Ibn Khaldun's Theory of *'Asabiyyah* and its Application in Modern Muslim Society

[1]Asyiqin Abdul Halim, [2]Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, [2]Ahmad Zaki Berahim Ibrahim and
[2]Faisal Ahmad Faisal Abdul Hamid

[1]Department of Theology and Religion, ERI Building, University of Birmingham,
Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, United Kingdom
[2]Department of Islamic History and Civilization, Academy of Islamic Studies,
University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract: The theory of *'Asabiyyah* propounded by Ibn Khaldun is the centre of his concept of *al-'umrân*, which according to him has influenced the rise and fall of certain dynasties or states. This study will examine Ibn Khaldun's theory of *'Asabiyyah* and the application of this theory within the modern Malaysian Muslim community. Certain dynasties or states were built on the notion of *'Asabiyyah* including Muslim governments in various regions of the world. However, Muslims these days are facing different challenges within this understanding of *'Asabiyyah*. These include integration, disunity within the same group, problems of immorality, criminality, social and internal and external problems. This study implies that addressing the issue of *'Asabiyyah* is a key to find solution to the malaise of the nation.

Key words: Ibn Khaldun % Theory of *'Asabiyyah* % Modern Muslim society % Malay community % Nation building

INTRODUCTION

Throughout Muslim history, governments have risen and fallen and been replaced by one after another. It began with the period of the Prophet and later the period of the Four Rightly-Guided Caliphs, continued with the Umayyad and Abbasid Empires. Later, they were substituted by small Muslim governments in places including the Safavid Empire in Iran, the Mughal Empire in India and the Ottoman Empire in Turkey. However, when the Ottoman Empire fell in the nineteenth century, Muslims began to be weakened and lost their courage to rise again as a great nation. Muslim territories were divided and split into different countries and ruled by the colonies. As described by Zakaria, "...The grabbing game reached its climax in 1920 at the end of World War I when British troops occupied Damascus and Baghdad, once the two most powerful of Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates. Everywhere Muslims found themselves utterly defeated and thoroughly demoralised..." [1]. Furthermore, the later rise of Muslim governments in several Muslim countries who ruled based on the notions and ideology of secularism had gradually created conflicts with those who

wanted to uphold and preserve the truth of religion. Groups of reformists and revivalists emerged to oppose these ruling governments and as a result Muslims grew apart and clashed.

In additions, Muslims became weak in economic terms, morally degraded and diminished in regard to academic and intellectual as well as scientific activity. Natural disaster such as famine, flood and plague added to their plight. Parwez said that "...The Muslim condition compared to the more developed countries of the world is very weak and humiliating; they are alive at the mercy of the countries of Europe and America; most of the essential things of life are received by Muslim countries from the more developed countries of the world. Many Muslim countries receive economic aid from foreign countries..." [2, 3]. That is the general situation of Muslim society nowadays cannot be denied, though there are also many Muslims living in good conditions.

One of the crucial factors agreed by the majority of Muslim scholars regarding the decline of Islamic civilization is the departure of Muslims from exercising the truth of Islamic teaching. According to Saeed, "...the failure of Muslim in understanding and application of the

Qur'anic doctrine in its totality is actually the cause of Muslim societies to be generally static and not developed in the manner that they should have..." [2, 3]. Furthermore, the famous Muslim reformist, Jamal al-din al-Afghani stated that, "Muslim people grew weak because the truth of Islam was corrupted by successive waves of falsity...Muslims are weak because they are not really Muslim..." [4, 3]. Hence, this shows that Islam has played a significant role in the rise of Islamic civilization and to abandon it cause decay. Islam changes the human's view regarding their purpose in this life, where they have a duty to God, themselves and others. Islam opens their mind to take the idea that life is not only to search for wealth and prosperity, but also has to be balanced between material and spiritual aspects. It upgrades the position of people who were suppressed before, because there is nothing superior except in their faith in God. Everyone is equal and respected by others. Islam instructs its followers to be kind towards each other and the rulers to protect their people from any threat or danger. These sustain good rule and establish great civilization which accord to the Islamic values.

However, once Muslims turn away from the Islamic principles, they tend to follow their own desire and lust in their lives and conduct. The rulers thus force their followers to implement their orders. As stated by Ibn Khaldun, the situation will be corrupted when those who been ruled protect themselves through lies, trick and dishonesty [5]. In addition, their luxurious life influences their bad behaviour. Only the spiritual element, which is the teaching of religion, can eliminate this bad conduct, as stated by Ibn Khaldun regarding the role of religion in the development of a nation [4]. This is in accordance with the Qur'anic verses, Surah al-Isra', verse 16:

When We decide to destroy a population, We (first) send a definite order to those among them who are given the good things of this life and yet transgress; so that the word is proved true against them; then (it is) We destroy them utterly.

The lack of strong bonds among the members of a group, expressed by Ibn Khaldun as *'Asabiyyah* is another vital factor that diminishes a nation's achievement. Without doubt, a strong bond among the members of a nation is really crucial in building a civilization. The members of a group need to support each other to fight against their opponents. Hence, a strong government relies on strong support. However, when the strong bond among the group members becomes loose,

implicitly it creates internal problems within a government. This is the issue and challenge confronted by Muslims today. One of the possible ways to reconcile this problem is by means of building the Muslim *Ummah* as pointed out by Siba' [6]. Therefore, Ibn Khaldun's theory of *'Asabiyyah* is believed to be the appropriate theory to examine in fulfilling this requirement and implicitly in reconstructing the great Islamic civilization in future.

What Is Ibn Khaldun's Theory of *'Asabiyyah*?: According to the *Arab-English Lexicon*, the term *'Asabiyyah* emerged from the word *"ta'asub"* which literally means "…bounding the turban round (his own) head". Thus, *'Asabiyyah* is explained as the "…quality of an individual who is possessing *'Asabiyyah* which refers to the action of ones in helping his people or his group against any aggressive action, the quality of a person who is angry for the sake of his group and protecting them, the action of ones who invites others to help his group, to combine or league with them in facing those who act hostility towards them whether they are wrongdoers or wronged, the action of an individual who associate with others or of him who protects others or partisanship and a strong association with holds numbers of person closely bound based on the same interest and opinion..." [7].

In the saying of the Prophet, *'Asabiyyah* was explained by him as "helping your own people in an unjust cause", where the Prophet says,

ليس منا من دعا إلى عصبية ، وليس منا من قاتل
على عصبية ، وليس منا من مات على عصبية

"He is not of us who proclaims the cause of tribal partisanship and he is not of us who fights in the cause of tribal partisanship; and he is not of us who dies in the cause of tribal partisanship".

When the Prophet was asked by the Companions about the meaning of *'Asabiyyah* (tribal partisanship), he explained:

أن تعين قومك على الظلم

"(It means) your helping your own people in an unjust cause" [8].

Interestingly, the term *'Asabiyyah* used by Ibn Khaldun in his theory of social development has been translated in various ways by recent scholars.

For example, Rosenthal has interpreted *'Asabiyyah* as 'group feeling', which according to Lacoste is the closest meaning to this term [9]. Meanwhile, Mahdi found that 'solidarity' is the nearest meaning of *'Asabiyyah* which was also used by Gumplawicz and Issawi [10]. Furthermore, De Slane translated the term as 'esprit de corps' representing the term in certain contexts addressed by Ibn Khaldun in his theory of *'Asabiyyah.* However, some of the modern scholars have preferred to use the Arabic term without translating it, while others have defined *'Asabiyyah* as 'sense of solidarity, group feeling, group loyalty and esprit de corps' [11]. It is believed that these different translations are in relation to the context in which it is used in the text.

Based on Ibn Khaldun's explanation, the spirit of *'Asabiyyah* basically exists due to the primitive life possesed by certain groups or nations when they face difficulties. These force them to stand together to protect themselves and their fellows from any danger outside their group. The spirit of group feeling or *'Asabiyyah* emerged because they had to fight for the basic need. The spirit of *'Asabiyyah* usually arises from the blood relationship, which is the core element of this spirit. On the other hand, the sense of *'Asabiyyah* could also exist in those who have no blood relationship, yet have a common view from '...alliance and clientship'... [5].

Another point to note is that religion plays a crucial role in binding the members of a group through the spirit of *'Asabiyyah.* The spirit of *'Asabiyyah* is essential in spreading the teaching of a religion. Religion eliminates jealousy among the members of a group that possesses *'Asabiyyah.* In Rosental's words, "...religion is the most powerful cement that can hold together a large sedentary people..." [12, 13]. Furthermore, having a common sense of religion allows the members of a group to work together, to the extent of being willing to die to achieve the objectives that they believe in. Accordingly, the physical aspect of hardship and the spiritual aspect which is the element of religion actually uphold a strong group feeling or *'Asabiyyah* in developing their group or nation.

Moreover, royal authority or *mulk* is the target of a group that owns *'Asabiyyah.* This quality is essential as one person needs to be superior over others to protect his group members. However, Ibn Khaldun has distinguished between royal authority or *mulk* and leadership, or translated by Rosenthal as chieftain [5]. According to him, leadership is included as part of royal authority where a person or group that possesses this characteristic has the power to rule over others and others will follow his orders.

Therefore, royal authority cannot be achieved except by having strong group feeling or *'Asabiyyah* among the members of a group [12, 13].

Consequently, the loss of the spirit of *'Asabiyyah* affects a group or nation. Once the group or nation establishes their kingdom, the comfortable life changes them so that they no longer need a relationship with their fellows to ensure their security as they are utilizing power as the replacement. Furthermore, their luxurious life gradually diminishes the strong *'Asabiyyah.* Hence, they get weaker and rely on the protection of their soldiers and those under their rule to guard them from their adversaries. This is the period where other groups who hold stronger *'Asabiyyah* overthrow them. Hence, the cycle of social development described by Ibn Khaldun in his writing of *Muqaddimah* and the theory of *'Asabiyyah* are the crucial factors in his theory of social development.

Malay Muslim Community in Malaysia: Malaysia is a multi-religious country and Islam is the official religion of the country. According to the Malaysia Population and Housing Census 2000, Islam is widely practised by 60.4 percent of the Malaysian population, while other religions are Buddhism (19 percent), Christianity (9.1 percent), Hinduism (6.3 percent) and Confucianism, Taoism and other traditional Chinese religions (2.6 percent) [14]. It is a multi-racial country consists of Malay, Indian, Chinese and other ethnic groups. The Malays have Islam as their religion, "...habitually speak Malay language and conform the Malay culture..." based on the Malaysian Constitution Article 160. It is believed Islam came to Malaysia at the beginning of the fourteenth century through the propagation of the religion by the Arab and Indian traders [15]. Significant evidence for this comes from the discovery of the Terengganu inscription, a four-sided stone on which is written the date of Friday 4th Rejab 702 AH/ Friday 22nd February 1303 AD. This stone was found in the early 1920s. According to Riddell, it shows that the Islamic teaching was spread within the country as well as to other places including Sumatra [16].

Furthermore, several Malay kingdoms including the Sultanate of Malacca had risen in the fifteenth-century. The pioneer of the Malacca government, Parameswara, had converted to Islam and changed his name to Iskandar Shah. His successors had established Malacca to be a successful and influential kingdom which was described as "a great success and considered as an inspiration and source of strength to the later empires" [17]. The achievement of Malacca was due to its systematic

administration. It was also well-known as a great entreport equipped with facilities for merchants to store goods from all over the world. Moreover, the Malay language was widely spoken among the foreign traders and became the national language of the state.

However, this great Malay civilization had reached its peak and subsequently began to decline during the period of Sultan Mahmud. Due to the weakness of the ruling government, Malacca had fallen to the Portuguese in 1511. It was the beginning of Malaya being colonised for four and half centuries. Subsequently, this country was conquered by the Dutch in 1641 and at the beginning of 17th century it was occupied by the British. The colonisation of the British is depicted by Mutalib as a starting point of changes '...the course of Islam in Malay life...' [18]. Moreover, Dr. Syed Husin Ali mentioned that the Malay Sultans "...under British control from 1824 to 1957 became a symbol of Malay political sovereignty without any authority to make decisions" [19]. In the late nineteenth century, the notion of an Islamic reformist movement arose within Malaya, influenced by the idea of Islamic reformism introduced by Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Syeikh Muhammad Abduh. The purpose of this group, known as Kaum Muda, was to enhance the identity of Malay Muslims under the British domination of Islam in Malaya. Cited from Hussin, Kaum Muda condemned the Malay rulers and traditional religious scholars, recognized as Kaum Tua for "...their failure to act as an effective referent group or models for their community..." [19]. They urged the Malay Muslim community to return to the fundamentals of Islamic teaching and equip themselves with the knowledge and skill of modern life to deal with the challenges they were facing.

During the World War II, the Japanese overthrew the British government and ruled Malaya for three years until they were defeated. Later, the British came back to Malaya with the introduction of the Malayan Union replacing the previous government system. However, this idea received strong opposition from the Malay Muslim groups as it weakened the power of Malay rulers and granted citizenship and similar rights to other races. As a result of the Malay Muslim strong voice resisting the idea of a Malayan Union and their strong desire to achieve independence, it was cancelled and transferred to the Federation Agreement [20].

Hence, an agreement was achieved between the Malay and the non-Malay groups and both of them agreed to a 'bargain'. From the non-Malay side, the Malay

group was recognized as indigenous residents in Malaya, whereas the non-Malay camps who were mainly Chinese and Indian were granted Malaya citizenship. Furthermore, the non-Malay group also acknowledged the special rights of Malay Muslim, the expansion of Malay land reserves and to accept Islam and Malay language as the official religion and language of the country. Thus, the first election in Malaya was a lunched and the Alliance Party (*Parti Perikatan*) coalition of United Malays Nation Organization (UMNO) representing the large Malay Muslim group, Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) won a huge majority. The new government was established and continued to struggle for independence until it was achieved on 31st August 1957. Tunku Abdul Rahman, leader of the UMNO party was appointed as the first Prime Minister of Malaya.

Although Malaya had been granted independence, there was tension between the three major groups; the Malay, Chinese and Indians. The British and Japanese occupations in Malaya had created a huge gap between these main groups. During the British administration, social and administrative contacts were kept to a minimum. The segregation during the colonisation and differences in culture and language had also led to tension [21]. Furthermore, the Malay Muslim group felt threatened for most of them lived in poverty while the other races were more advanced in financial situation. This situation remained sustained until the ethnic riots of 13th May 1969 occurred when hundreds of people died. Following this incident, Malaysia's New National Economy Policy (NEP) was introduced to ensure the Malay and indigenous groups achieved at least 30 percent of the economic share by 1990 [22]. However, this plan did not reach its target. As reported by Jomo, these groups only achieved around 18 per cent of this share in 1990 and slightly more than 20 per cent in 2000. Some people criticized this plan for bringing a 'relaxed attitude' among the Malay and *bumiputras* groups. Hence, there is a slight change towards the economy situation of these groups though they dominate politically.

Malay Muslim Community and *'Asabiyyah*: Today, the Malay Muslim community in Malaysia has a better standard of living than before. Malaysia at the current situation is viewed as an example for the combination of Islam and modernization [23]. As stated by Funston, Islam in Malaysia is seen as "...both moderate and enlightened, rejecting extremism in any form..." and tolerant of the rights of Muslim women in economic,

academic, social and political activities [24]. Yet, there is an internal problem within the Malay Muslim camp. The different understanding and perception of the teaching of Islam has divided the Malay Muslim community into several movements such as the Malay political parties which are the United Malay Nation Organization (UMNO) and Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). As mentioned by Mutalib, there was "...a traditional UMNO-PAS ideological divide where both of them have accused each other for not following the 'right Islam'" [25]. In 1987, there was an open attack between these two parties, accusing each other of being 'infidels' which is a serious accusation in Islamic teaching.

Besides, there was a clash within the ruling party, UMNO, where the new camps were formed in 1989, led by Tun Dr. Mahathir recognized as UMNO Baru (New UMNO) and another camp known as Team B led by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, the former Finance Minister who later formed a new party named Semangat 46 (Spirit of 46 or the Old UMNO of 1946). The party was disbanded in October 1996 and Tengku Razaleigh and the other members of the party returned to UMNO. In addition, *dakwah* movements such as the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia or Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), Jemaah Islah Malaysia (JIM) and Jama'at Tabligh (the Muslim Missionary Group) had emerged. Due to the introduction of a New Economic Policy (NEP) and New Education Policy (NEDP) purposely for the Malay and *bumiputra* after the incident 13th May 1969 ethnic riots occurred, Malay youngsters from the rural areas were given the opportunity to pursue their studies at the local universities and overseas institutions of higher education. The strong notion of religion they brought to the universities had influenced these *dakwah* movements and there emerged a more "...Islamised and educated Malay elite..." [25].

This community is also facing social and morality issues. Drug addiction, broken families and moral degradation are some of the problems faced by the Malay Muslim youth. The recent statistics of drug addicts in Malaysia in 2010 from the National Anti-Drug Agency or *Agensi Anti Dadah Kebangsaan* shows that the total number of drugs addict in Malaysia is 23,642 which total up to 66 cases per day. Most of drug addicts are Malays, a total 18,693 cases compared to Chinese 2,279 cases and Indian 2,037 cases [26]. Moreover, 2,158 cases of sex among the family members (*sumbang mahram*) which is illegal in Islam; were reported from 2000 to 2007 [27]. Besides, there are 304 cases of babies were abandoned

from 2004 to 2007, which thought to be the result of young Muslims having sex pre-marriage. These are among the issues faced by the Malay Muslim community in Malaysia. Hence, these problems have to be solved to ensure the material and spiritual achievement of this group. To reflect Ibn Khaldun's theory of *'Asabiyyah* of social development, there are two essential elements to ensure the strength of Muslim achievement and civilization. First is the true understanding of *'Asabiyyah* to support each other though they have no blood relationship. The element of belief in addition, is essential in implementing this theory. Muslims need to understand and apply the teaching of religion in its true manner. If this theory is given due consideration and Muslims learn their lesson from the past, they are capable of rising as a great nation once again.

CONCLUSION

The challenges faced by Muslims today are not the same as those confronted by the Muslims in the past. Muslims in the past faced difficulties in establishing the Islamic civilization whereas Muslims today have to reconstruct their civilization as well as its social institutions [28]. Therefore, the theory of *'Asabiyyah* propounded by Ibn Khaldun need to be considered in implementing this vision. Muslims need to learn lessons from the past to achieve success in the future. To practise the right teaching and to initiate a strong bond of *'Asabiyyah* are crucial for Muslims to rise up again as a great nation and re-establish an Islamic civilization. The unity of Muslims should be implemented with concerns of the differences in their views [29]. This suggestion can also apply to the Malay Muslim community in Malaysia in overcoming the issues they are facing. Hence, Muslims need to cope with the challenges, facing them, not to run away from them or reject them, in order to be a great nation.

REFERENCES

1. Zakaria, R., 1989. The Struggle within Islam: The Conflict between Religion and Politics. London: Penguin Books.
2. Parwez, G.A., 1966. Asbab-e Zawa Ummat (Causes of the Downfall of the Community of Muslim). Lahore: Adara Taloo-e Islam.
3. Saeed, J., 1994. Islam and Modernization: A comparative Analysis in Pakistan, Egypt and Turkey, London: Praeger.

4. Hourani, A., 1962. Arabic Thought in Liberal Age. London: Oxford University Press.

5. Ibn Khaldun, 1958. The Muqaddimah. (trans) Rosenthal, Franz, An Introduction to History, Vol 1. New York: Princeton University Press.

6. Siba'i, M., 2002. The Islamic Civilization. Swansea: Awakening Publications.

7. Lane, E.W., 1984. Arabic-English Lexicon (Vol. Two). Cambridge: Islamic Text Society Trust.

8. Asad, M., 1961. The Principles of State and Government in Islam. Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus.

9. Lacoste, Y., 1984. Ibn Khaldun: The Birth of History and the Past of the Third World. London: Verso Editions.

10. Mahdi, M., 1957. *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.

11. Rabi', M.M., (1967). The Political Theory of Ibn Khaldun. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

12. Rosenthal, E., 1940. Ibn Khaldun, a North African Muslim Thinker of the Fourteenth Century Bulletin of John Rylands Library, Manchester.

13. Issawi, C., 1950. An Arab Philosophy of History. London: John Murray.

14. Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia, 2005. Laporan Am Banci Penduduk dan Perumahan. Malaysia: Jabatan Perangkaan.

15. Funston, John, 2006. "Malaysia" in Hooker, Virginia and Fealy, Greg, Voices of Islam in Southeast Asia: A Contemporary Sourcebook, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

16. Riddel, P.G., 2001. 'Muslims and Christians in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei: In Quest of a Common Vision' In: A. O' Mahony and A. Siddiqui, Christians and Muslims in the Commonwealth: A dynamic role in the future, London: Altajir World of Islamic Trust.

17. Andaya, B.W. and L.Y. Andaya, 1982. A History of Malaysia. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd.

18. Mutalib, H., 1993. Islam in Malaysia: From Revivalism to Islamic State. Singapore: Singapore University Press.

19. Ali, S.H., 1993. The Malays: Their Problems and Future. Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Asia.

20. Means, G.P., 1970. Malayan Politics. London: University of London Press Ltd.

21. Mahathir, M., 1970. The Malay Dilemma. Singapore and Kuala Lumpur: Times Books International.

22. Jomo, K.S., 2004. The New Economic Policy and Interethnic Relations in Malaysia. [Online] Available: < http:// www.unrisd.org/ 80256B3C005BCCF9/ (httpPublications)/A20E9AD6E5BA919780256B6D0 057896B?OpenDocument > (May 10, 2012.

23. Choudhury, G.W., 1993. Islam and the Modern Muslim World. Kuala Lumpur: WHS Publications Sdn. Bhd.

24. Funston, J., 1980. Malay Politics in Malaysia: A study of UMNO and PAS. Kuala Lumpur: Heinamenn Education Books (Asia) Ltd.

25. Mutalib, H., 1994. 'Islamisation in Malaysia: Between Ideals and Realities' In: H. Mutalib and T. I. Hashmi, Muslims and the Modern States: Case Studies of Muslims in Thirteen Countries, New York: St. Martin's Press.

26. Agensi Anti Dadah Kebangsaan, 2010. Laporan Dadah Disember. [Online] Available: http:// www.adk.gov.my/html/laporandadah/Disember%20 2010.pdf (April 7, 2012).

27. Tawadi, H., 2008. "Kes Sumbang Mahram Tertinggi di Johor", *Utusan Malaysia,* (May 26). [Online] Available: <http:// www.utusan.com.my/ utusan/ arkib.asp?y=2008&dt=0527&pub=utusan_malaysia &sec=johor&pg=wj_01.htm&arc=hive> (May 8, 2012).

28. Rahman, F., 1966. Islam. 2nd edition, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

29. Mutalib, H., 1998. Islam in Southeast Asia and the 21st Century: Managing the Inevitable Challenges, Dilemmas and Tensions. Islamic Studies, 37(2): 201-227.

30. Pratt, D., 2005. The Challenge of Islam: Encountering in Interfaith Dialogue. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company.

31. Anonymous, 2008. "304 kes buang bayi 2004-07" *Utusan Malaysia*, (May 28). [Online] Available: < http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/arkib.asp?y=20 08&dt=0528&pub=utusan_malaysia&sec=parlimen &pg=pa_01.htm&arc=hive> (April 7, 2012).

32. Chapra, M.U., 2008. Muslim Civilization: The Causes of Decline and the Need for Reform. United Kingdom: The Islamic Foundation.