malays (South Africa).

During the mid-1990s under Mohamed Tayob, Selangor Darul Ihsan's former chief minister, a Melayu Secretariat comprising representatives from Malaysia's states and from the various Malay diasporic communities was established. Regrettably, the secretariat accomplished very little, due to the national economic meltdown mentioned earlier; its activities were frozen and the secretariat was eventually disbanded. Not long after these events, DMDI was formed in Melaka and took up the same challenge.

DMDI: Its Formation and Development

The DMDP Secretariat⁷ was established during October 2000 as a broad-based national religious cum cultural organization to forge ties with diaspora Malay communities,⁸ particularly those located beyond the Southeast Asian region. It also seeks to unite Malay communities with other Muslim communities through such collaborative undertakings as implementing appropriate projects and programs that would benefit the partners and help all Malays and other Muslims who need financial support, human expertise, and various services.

With these broad objectives in mind, DMDI envisioned generating a passion and eagerness among the Malay/Muslim communities globally to work for a united front to make progress in such critical areas as education, economics, culture, and science and technology innovation, a united front that would bring together and unite the Malay Muslim communities and the Malay diaspora. Despite this vision, however, the organization does not see itself as *the* international representative of the Malays and Muslims, but rather views itself as pursuing activities that will help bring them closer together.⁹ Perhaps it might one day be able to present itself as a model for others to replicate.

For the past few years, DMDI has provided an annual platform on which these communities can interact, socialize, and meet to discuss their concerns and interests in terms of culture, language, society, education, economy, and science and technology. Having held more than fourteen such gatherings so far, it has managed to bring together representatives from the thirteen member countries,¹⁰ namely, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand, the Philippines, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Madagascar, South Africa, Australia, the United Kingdom, and China.¹¹ In 2012 the DMDI Secretariat started establishing secretariats/affiliates outside Malaysia; some are now functioning while others are still being set up. One of its achievements in this regard is its recently concluded agreement with Singapore to pursue joint goals.¹²

In 2007 the DMDI convention proposed that a DMDI Financial House be established to serve the interests of its members' representative groups. In 2008 the idea was taken up, and a follow-up meeting agreed that it would be modeled upon the successful Kuwait Financial House.¹³ The project received enthusiastic support from DMDI's president and supreme council as well as from the Malaysian government. Although it had not been set up by 2008, a framework had been worked out in regards to its formal implementation.¹⁴ Other earlier established structures remain in operation.

DMDI remains headquartered in the State of Melaka. In the early days it was fully supported by the then-chief minister Haji Mohd Ali Mohd Rustam, under whose dynamic leadership it established joint structures and ventures. Together they formed the Muzium Dunia Melayu Dunia Islam (DMDI Museum), which is housed in the colonial-era's Bastion House¹⁵ located in the main city center. From that time on, DMDI Museum has become "a reference point" for the socio-economic and political issues related to Southeast Asia's Malay communities, as well as an exhibitor of artifacts brought from the neighboring Muslim countries to show the relationship among the region's Muslim communities and the bond between the Malays and the Muslim world.¹⁶

The Convention and its *Wasaṭīyah* Strategy¹⁷

In line with its policy, DMDI hosts annual workshops, meetings, conferences, and symposia to bring together the representatives of Malay activists, scholars, and intellectuals from the region and those in the diaspora. Some of the earlier symposia focused on culture, civilization, and education. To organize these thematic gatherings, DMDI networks with academic institutions and other affiliates that now play a pivotal role in achieving some of the NGO's goals. For example, it teamed up with the University of Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP) to host the 2012 conference on education.¹⁸ This university, considered an established government-sponsored institution and the State of Perlis' academic flagship, shares a borders with Thailand. This joint educational-cultural venture encouraged many private companies to both sponsor and support this important event – a real tripartite (i.e., government sector, NGO and academia) alliance.

For the 2014 convention, DMDI partnered with the privately funded Kolej Universiti Islam Melaka (KUIM)¹⁹ and enjoyed the sponsorship of the State of Melaka, yet another indication of this above-mentioned tripartite alliance. Thus, one can say that other communities should consider emulating this successful model, for it has proved to be a workable relationship that can provide a set of meaningful results.

On October 24, 2014, DMDI hosted a “Malay and Islamic World Youth Village” camp. Opened by Minister of Youth and Sport Khairy Jamaludin bin Abu Bakar, it featured three special seminars: “Malay Identity and Culture,” “Women’s Issues,” and “Strengthening Faith.” An accompanying expo exhibited the goods manufactured in DMDI member states.

The theme for this year’s convention, “*Wasatiyyah* asas perpaduan Ummah (Moderation: The Foundation of the Community’s Unity), has been consciously promoted by Kuala Lumpur within its governmental structures. In fact, Prime Minister Najib has made it his personal mission to dissuade Malaysia’s population from embracing extremism by serving as a leading full-time advocate of modernation.²⁰ He has personally persuaded many national NGOs, among them DMDI, and such institutions as the International Islamic University of Malaysia to adopt this idea. DMDI responded by organizing this convention in order to draw even more attention to this key concept.²¹ For this auspicious occasion, the DMDI Secretariat asked Deputy Prime Minister Hj. Muhyiddin bin Hj. Mohd Yassin to officially open the convention; he did so on the convention’s first night by unpacking the concept and stressing its relevance in the contemporary period.

The term *wasatīyah* has been excellently explored by Kamali and, to some extent, by a host of other scholars. Since this was the case, the intention is not to regurgitate their ideas but to share, albeit briefly, thoughts about the concept that reinforce the views expressed by the DMDI forum. In the Qur’an the verses captured the term unambiguously; one of the verses underlined that “We have made you a median (global) community in order that you may serve as a testimony (and as an) example to humanity,” and in another it underscored that, “those who, when they spend (of their wealth), are neither extravagant nor stingy, but (they are the ones who) hold to the medium (way) between those (extremes).” Khan noted that these and other verses, as well as the various Prophetic statements, translate the term to mean the “middle way between extremes” and “upright without losing balance.” In fact prior to making this point Khan stated that the term should be employed as a fundamental principle since its essential connotation suggests, among others, moderation, gentleness, temperateness, keeping within bounds, calmness, reasonableness, peacefulness; and by extension, he argued, it also denotes balance and justice/fairness. Now since these words captured related understandings and interpretations they clearly convey the term’s intrinsic meaning. He thus concluded that the term should be adopted, “(a) a principle of life”; one that should be viewed as “the ideal mean(s) of social interaction” and one that manifests “the Universal Golden rule of ‘treating others as you wish to be treated’”; of being respectful and respectable, balanced in disposition.”

That aside, on October 26, 2014, the convention was “unconventionally” opened with a number of commissions (e.g., women, education, and economics) during the early morning session. After this came the keynote speeches of Chandra Muzaffar (president, International Movement for a Just World) and Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahim (chairperson, Kelab Putera 1Malaysia). Both addressed a very sensitive topic: “The Palestine Issue: Where Will it Ever End?” Muzaffar scathingly critiqued the Zionist state for its atrocities against the oppressed Palestinians and bin Abdul Rahim, who has been extremely active in the Palestinian arena, narrated and highlighted with a series of helpful slides Malaysia’s contributions (over the years) to this rather beleaguered society.

After their insightful assessments, the audience listened to the first panel of presenters who spoke on “Appreciation of *Wasatiyyah* in the Union and to Strengthen the Unity of Malay and Muslim Ummah Universally.” The speakers were Abdullah bin Mohd Zin (the prime minister’s religious advisor and chairperson, the Wasatiyyah Institute of Malaysia).²² Chalidin Yaacob (Ashabul Kahfi Islamic Centre and chairperson, DMDI Australia) and H. Machasin (director general, Bismas Islam Permentiran Agama Islam).

The second panel dealt with “*Wasatiyyah* Approaches in Developing Economics and Education for the Malays and the Muslim Ummah.” Ashraf Wajdi bin Dusuki (Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia), Mirza Vejzagic (DMDI secretary, Bosnia and Herzegovina), and Muhammed Haron (University of Botswana) all emphasized the concept, and each one connected his/her ideas to some of the mentioned verses that stress the adoption of moderation. Interestingly, quite a few of the panelists cited al-Ghazali (d. 1111), the well-respected scholar who had fully elaborated upon this concept in his writings and actions.

Conclusion

On the final day, DMDI president Mohd Ali bin Mohd Rustam chaired the plenary session, during which each commission representative presented his/her recommendations on how the ideas expressed by these commissions can be moved forward. For example, the education commission agreed on pursuing partnerships with Muslim-minority communities and conducting Bahasa Melayu classes for them. Prior to the closing ceremony a number of resolutions were read out and adopted unanimously.

Toward the end, it was proposed that DMDI should consider going beyond its original objectives and establish various educational structures, such as institutes or centers similar to Germany’s Goethe Institute and China’s Con-

fucius Institute, both of which provide language instruction; create cultural programs; and, more importantly, develop short-, medium-, and long-term cultural and educational exchanges for both staff and students.

Along with the Ministry of Education, DMDI should perhaps pursue the idea of close cooperation with Malaysian educational institutions and their counterparts in other nation-states along the lines of the Lim Kok Wing University of Creative Technology has been doing in the United Kingdom, Southern Africa, and elsewhere.²³ DMDI members also supported the idea that all MoUs signed with foreign educational institutions should be revisited and activated in order to advance the NGO's aims and objectives.

Endnotes

1. Martin Kramer, *Islam Assembled: The Advent of Muslim Congresses* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).
2. Nathan Lean, *The Islamophobia Industry: How the Right Manufactures Fear of Muslims* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).
3. See www.oic-oci.org.
4. See www.dmdi.org.
5. See Khoo Ying Hooi, "The NGO-Government Relations in Malaysia: Historical Context and Contemporary Discourse," *Malaysian Journal of Democracy and Election Studies* 1, no. 1 (2013): 76-85.
6. See <http://gapena07.5u.com>.
7. See Abdul Latiff Abu Bakar, ed., *Dunia Melayu Dunia Islam: Kesatuan dan Perpaduan* (Melaka: Kerajaan Negeri Melaka dan IKSEP, 2001); Minako Sakai, "Creating a New Centre in the Periphery of Indonesia: Sumtran Malay Identity Politics," in *The Politics of the Periphery in Indonesia: Social and Geographical Perspectives*, ed. Minako Sakai, Glen Banks, and John H. Walker (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009): 64-66.
8. Mohamad Maznah and Syed M. K. Aljunied, eds., *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics, and Paradoxes of Malayness* (Singapore: NUS, 2010); Timothy Barnard, *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identities across Boundaries* (Singapore: NUS, 2004).
9. See, for example, its social welfare activities in Melaka at <http://www.goriau.com/berita/umum/pgri-dmdi-dmi-dan-yayasan-kansai-teken-kerjasama-dengan-putra-hospital-malaka.html>. I would like to thank Minako Sakai for her text and drawing my attention to this link.
10. See the brief National University of Malaysia report on the joint education conference during 2011 at <http://www.ukm.my/news/index.php/extras/894-islamic-influence-on-malay-identity.html>.
11. See Rommel Curaming, "Filipinos as Malay," in *Melayu*, chap. 10.
12. See Jan. van der Putten, "Malay Heartlands at the Borders," *Melayu*, chap. 9.
13. www.kfh.my.

14. <http://islamicfinanceupdates.wordpress.com/2008/08/22/dmdi-in-final-stages-of-setting-up-finance-house>.
15. See www.jmm.gov.my/ms.
16. See <http://amazingmelaka.com/2011/10/dmdi-museum>.
17. See Muhammad Kamal Hassan, "Wasatiyyah as Explained by Professor Muhammad Kamal Hassan: Justice, Excellence, and Balance," in *Counter Terrorism Trends and Analysis* 6, no. 2 (March 2014): 24-30; Mazlan Ibrahim, Jaffary Awang, Latifah Abdul Majid, Haziyah Husin, Muhd Najib Abdul Kadir, Abu Hamdi Usman, and Latifah Abdul Majid, "Wasatiyyah Discourse according to Muslim Scholars in Malaysia," *Advances in Natural and Applied Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2013): 6-14; Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *The Middle Path of Moderation in Islam: The Qur'anic Principle of Wasatiyyah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Also visit www.ipislam.edu.my and read Datuk Aziz Jamaluddin Mhd Tahir's "Institut Wasatiyyah tolak ekstremisme, *Yadim*, 21 April 2012.
18. See www.unimap.edu.my. By the time the seminar 2012 officially ended, I managed to have a brief word with Kamarudin Hussin, current vice-chancellor of the University Malaysia Perlis. As expected, he demonstrated his interest in visiting the Southern African region to sign a possible MoU with institutions, such as the University of the Western Cape (www.uwc.ac.za), that had been on the verge of signing an MoU with Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. Unfortunately, the economic meltdown of the late 1990s put an end to this venture. For the record, the deputy vice-chancellor of the University Malaysia Perlis visited four South African universities prior to the seminar with the intention of signing memorandums in the future. Based on the ensuing discussions, it appears that the university's administration is quite keen to pursue MoUs with institutions in this region, a healthy sign for the decades ahead indeed. According to Nazreen Salie (Cape Malay Consultants and an executive member of DMDI), as of April 2015 it appears that DMDI and the newly established World Melayu Polynesian Organization intend to help introduce Bahasa Melayu and Malay culture at UWC. Muhammed Haron, "GAPENA and The Cape Malay Community: Making Connections, Constructing Images," *SARI: Journal of the Malay World and Civilization* 23 (2005): 47-66 and Muhammed Haron, ed, *Going Forward: South Africa-Malaysia Cementing Relations* (Kuala Lumpur: Lim Kok Wing University of Creative Technology, 2008).
19. See www.kuim.edu.my.
20. "Embrace Spirit of *Wasatiyyah* for Nation's Sake," 9 March 2013, at www.themalayinsider.com.
21. Mazlan Ibrahim et al., "Wasatiyyah Discourse," 6-14.
22. The institute is attached to the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM). See www.iium.edu.my/wasatiyyah.
23. Muhammed Haron, "Malaysia's Educational Efforts in Southern Africa: Creating Opportunities, Developing Partnerships," *Malaysia Journal of Education* 38, no 1 (2013): 1-10.