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Model of Religious Conflict Mechanism among Muslims in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to identify the critical factors that cause conflicts and division among the Muslim community in Malaysia. As the disputes among Muslims in Malaysia are acknowledged by religious scholars and national leaders to become more serious in recently, a formula for forming a more united and harmonious generation in diversity needs to be devised. Thus, the identification of the root cause of the problem and conflict mechanism can lead to religious harmony in society. This study tries to answer the question of why the phenomenon of religious conflict is formed in the Muslim community in Malaysia. This study uses a qualitative approach through a thematic analysis of transcripts from in-depth interviews. The study also conducts a systematic review of articles related to religious conflict from a social psychology perspective to support the argument. The result of the study is a model of the mechanism of religious conflict that uses a system model as the framework. Its impact on long-term national development is highly relevant as stated in Malaysia's Vision for Shared Prosperity 2030.

Keywords: *Extremism, Malaysia Model, Muslim, Religious conflict.*

Why do groups with high levels of religiosity often engage in conflict? A review by Neuberg et al. (2014) in 97 countries against 194 groups (various religions, races, and nationalities) found that groups with higher levels of religious adoption tended to experience various types of conflict, including prejudice, interpersonal discrimination, individual violence, and aggression. This implies that individuals who are religious are more likely to be prejudiced against individuals from outside their group than individuals who are less religious. However, the conclusions from this study should be viewed from a multi-dimensional religious perspective and not merely as a single dimension belief. This is because not all dimensions of religion can be attributed to the root cause of conflict.

Islam is a religion of peace and brotherhood. This is clearly stated through the words of Allah in the Quran (8: 62-63; 22: 40-41; 2: 191-194; 8: 39-41). However, the image of Muslim brotherhood seen from the naked eye is not in line with what is in the Qur'an due to prolonged

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strife among Muslims themselves, particularly in the Middle East and in Muslim countries around the world. Muslim scholars such as al-Qaradawi (2015) expressed their sadness when there are Islamic preachers and activists who do not take seriously the problem (differences) and spread the seeds of disunity themselves. According to al-Qaradawi, the attention of this group is always focused on the point of disagreement, not on the point of unity. Looking at the scenario of ummah disunity in the world today, al-Bakri (2018) urges Muslims to find the most effective solution as soon as possible so that Muslims and Islam return to excellence and be at the peak of its greatness.

In Malaysia, conflicts and disunity among Muslims are becoming more apparent in the information technology era. Rawa (2014) stated that the method of communicating on social media is one of the causes that fuel controversy in society. According to Rawa, the way of response and discussion on social media tend to favor labeling and punishing compared to *tabayyun* or getting an explanation. Disputes in the Muslim community are not only the concern of the country's leaders, but also got the attention of the Sultan who is the patron of Islamic affairs at the state level. The Sultan of Perak, Sultan Nazrin Shah in his speech stated that rhetorical slogans in the name of religion with extreme tones are increasing (Ismail 2019).

From the literature, most studies focus on inter-religious tolerance, inter-religious relations, inter-religious dialogue, and the role of religion in fostering harmony in a multiracial society, but very few studies pay attention to the problem of intra-religious harmony that is harmony among believers in a religion, especially in the context of Malaysia. Issues that are often discussed in forums and seminars also focus on the conceptual framework of religion in dealing with the disunity between Muslim countries and the world community, while at the micro level, Muslims are divided from within due to the attitudes and stances of Muslims themselves. Thus, conflict mechanisms and practical solutions based on the real cause of the problem need to be studied.

Undoubtedly, intra-religious conflict among Muslims is an issue that needs serious attention. Azim (2017) in his study confirmed that there are gaps in the study on Islamic views on conflict and Muslim practices for overcoming conflict. Earlier, Brewer et al. (2010) also noted that the relationship between religion (not limited to Islam) and peace is very poorly documented. Based on the gaps in the literature as well as the concerns voiced by national, religious, and community leaders on the serious division of Muslims in Malaysia (Hasniza 2020; Ismail 2019; Astro Awani 2018), this study was conducted to identify the causes of discord and synthesize the mechanism framework of conflicts formation stemming from religious issues in Malaysia.

History of the Muslim Conflict in Malaysia

Religious conflicts in Malaysia (Malaya) can be traced back to the early 20th century, namely the quarrel between *Kaum Tua* and *Kaum Muda*. These two Islamic groups have different backgrounds and interests that influence the way they think and act. *Kaum Tua* consists of religious leaders and scholars who are loyal to the Malay rulers and Malay customs. *Kaum Tua* is a group of traditional or conservative Islamic thought. The scholars of sufism at that time focused on the field of religion and did not emphasize the mastery of modern knowledge.

Kaum Muda, on the other hand, is a group of more radical religious leaders and scholars. The average youth cleric is a higher education graduate from the Middle East and is influenced by Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (Saat 2019). They criticized and rebuked the actions of the Malay rulers and Malay customs that were contrary to the teachings of Islam. The young clerics brought awareness in the society to return to the true teachings of Islam and eliminate the superstitious practices that were prevalent in Malay society at that time as well as the *taqlid* or uncritical thinking.

Despite fighting for the same cause, the approach and thinking of these two groups led to conflict. Roff (1967) in his book 'The Origins of Malay Nationalism', stated that the cause of the conflict between *Kaum Tua* and *Kaum Muda* is a threat to the status of Malay customs that have

long been entrenched in the society. Roff further stated that the reason why *Kaum Muda* launched the reform movement was for the sake of social and economic change of the Malays. The changes brought by the *Kaum Muda* met the opposition of the *Kaum Tua* by labeling the reforms they carried out as heresy (Saat 2019). According to Don and Nasir (2012), this conflict has slowed down the development process of da'wah in Malaya.

A century later, Muslims in Malaysia are still in conflict over petty issues in religion. The culture of labelling among Muslims as disbelievers or *takfiri* is spreading in the Malay Muslim community and destroying the harmony of the Muslim community in Malaysia as happened in the Middle East countries (Hasniza 2020). Rahim and Zulkepli (2018) stated that religious fanatics are due to the literal method of religious interpretation of some groups as practiced by the Kharijites, while the act of *takfiri* towards other individuals or groups stems from the shallowness of religious knowledge, especially in *akhlak* and *tasawuf*.

According to Ahmad, et al. (2017), in general, religious fanaticism in Malaysia can be seen from two aspects, namely fanaticism in sectarianism (*mazhab*) and fanaticism in religious practice (*ibadah*). This division has similarities with what is stated by Afroni (2016) when discussing about *ghuluw*, an extreme attitude according to Islam. According to him, *ghuluw* is divided into *ghuluw* in creed (*aqidah*) and *ghuluw* in worshipping. The factors associated with the cause of *ghuluw* are first, the shallowness of religious knowledge; second, the education and environment of the individual; and third, the response to socio-economic conditions (al-Luwaihiq, 2014). Many individuals are passionate about practicing the teachings of Islam but do not have sufficient knowledge about it. This situation causes them to quickly conclude a law without looking at it in the appropriate context. Thus, this seeks to create an atmosphere of labeling and *takfiri*.

The conflict between Muslims in Malaysia today is not just a clash between two groups, but various religious groups. Islamic political parties, non-governmental Islamic organizations (NGOs), sufism groups, and Muslim professional scholars are among the groups that each have influence and followers and are in constant conflict. The division of Muslims not only occurs between groups from two different organizations, but also within the same organization, destructive divisions and sects also occur. The dominant Islamic party in Malaysian politics, Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS -Malaysian Islamic Party) experienced a major split no less than twice between 1982 and 2015. The first split occurred in 1982 due to the rise of young clerics who emphasized the concept of Islamic clerical leadership and were influenced by the 1979 Iranian Revolution (Muda 2003). This group caused the then-party president who was a Nationalist-Islam, Asri Muda, to resign and form a new party.

A major split for the second time occurred in 2015 when professional groups within the party were opposed by a group of young clerics who tended towards conservative and traditional trends within the party. In both cases, it can be observed that differences in thought patterns play a role in such internal conflicts. This was also stated by Khairuddin (2016) in his analysis of the PAS faction between 2002 to 2015. According to Khairuddin, the party conflict that occurred was the result of a clash between the conservative faction and the neo-conservative faction (progressive and liberal) in the party. This ousted group of professionals eventually formed Parti Amanah Negara and continued to be hostile to PAS in terms of approach.

The Escalating Conflict and Implications

Between 2018 and 2022, the news media in Malaysia reported many issues related to religious conflicts. Jalal (2018) in his writing in *Berita Harian* stressed the need to find an approach that promotes understanding, tolerance, and unity between religious people. Ismail (2019) in his reporting in *Berita Harian* stated that slogans that are provocative and rhetoric in the name of religion that has an extreme tone seem to be increasingly echoed in Malaysian society. While Hussain (2020) reported in *Sinar Harian* that government leaders warned that the culture of *takfiri* could tarnish the image of Islam thus destroying the harmony of Malaysia. Adnan (2022)

through his writing in *Utusan Malaysia* reported that political leaders were urged to stop raising religious and racial issues that could cause discomfort in society.

Clashes on religious issues are not only rampant among political parties, but religious groups representing various schools of thought and religious teachings are also dividing the Muslim community in Malaysia. The division and conflict that is being faced can trigger the thought of extremism. Religious extremism does not necessarily lead to the level of radical extremism, but the probability is always there if not controlled. This is stated by Trip et al. (2019) that some individuals may have radical beliefs but are not part of a radical movement and do not perform radical actions.

It should be noted that when Islam is associated with extremism, it does not come from the teachings of the religion itself, in fact it is the way the religious teachings are interpreted by the adherents of that religion. This is emphasized by Hamid and Hambali (2015) when stating that the concept of mutual acquaintance is not a foreign concept in Islam as stated in the Qur'an, but it is not practiced by some Muslims (even religious individuals) in society due to prejudice. Hamid and Hambali (2015) also stated that the main cause of endless strife in religious groups is due to the misinterpretation of the teachings of religion. According to Bakali (2019), most Muslim extremists are ignorant of religious beliefs, doctrines, and practices but use religious identity as a tool for their movement and personal gain.

Among the characteristics of religious extremism are not open to the views of others and obsessed with their own opinions, tendency to complicate a situation (inflexible), being prejudiced against others, being rigid, and acts of *takfiri* (Al-Qaradawi 1996). Rahim and Zulkepli (2018) in their study blame indoctrination by religious extremist groups such as done by al-Qaeda as the cause of blind obedience.

The effect of this behaviour of religious extremism is conflict in society. Conflict can consist of several levels, namely internal conflict, conflict between individuals, conflict within groups, and conflict between groups. Conflict arises when the behaviour of religious extremism is highlighted between groups in society. This effect can be classified into three forms, namely the creed (*aqidah*), the practice of worship, and the attitude among Muslims.

The effect in terms of *aqidah* is the behaviour of *takfiri* among Muslims. It occurs when a religious group believes that their belief is the absolute truth and denies the truth from others (Rahim & Zulkepli 2018). In fact, the situation can worsen when the opinions of these extremists are forced on others (Majid 2003). This harsh attitude can also be seen in the problems of sects where every fanatical believer is willing to label the followers of other sects as heretics.

The effect in terms of practice is that it complicates the Muslim community in issues involving worship. For example, bigotry (*taksub*) towards certain opinions and inflexibility in the issue of *fiqh* of worship lead to actions such as praying with two imams at a time, boycotting the results of certain individual sacrifices, and so on. Obsession with one's own views shuts down the rational mind and scholarly debate. The nature of obsession is likely to cover up individual self-weaknesses and highlight dominance as well as self-significance (Kruglanski et al. 2018).

The third effect is prejudice which leads to prolonged disputes and conflicts among religious groups. According to Kruglanski et al. (2018), narratives of a religious ideological nature can be the cause and goal of most political extremists. Individuals acquire self-worth when being part of a social group (Tajfel & Turner 2004), and if the group they belong to is discriminated against by others, it will elicit a response in the form of aggressive actions from members of that group. All these phenomena can be seen in the Muslim community in Malaysia today.

Research Method

In the present study, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews using a semi-structured set of questions, which comprised five open-ended questions. The questions were designed in consideration of the current religious conflict situation in Malaysia which emphasizes the main cause of division, factors that encourage conflict, the obstacles to conflict resolution, and practical

methods of conflict resolution. A total of 8 respondents were purposely selected to be interviewed. The respondents consisted of three academicians, two Muslim preachers, two from Islamic NGOs, and a Muslim politician. All respondents have a relatively good religious background with 5 of them having post-graduate degrees. Two respondents each represent the ages of 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s. The data from the interviews were analysed thematically. An inductive coding approach was used, and the results of the analysis found that there are eight main themes related to the topic. The themes are then fitted into the framework of the system model to get a clearer picture of the conflict mechanism in Malaysia.

Findings

Eight main themes emerged from the analysis, which are education, thinking method, educator, bigotry (*taksub*), individual attitudes, self-interest, media, and authorities. In this study, the researcher divides the conflict mechanism into three components, namely trigger factors (input), formation (process), and effects (output). The breakdown of conflict mechanisms into these components aims to facilitate the analysis and identification of solutions to the root causes of the problem. This input-process-output model is commonly used in analysing issues in the study of organizational behaviour.

Individual attitudes, educators, and education are the underpinning factors that cause conflict in society. Negative attitudes stem from the lack of an individual's faith and spirituality. It is linked to man's relationship with God. Negative attitudes such as ego and insincere in practicing religious teachings led to disharmony were mentioned 14 times by seven of the respondents. Educator in the context of this study refers to religious leaders and religious scholars in the community. They are responsible for educating the community about religious teachings and Islam as a way of life. Unfortunately, because they lack the knowledge and skills to preach in a pluralistic society, hence causing fanaticism. Their role in causing conflict in society was stated nine times by six respondents. The third underpinning factor, education in the context of this study refers to the religious education system that tends to deliver knowledge in the form of memorization rather than synthesizing facts by thinking critically. This factor was mentioned nine times by four respondents. Table 1 summarized the underpinning factors that cause conflict.

Table 1: Summary of the Underpinning Factors

Domain	Connection with God	Connection with Self	Connection with Others
Factor	Weakness of Faith (Iman)	Lack of Knowledge & Skills	Weakness of Religious Education
Details	Ego, Insincere, Envy	Traditional Method, Lack of Knowledge Mastery & Lack of Exposure to the Reality of the Society	Memorization, Disrespect for the Differences, Lack of Religious/Racial Integration.

The three underpinning factors above are the cause of the process of forming thoughts, emotions, and behaviours related to the conflict. An education system based on memorization may distort how an individual thinks. This then leads to bias, labelling, and uncritical thinking. All the respondents agreed with this statement. The lack of mastery of knowledge and skills to convey religion will give rise to fanaticism among followers. This fanaticism can cause hatred among individuals or groups with different opinions. A sense of superiority over other individuals or groups also arises from the feeling of self-obsession. From the interviews, the researchers found that fanaticism occurs toward teachers, groups, or sources of knowledge. The weakness of a person's faith leads to a selfish attitude and subsequently, such individuals use religion and political groups for their own interests either to take revenge or punish those who do not agree

with them. This was expressed by six out of the eight respondents. Figure 1 shows the summary of the process involved.

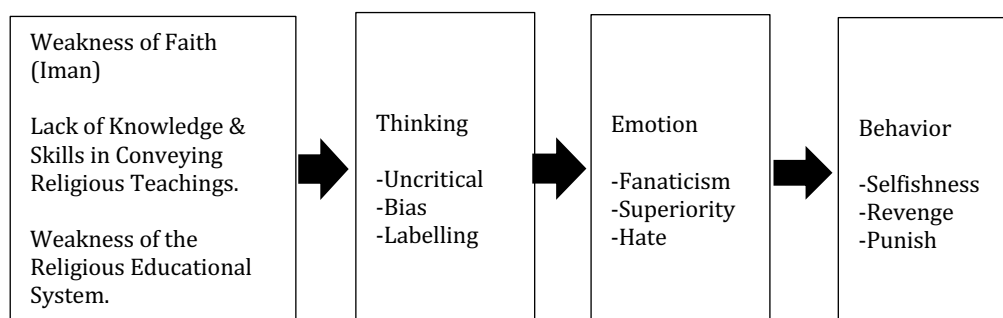


Figure 1: Summary of the Conflict Process

In the end, the three elements of thought, emotion, and behaviour cause incompatibility between individuals and groups in society. Prejudice and discriminatory actions are also outputs of this process. Figure 2 below is a model to explain the mechanisms of religious conflict in Malaysia using a systems model to get a full picture of the causes, processes, and implications:

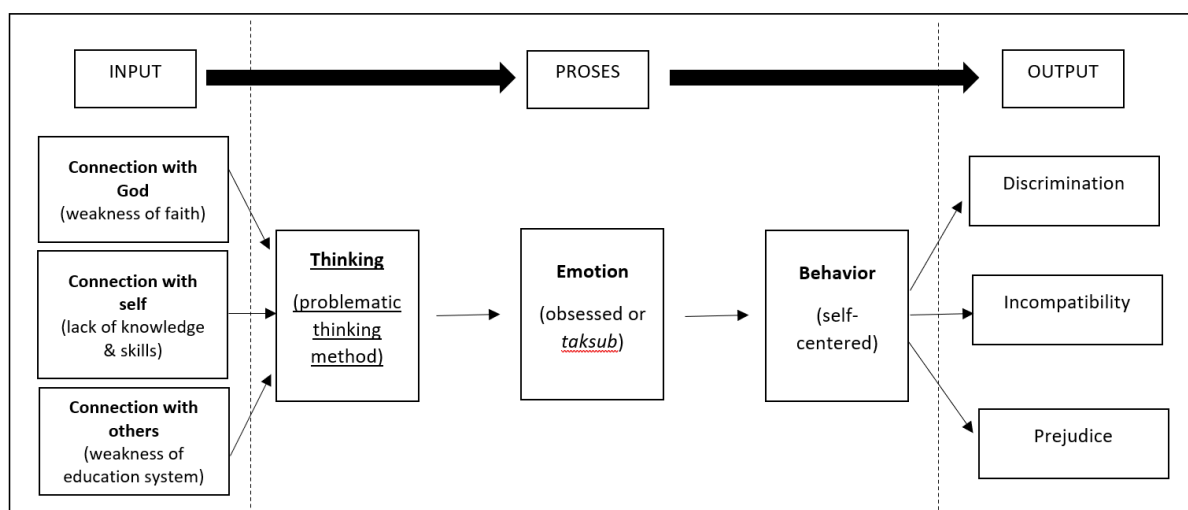


Figure 2: Model of Conflict Mechanism in Malaysia

Discussion

The results of the study correspond to the statements of previous researchers related to religious conflict. First, the cause of conflict and division in society is not from the religion itself but a result of weak understanding and faith in religion. Spiritual weakness leads to ego, arrogance, envy, insincerity in religion, and prioritizing personal interests. Second, Muslim individuals and Muslim preachers still lack an understanding of religious knowledge and skills in delivering preaching in society. Some of the educators (*asatizah*) in society are seen as the cause of bigotry (*taksub*) in society.

The study found that the characteristics of educators that arouse fanaticism are those who lack mastery of religious knowledge, receive religious knowledge only in a traditional way, and lack exposure to the reality of a pluralistic society. The relationship between weak faith, lack of understanding, and mastery of religious knowledge was stated by previous researchers (Bakali

2019; Rahim & Zulkepli 2018; Hamid & Hambali 2015; al-Luwaihiq 2014). Kruglanski et al. (2018) in his study explained that obsession is also highlighted by certain individuals in order to cover up their own weaknesses and highlight their own significance in society.

The third critical cause is the method of learning religion in some Islamic educational institutions that emphasize the process of memorization without encouraging students to think critically as recommended in verses of the Qur'an related to *ulul albab*, which is those who think critically. This kind of education system fails to produce students who are able to think clearly and systematically, resulting in biased thinking and disrespecting different views. The one-stream education system also fails to form students who can integrate into a multi-racial society.

These three main causes lead to thoughts, emotions, and behaviours that damage harmony among Muslims and in society. An irrational way of thinking will make society tend to evaluate emotionally and the act of labelling is one of the significant effects that can be seen in the society. This act of labelling can also be traced to the history of disputes between the *Kaum Muda* and the *Kaum Tua* (Saat 2019). Thinking emotionally produces fanatical followers. The resulting bigotry in society causes several effects such as harsh religious interpretation (*ghuluw*), misinterpretation of the Qur'an, *taqlid*, and prejudice against fellow members of society.

This study also found that fanaticism in society is divided into three, namely obsession with teachers, obsession with groups, and obsession with sources of knowledge. The division of fanaticism is different from the perspective of Ahmad et al. (2017) and Afroni (2016) who only focused on the components of belief and worship. The individual's relationship with the leader of the religious group provoked fanaticism toward the teacher. Group fanaticism occurs when an individual who is a member of a certain group, defends the group's interests from the accusations of other parties (Tajfel & Turner 2004). While fanaticism with sources of knowledge is due to the assumption that only sources held by certain individuals or groups are authentic while other sources are wrong (Rahim & Zulkepli 2018).

Through this study, religious members and politicians were found to be inclined to use religion and political groups for personal gain. Although in Islam, the goal does not justify the means, but for some Muslim politicians, it seems to be an exception for them. Leaders of certain religious groups and political parties were not correcting mistakes among their followers. The belief that all their actions are right, and others as wrong is subtly indoctrinated into followers by political leaders through superficial arguments. These actions are the seeds of extremism as said by Bakali (2019) that Islamic extremists use the image and identity of religion for self-interest.

Meanwhile, some the religious scholars are not transparent in imparting knowledge because they have personal interests. The study found that the characteristics of those who turn their backs on religion for self-interest are the pursuit of popularity and influence in society, grudges, and showing off. Maintaining a position or influence in society becomes a priority for certain religious scholars compared to seeking the truth in a debate. Differences of opinion are not dealt with *adab*, but instead destructively. Among them is the act of labelling parties with different opinions with labels that tarnish their credibility.

Followers and social media were also found to contribute to hostility, although not as a major factor. A study by Naeem (2022) supports that the media plays a role in religious extremism. When leaders of one religious group are attacked by members of another religious group, they respond by committing character assassinations which are widely viral on social media. In most cases, leaders do not teach their followers to be obsessed with their group, but it is the followers who are obsessed with the leader and his religious group.

This study also found that authorities and religious scholars can play a more active role in explaining to the community the differences of opinion in Islam (*khilaf*). It is more important to address the issues of attitude and behaviour that can damage harmony in society, not who is right and who is wrong. As one of the respondents said:

"These matters should be dealt with firmly by the authorities if they clearly affect the harmony in society. Enforcement needs to focus on wrongdoing, not the labels being thrown at individuals."

The issue of education is a core issue that needs to be corrected to effectively deal with the problem at hand. An education system that only focuses on the memorization process and pays less attention to the thinking process needs to be improved. Next, religious teachers and religious preachers must be ensured to have a deep understanding of Islam before being allowed to teach. Finally, a learning syllabus that emphasizes manners for different views should also be included in Islamic religious studies at the school level. All these efforts require commitment and determination from political and community leaders.

The researchers suggest that future studies can be done using a quantitative approach to confirm this finding. A comparative study between a community with a Muslim majority and a community with an even percentage of Muslims and non-Muslims is also recommended. This is because besides education factors, there are studies that suggest that the culture and environment of the local community also influence extremist behaviour. Thus, a comparison between the behaviour of Muslims in the states on the west coast and the states on the east coast of peninsula Malaysia may show significant differences.

To conclude, based on a systematic analysis of the qualitative data, it was found that conflict mechanisms among Malaysian Muslims can be structured into input-process-output models. The results found that three main factors were related to religious conflict. The results of this study have an impact on the Muslim community in Malaysia which is laden with issues of discord, division, and conflict. It can be the basis for conflict resolution in society when the real causes of conflict can be identified and managed from the beginning. In fact, early education to curb problems in society can be applied at the school level with the presence of religious harmony modules.

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