

Language in politicization of religion in Malaysian inter-religious discourse

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ABSTRACT: Language in politics is about how language is used by politicians for their political purposes. In Malaysian inter-religious discourse, politicization of religion includes various issues, such as hudud, conversion into Islam, the use of the word 'Allah' and Christianization. This paper aims to (1) discuss the use of language in inter-religious discourse in Malaysia, and (2) analyze the interpretation of language through meaning in inter-religious discourse in Malaysia. The discussion is based on the physical meaning, and how language is politically interpreted. The data relate to two categories of religious issues in 2015, i.e. practiced by Muslims and responded by non-Muslims, and practiced by non-Muslims and responded by Muslims. The discussion shows that the use of language is mainly based on denotative meaning which are well understood. However, it is not sufficient enough because connotatively and politically, prejudice and suspicion take place in the interpretation of religious meanings.

KEYWORDS: Religious discourse analysis, sociology of language and religion.

I. INTRODUCTION

As a nation-state, Malaysia is constituted in the spirit of understanding and tolerance among its multi-religious citizens. However, within this decade, the spirit is difficult to be maintained because religious issues emerge unexpectedly and become controversial quickly. Politicization of religion is identified one of the major factors sparking the issues. It is essential to link language with politics as it is about how it is used by politicians for their political purposes.

In Malaysian inter-religious discourse between 2006 until 2016, the politicization of religion caused at least ten issues, such as *hudud*, conversion into Islam, the use of the word 'Allah' and Christianization. The issues included Muslim religious practice responded negatively by non-Muslim as well as non-Muslim religious practice opposed by Muslim. This paper aims to discuss the use of language in inter-religious discourse in Malaysia, and analyze the interpretation of language through meaning in inter-religious discourse in Malaysia.

II. LANGUAGE, POLITICS AND RELIGION IN MALAYSIAN INTER-RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

Malaysia, being a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country has not been spared from the inter-religious tensions due to various reasons. Over the years, there had several wake up calls which inadvertently should have sounded the alarm on the need for an urgent intervention to address the animosity in Malaysian inter-religion relations [1].

As language represents the ideologies of political parties, from Muslim to non-Muslim political thoughts, there are specific linguistic features of language, politics and religion, with regard to lexical, phrases, sentences, meaning and interpretation [2].

It is essential to recognize that the language and politics of Islam are expressed by referring to the major sources of the Quran and *Sunnah* [3]. The grammar and syntax of political discourse in Islam differ fundamentally from those of other political traditions, and have long complicated outside comprehension of Islam's inner dialogue [4].

In intra and inter-religious discourses, words are necessary. Words are nevertheless the only way religious devotees have not only of expressing their faith, sharing their spiritual experience, but also inspiring and teaching one another about their political ideology and identity [5]. Thus, inter-religious clashes are in fact, inter-political clashes [6]. Different political parties carve out their vote-banks among different religious communities and target some communities, in order to emerge as champion of one's own community [7]. In fact, they are champions of their own political interests, rather than community's interests [7].

In this context, politicization of religion by using religious language takes place. Thus some politicians use religion by promoting their religious thoughts, imposing their religious interpretations on others, and even labelling negatively who oppose their religious ideas [8].

Today, many of the so called religious leaders who are also politicians are worse in their manner of dealing with the public with their vituperative utterances and firebrand speeches. They are trying their best to divide the society further – ironically in the name of god!

Religious issues are complicated to find out the solution as religious leaders stand against dialogue and in favor of self-protective or aggressive confrontation. In the politicization of religion, religious texts can be used to legitimate violence, claims to superiority, blanket condemnations, cruel punishments, suspicions, oppressive morality, and hostility to those who oppose them.

For example, the use of ‘Allah’ word by the Catholic followers in their Malay version article in Herald was strongly opposed by the Muslims in Malaysia. This is a very sensitive issue because ‘Allah’ is a word that can only be used by Muslims, and they believe that there is only one ‘Allah’ that will never reincarnate or be reincarnated. For politicization purpose, the use of this word, ‘Allah’ by other religions will only mislead Muslim. For the Christians, however, the word of ‘Allah’ is only a term, a question of language and a different terminology.

III. METHODOLOGY

The discussion is based on the physical meaning, and how language is politically interpreted. Russell [9] proposed the meaning and truth approach in his philosophy of language, i.e. the meaning indicated by the physical presence of the word and the truth as a result of the use of language. The data relate to two categories of religious issues in 2015, i.e. practiced by Muslims and responded by non-Muslims (M-NM), and practiced by non-Muslims and responded by Muslims (NM-M).

The selected M-NM issue is *hudud* with a Buddhist respondent from the state of Kelantan, while the selected NM-M issue is Christianization with a Muslim respondent from the state of Sabah. *Hudud* means a punishment fixed in the Quran and *hadith* for crimes, and is thus unchangeable. Christianization refers to the conversion of individuals to Christianity or the conversion of entire groups at once.

The respondents were persons who have authority in their religious institutions. In the interviews, they insisted that the issues have been politicized by some politicians. In explaining the politicization of religion in the issues, both respondents were asked two questions:

- a. What is the sensitive and provocative keyword (reason or argument) in the issue?
- b. What are the factors that make the issue hot?

In the next two sections of analysis, the text will be chronologically numbered according to the respondent, interview's question and answer. For instance, (1) M-NM[B]:QA1:1 means example 1 that consists of M-NM issue with a Buddhist respondent followed by the first question and answer(s).

IV. THE USE OF LANGUAGE IN INTER-RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

a. *Hudud*

The Buddhist respondent mentions four sensitive keywords which are inappropriate, unjustness, difficulty and inconvenience as in example 1.

(1) M-NM[B]:QA1

The issue is inappropriate because it is unjust to be implemented in Malaysia.

Hudud causes the people or community in difficulty to find and obtain justice. So, it is an inconvenience for other religions.

The physical meaning of the words concern negative implications if *hudud* is to be implemented by the government. The people and society will be in trouble and difficulty as *hudud* does not promise justice and convenience because there is no appropriate model of *hudud* to be referred to in the contemporary Muslim countries.

b. *Christianization*

Muslim respondent insists that the use of the word Allah is one of the strategies of Christianization. Christians are described as very smart in promoting Christianity as stated in example 2.

(2) NM-M[M]:QA1

They are very smart (crafty). The use of the word ‘Allah’ is a strategy of Christianization.

The word *very smart* literally refers to intelligence and ability in hiding intention to achieve a specific goal. This means that the issue is seen as a Christian goal which is managed craftily. The word seems to be a negative gradable from Muslim perspective.

V. THE INTERPRETATION OF LANGUAGE IN INTER-RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

a. *Hudud*

As the issue was raised up in Kelantan, there is a phobia or fear and hatred over the issue. For non-Muslims in the state, the implementation of *hudud* cannot promise justice for them. If non-Muslims commit a crime, they are also punished by *hudud*. It raises the question on either *hudud* implement is only for Muslims or together for non-Muslims too. In Islam, Islam does not compel other believers to convert to Islam, and how to force non-Muslims to follow *hudud*.

The Buddhist respondent agrees that apart from politicization, the factors that ignite this issue are injustice to humanity as in example 3.

(3) M-NM[B]:QA2

Factor that makes issue hot is humanities because for the non-Muslim it is injustice.

Politics is also as one of the factors that make issue hot because the issue has been spun by politicians.

It has also no privatization to the implementation of the *hudud*.

Other than that, a few politicians have spun the information about the implementation of *hudud*, and the issue gradually has been politicized. The respondent also stresses that there is no privatization to the implementation of Islamic law. It means that *hudud* will not be implemented exclusively, but inclusively involving Muslims and non-Muslims.

b. *Christianization*

In Sabah and Sarawak, Christianization which based on 3G (Gold, Glory and Gospel) is not an issue. However, in the Peninsula of Malaysia, the issue is very sensitive. It becomes contentious when a seminar on the efforts to convert Muslims into Christian scheduled to be held at the Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Melaka has raised Muslims dissatisfaction over some Christians [10].

According to the Muslim respondent, the issue has been politicized by some political parties and some of them want to be heroes as stated by Muslim respondent in example 4.

(4) NM-M16[M]:QA2

The issue has been politicized by some political parties. Some of them want to be heroes.

Prejudice is one of the factors that make issue hot and it is a major problem.

Another factor is the high degree of religious prejudice. It is because the prejudice creates misunderstanding and a negative view over other religions. The prejudice also will split religious devotees from different religions into different understanding and it will threat the unity of the country.

VI. CONCLUSION

There are religious sensitivities in the Malaysian context of inter-religious. The non-Muslim negative responses are more dangerous than the Muslim through the words of inappropriate, unjustness, difficulty and inconvenience in the issue of *hudud*. By contrast, the Muslim responses are lighter as can be observed from the word *very smart* in the issue of Christianization.

The discussion shows that the use of language is mainly based on denotative meaning which are well understood. However, it is not sufficient enough because connotatively and politically, prejudice and suspicion take place in the interpretation of meanings through the politicization of religion. *Hudud* has been spun especially its unclear implementation, and the issue gradually has been politicized in the name of religion.

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