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Banning ‘God’ in Malaysia

Abstract

This article examines an option of depriving a language of certain words by presenting the circumstances surrounding the ruling issued by the Malaysian Court of Appeal on 14th October 2013, which set precedent for prohibition against the use of the word ‘Allāh’ by non-Muslims. The main concern in this study is the deceptive handling of truth by the Malaysian media, whereby they have been used as means of fear-mongering among Muslims to support the ban on the use of the word ‘Allāh’ and, eventually, to exacerbate religious intolerance.

Keywords: *Allāh*, religious intolerance, Malaysia, politicization of religion, *The Herald* case, censorship

The ‘Allāh’ case

In January 2008, the Malaysian government renewed the publication licence for the Malay-language edition of the Roman Catholic Church weekly, “The Herald”, which was terminated in December 2007. Although the publication licence was resumed, the weekly was barred from referring to God as ‘Allāh’. The then Deputy Internal Security Minister (now known as Home Minister), claimed that the word ‘Allāh’ could only be used in the context of Islam and that “«The Herald» can use other words but not ‘Allāh’. That will confuse people.”¹

In February 2009, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur filed a judicial review against the government to challenge the ban. In December 2009, the Kuala Lumpur

¹ SUARAM (Suara Rakyat Malaysia), *Malaysia Human Rights Report 2008*, SUARAM, Petaling Jaya, 2009, pp. 66–67, 118–120.

High Court concluded that “The Herald” had the constitutional right to use the word ‘Allāh’.² The court ruling led to Muslim groups protests in early January 2010. The protests coincided with arson attacks on a number of churches across Malaysia.³ Soon the government appealed against the decision of the High Court. On 14th October 2013, the Court of Appeal allowed the appeal and set aside all orders given by the High Court to the judicial review application.⁴ According to the court’s findings the usage of the term ‘Allāh’ was not an integral part of the faith and practice of Christianity and if such usage were allowed, it would cause confusion within the community.⁵ The Court of Appeal’s conclusion on what was or was not integral to the Christian faith, was striking to the public opinion, a prominent Malaysian lawyer, Malik Imtiaz Sarwar commented: “It is not for the courts to define what is and what is not essential in any faith and I can see no reason for any superior court in this country to ever take such an extraordinary step. Not only is such a course wholly inconsistent with the various dimensions of the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion, it is unnecessary.”⁶ Malik Imtiaz observes that the whole case was made controversial by certain groups for their own purposes and that “[...] in failing to recognise the controversy for what it was, the Court of Appeal may have inadvertently laid the ground for the further machinations of those who would divide this nation.”⁷ The ploy followed soon when in the beginning of January 2014, Malaysian authorities raided the Bible Society of Malaysia, arrested two of its officials and seized Bibles in which the word ‘Allāh’ was used.⁸

From freedom of expression to freedom of religion

When “The Herald” was prohibited from referring to God as ‘Allāh’ in its publications, the ban issued by the government pertained to the matter of freedom of press and freedom of expression, yet soon it ignited an ethno-nationalist-religious campaign which culminated with the court ruling in October 2013, whereby the word ‘Allāh’ became a forbidden reference to God for non-Muslims. The process by which the matter was extended from the level of freedom of expression to the level of religious freedom was multidimensional,

² The High Court grounds of judgment of the *Titular Roman Catholic Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur v 1. Menteri Dalam Negeri 2. Kerajaan Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur High Court Judicial Review: R1–25–28–2009.

³ *Malaysian churches attacked*, Al Jazeera, last modified January 8, 2010, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2010/01/20101871816435228.html>, accessed April 4, 2014.

⁴ The Court of Appeal of Malaysia Civil Appeal: W-01-1-2010.

⁵ The grounds of judgment of the Court of Appeal of Malaysia - summary of decision, W-01-1-2010: “[5] It is our common finding that the usage of the name “Allah” is not an integral part of the faith and practice of Christianity. From such finding, we find no reason why the respondent is so adamant to use the name “Allah” in their weekly publication. Such usage, if allowed, will inevitably cause confusion within the community.”

⁶ Malik Imtiaz Sarwar, *A matter of law, not policy*, “The Edge”, October 19, 2013.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Malaysian authorities seize Bibles containing ‘Allah’*, Al Jazeera, last modified January 2, 2014, <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201401022106-0023288>, accessed April 4, 2014.

this paper seeks to focus particularly on the mindset-shaping involvement of the pro-government media, especially the “*Utusan Malaysia*”, the biggest Malay-language daily, read by the majority of the Muslim heartland community. Some of the *Utusan* reporting with regard to “The Herald” case was bordering on instigation of religious tensions by instilling fear that Islam is undermined and hijacked by Christians. Before I continue to the media analysis an introduction must be made to the Malaysian context of ethno-religious relations intricately shaped by the binding of Islam with Malay ethnicity.

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country with three major groups, “Malays”, “Chinese”, and “Indians”, more commonly this division is simplified to “Malays” and “non-Malays.”⁹ The British colonial period had left intellectual and economic imbalance between these groups – the Malays had lagged in education, civil service and entrepreneurship. When the country became independent in 1957, its first leaders sought to compensate Malays for past neglect through various affirmative action policies. Nowadays this continued affirmative action gives each ethnic group a different set of permits and provisions. A special privileges scheme is granted to the Malays. Who are Malays? The first criterion of person to legally qualify as Malay is, according to the Article 160(2) of the Federal Constitution, that he or she must profess the religion of Islam.¹⁰ Slightly more than a half of Malaysia’s population belongs to the Malay group, and Islam is the most widely professed religion in the country with the proportion of 61.3% (other religions include Buddhism – 19.8%, Christianity – 9.2%, and Hinduism – 6.3%).¹¹ The superior position of Islam as the religion of the Federation, guaranteed by the Federal Constitution, is also reflected by the state leadership provisions.¹² Although we may argue that before independence and even before the colonial period it had not necessarily been so, today, due to peculiar binding of Islam with Malay ethnicity, “Islam is the greatest single influence on the Malay value concepts and ethical codes.”¹³ It should not be surprising there have been voices claiming that the possibility of Malay Muslims converting to other religions is a national threat. If Islam is perceived as the core of Malayness then indeed

⁹ This understanding reflects the ethnic relations in Peninsular Malaysia. In the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak on Borneo, it is somewhat more complex. To describe the populations of these states another collective term has been used, *bumiputera* (‘sons of the land’).

¹⁰ Federal Constitution of Malaysia, Article 160: “(2) ‘Malay’ means a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom and – (a) was before Merdeka [Independence] Day born in the Federation or in Singapore or born of parents one of whom was born in the Federation or in Singapore, or is on that day domiciled in the Federation or in Singapore; or (b) is the issue of such a person.”

¹¹ Department of Statistics Malaysia, *Population and Housing Census of Malaysia: Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics (2010)*, Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia, Putrajaya, 2011, p. 13.

¹² Federal Constitution of Malaysia, Article 3: “(1) Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation.” In all Malaysian states except Melaka, Penang, Sabah and Sarawak, the chief minister (*menteri besar*) of the state must be both Malay and Muslim. Shad Saleem Faruqi, *Document of Destiny: The Constitution of the Federation of Malaysia*, Star Publications Berhad, Petaling Jaya, 2008, p. 693.

¹³ And these words are not accidental, as they were expressed by Mahathir, the longest serving Malaysian prime minister, in his controversial bestselling book: Mahathir Mohamad, *The Malay Dilemma*, Marshal Cavendish Editions, Singapore, 2009, p. 196.

the anxiety can be easily evoked among the Malays. This narrative of ethno-nationalist-religious vulnerability has for decades been successfully employed to divide the society – the case of “The Herald” weekly and the ban on the use of the word ‘Allāh’ is merely one of its recent manifestations.

Another issue which should be discussed for the whole context to become relatively coherent is the linguistic influence of Arabic on Malay and the historical presence of ‘Allāh’ in the scriptures of the Malay-speaking Christian groups. Since these features are as well needed to evince the bias in media reporting, they will be introduced in comments to respective reconstructed passages of the “Utusan Melayu” coverage.

Media analysis

The main question behind the media analysis was how the largest Malay-language daily reported on the case of the Catholic weekly being barred from using the word ‘Allāh’ and whether the reporting style changed with time – from 2008 until the next few days after the Court of Appeal announced its judgement on 14th October 2013. Of all 104¹⁴ articles taken into account each at least once mentions “The Herald” and each includes the phrase *kalimah Allah* (‘the word Allāh’). The method used here to examine the “Utusan” coverage is the semantic field analysis. As a method it is simple, quite clear and rather impervious to researcher’s own inclinations. Semantic field analysis is based on the structural linguistics and was originally used in the analysis of historical sources for the study of historical change of concepts and meanings.¹⁵ It allows to determine how particular terms were used in particular periods. In case of press coverage it can also demonstrate what kind of perception of the analysed subject the readers might obtain, and what kind of impression the editors or journalists were trying to create. The subject here is the Malay expression *kalimah Allah* (‘the word Allāh’). From 2008 until 2012¹⁶ the prevalent perceptions of it seem more or less balanced, reflecting contending opinions. In reconstructed coverage they assume the following forms:

¹⁴ All articles were published online and most of them come from the *Utusan Malaysia* news section, www.utusan.com.my/. The Internet browser search was made for texts which included key terms: “The Herald” and “kalimah Allah”.

¹⁵ We place the terms in the context of their observable use, that is in a relation to other words, and deconstruct them into single expressions in order to emphasise the relations between words. The meaning of the key words or terms – *kalimah Allah* in this case – can be reconstructed from the configuration of all the expressions in which they occur. Each expression is assigned to one of the functional categories, depending on the context in which the keyword/subject appears. There are six functional categories: descriptions – the features of the subject; associations – what accompanies the subject; oppositions – what the subject is opposed to, its contradictions; equivalents – what the subject is identified with; subject’s actions – what the subject is doing and how; actions on the subject/towards the subject – what is being done with the subject. The outcome of this categorisation allows constructing full sentences which determine how the term was used in particular periods.

¹⁶ In 2011 and 2012 there was almost no mention of “The Herald” case, majority of the 43 articles considered come from the years 2008, 2009 and 2010.

- 1) *Kalimah Allah* in Malaysia has been long understood as [denoting] the 'God of Muslims', if allowed [to be used] in other religions, it will in future cause various dangerous implications for the Muslim community.

Or a very similar one:

- 2) The usage of *kalimah Allah* by the Catholic newspaper, "The Herald", in its Malay-language edition, can trigger the worst religious crisis in the country.

While the first two perceptions are against the use of the term 'Allāh' by non-Muslims and the Catholic weekly, they are relatively mild in the way they stir anxiety. We also find tolerant coverage:

- 3) *Kalimah Allah*, [a term] not exclusive to Islam, is widely accepted as referring to God in Malay, Indonesian and in Arabic. It is permitted to be used by the monotheistic religions such as Christianity and Judaism.
- 4) There is no evidence that the use of *kalimah Allah* by the Catholic weekly, "The Herald", which on the grounds of constitutional rights was allowed by the High Court, could disrupt the public order.

A few days after the High Court concluded that "The Herald" had the constitutional right to use the word 'Allāh', Malaysia witnessed arson attacks on churches all over the country. It remains unclear if political forces were behind these attacks or whether they were independent acts. Although the attacks coincided with the Muslim groups' protests against the court ruling, we may argue violence and protests did not really reflect the social moods. An immediate initiative was undertaken by the Muslim community to protect the church areas. Members of various Muslim NGOs volunteered for wards to ensure the security of Christian places of worship.¹⁷ A spontaneous civil sympathy.

The sympathy appears to have faded by 2013. Perhaps something changed in the social mood. And for sure something changed in the style of reporting. In 2013, when the Court of Appeal's ruling was expected, and when it was finally issued in October, the perception of *kalimah Allah* (61 articles considered) projected to the "Utusan Malaysia" readers reveals alarming trends of bolstering intolerance and manipulation of historical facts. The usage of the Arabic term for 'God' is presented, very likely to dismay of the speakers of Arabic and anyone with the most basic knowledge of the language, as exclusive for Islam and with the necessity to defend this exclusivity:

- 1) *Kalimah Allah*, which does not mean God for the followers of other religions, is reserved specifically for Muslim.

¹⁷ "Malaysia 'Allah' Ruling Sparks Arson Attacks on 8 Churches", *The Christian Post*, last modified January 11, 2010, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/malaysia-allah-ruling-sparks-arson-attacks-on-8-churches-43012/>, accessed April 5, 2014.

- 2) *Kalimah Allah* is not a term that can be applied arbitrarily to any belief system. It must be protected to preserve the sanctity of Islam.

Against common sense and obvious historical reference to Christianity in the Arab world claims were made as well that the word ‘Allāh’ is not present in the Christian scriptures:

- 3) The matter of *kalimah Allah* is a critical issue, not a matter that can be compromised upon. It cannot be translated into any language in the world, and it had not been used in the Christian scriptures before.

Another reference, this time to Greek, in not less confusing, but indeed it is right. Once cannot help to add yet that neither the Bible in Polish uses the word ‘Allāh’ to denote ‘God’:

- 4) *Kalimah Allah*, never used even once in the Torah and the Psalms or the Gospel, is not even present in the Bible in Greek language.

A few more disquieting statements are made which in a peculiar manner serve to reinforce ignorance, indirectly implying that Christianity is not a monotheist religion and suggesting that Malay-speaking Christians before the case of “The Herald” weekly used to refer to God with the English word *God*:

- 5) *Kalimah Allah*, a term which contains *tawhīd*, and which is not a fundamental basis of Christianity and has never appeared in Hebrew scriptures, has only since recently been used in the Malay translations of the Bible in the place of [the word] *God* [sic!].
- 6) The usage of *kalimah Allah* by followers of other religions does not mean they have accepted the concept of One God. If not addressed and handled properly, it can lead to tensions between Muslims and Christians.
- 7) *Kalimah Allah*, which is not [does not mean] the same God as in Biblical reference, has been defended from being used in the publications of the Catholic weekly, *The Herald*.

The advent and the acceptance of Islam by the communities of Malay Peninsula and Malay/Indonesian Archipelago preceded introduction of Christianity in the region. The concept of monotheism arrived with Islam and thus the Arabic term was adopted by the speakers of Malay language which for centuries was the region’s *lingua franca*. We have another term in Malay which since the Court of Appeal ruling has been used in “The Herald”’s Malay section: *Tuhan*. Yet *Tuhan* means ‘Lord’ and having elementary linguistic intuition one is able to realise that ‘Lord’ and ‘God’ are not entirely synonymous, although both actually appear in the Bible. The first complete Bible printed in Malay, in 1733, uses the word *Allah* and so it has been until today, also in Indonesia where it has never

ignited religious tensions. Even the father of modern Malay literature, Munshi Abdullah (1796–1854), a Muslim scholar and man of letters, who was one of the translators of *The Gospel of John* to Malay language¹⁸ used the word *Allah* as reference for the God in the Christian text. It is not true that 'Allāh' has only since recently been used by Malay-speaking Christians, but it true that only since recently the authorities have been employing this fact to suppress the freedom of expression and seem likely to be using it in future against the freedom of religion as well.

Returning to the media examples we can see, even though it is common knowledge, that journalists have a remarkable potential to serve particular political interests aimed at stirring up primordial tensions. In the Malaysian case of 'Allāh' many newspapers and other media outlets, not only "Utusan Malaysia", have failed to rise to the challenge of remaining unbiased and "instead of raising awareness and challenging ignorance they stoke the fires of intolerance and racism."¹⁹

There is something frightening in the possibility of the state authorities' effort to deprive a language of certain words – the possibility of an imposed change in relationship between the signifier and the signified, and particularly the Signifier and the Signified. And there is also something frightening in the realisation that pro-government media can shift our sympathy and cripple our empathy towards others. We all, obviously, recognise as human people who do not share our own religious ideas, but does this recognition not become fragile if we prescribe those others how they must not address God? Can we assume that, contrary to us, they do not know the meaning of the word 'God'? Generally the meaning of the word presupposes our ability to use it, knowing the use means knowing the meaning²⁰, thus, banning the use... is denying the access to the meaning.

¹⁸ Rosnani Hashim (ed.), *Conversation: Islamic Intellectual Tradition in the Malay Archipelago*, The Other Press, Petaling Jaya, 2010, p. 54.

¹⁹ I am borrowing this wording and also the sequence of thought from Aidan White's work, *The Ethical Journalism Initiative*, International Federation of Journalists, Brussels, 2008, p. 97.

²⁰ Wittgenstein's 'investigation' into the use-meaning relation is of course much broader, this comment is merely an intuitive approximation of § 43 of the *Philosophical Investigations*: "For a large class of cases of the employment of the word «meaning» – though not for all – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language." – Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell Publishing, 2009.