

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

### The History of The Institutionalization of People's Religious Schools in Malaysian National Education Policy

<sup>1</sup>Azizi Umar, <sup>2,3</sup>Ezad Azraai Jamsari, <sup>1</sup>Nazri Muslim, <sup>1</sup>Wan Zulkifli Wan Hassan, <sup>1</sup>Azwira Ab. Aziz and <sup>1,3</sup>Aminuddin Basir

<sup>1</sup>Centre for General Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Arabic Studies and Islamic Civilization, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

<sup>3</sup>Institute of West Asian Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

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#### ABSTRACT

The progress of the institutionalization of the People's Religious Schools (SAR) in Malaysia demonstrates that it is laden with diverse challenges to ensure that it continues to be in the national education system. The effort to institutionalise the SAR has actually begun since the early days of independence. Among the measures that have been taken are the creation of the laws of financial assistance, the acquisition of administration, the founding of the *Lembaga Penasihat Penyelarasan Pelajaran dan Pendidikan Agama Islam* (LEPAI) or Advisory Council for the Coordination of Islamic Education, the state Enactment Coordination, the uniformity of the Malaysia Religious Higher Certificate (STAM) and the latest is the registration of the SAR as the Government-Aided Religious Schools (SABK). However, these efforts are yet to be successfully implemented and position at its full readiness to be in the mainstream. This purpose of this study is to discuss the history of the development of SAR institutionalization and looking at the extent of the differences and the strategies, also the management implications for every step taken. The methodologies used were the document analysis and interviews. The findings of this study have been able to show that the process of an event will continue to happen the way the historical theories did. The process of event is only different from several aspects, yet the grounds for the change remain the same. The society only needs to learn the lesson from what has happened and make it as a guidance to overcome the challenges of future events.

**Key words:** People's Religious School, National Educational Policy, Malaysia Muslim Education

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#### Introduction

Malaysia is a country that had been colonised by several major countries since the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. It started with the colonisation of the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Japanese and finally the British. During the process of the struggles for independence, all systems that are in practice fully depended on the administration system, implemented by the colonial power. The national education system also did not escape from the British-influenced system, either from the angles of philosophy, laws, system and other aspects related to education. In turn, the Malaysian national education's philosophy and ideology simply cannot escape from its influence from the national education history. History is a discipline of knowledge in a systematic manner. It collects the knowledge of the past based on the chronology and mirrors the changes that have taken place. According to Ibnu Khaldun, the knowledge of history is notes about human societies, the journeys of the Apostles, and also affairs of administration and ruling that seek to be guidance in religious and worldly affairs (Ibn Khaldun, n.d.). For Collingwood, a historian must be able to recollect the history of the past in his own mind (Collingwood, 1946). Issawi analogises the past events to resemble the future events the way water resembles water (Issawi, 1962). In the al-Qu'ran, Allah s.w.t. dictates, it means that: "Indeed, the stories of the Apostles contain stories that can give lessons to people with sane minds" (Yusuf: 111).

Sidi Gazalba opines that history is the picture of the past about human and his surroundings, as social creatures that have been arranged academically. The history of education is the events of education with continuous incidences (Sidi, 1966). It happens in one specific time and has its own pattern that cannot be

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**Corresponding Author:** Ezad Azraai Jamsari, Department of Arabic Studies and Islamic Civilization, Faculty of Islamic Studies & Institute of West Asian Studies (IKRAB), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia  
E-mail: eajsti@gmail.com; Tel: +60389215291; Fax: +60389213185

equated with anything else (Barnadib, 1982). Events in history serve as knowledge of the past (Muhd. Yusof, 1986). The knowledge of history is a broadened field towards achieving Islamic education goals. The historical factors are assumed as one of the important factors in influencing the historical philosophy either in terms of the system or the purpose (al-Silmi, 1988). Based on these views, the authors have proven that the discussion on the history of the institutionalization of religious schools are inextricably linked with one another and can serve as guidance for future development.

#### *The History of the Institutionalization:*

In the context of the discussion on the People's Religious Schools (*Sekolah Agama Rakyat* or SAR), institutionalization in the national education policy has happened in all four major categories, namely power institutionalization, curriculum, human resource and finance. What distinguishes the institutionalization is in term of time and the level of institutionalization, whether fully or in part. To make the discussion easier, the authors have made a list following the time chronology, starting from Independence, which was from 1959 until 2009, for easier understanding, as tabled in Table 1.

**Table 1:** The Institutionalization of the SMAR in The National Education Policy

Year	Institutionalization Measure
1961	Creating the laws of financial assistance in the educational Act
1977	Taking over the SMAR as Government's Fully-Aided Schools
1983	The establishment of <i>Lembaga Penasihat Penyelarasan Pelajaran dan Pendidikan Agama Islam</i> (LEPAI)
1990	The Coordination of the Islamic Religious Schools Monitoring Enactment
2000	The uniformity of the religious higher certificate to Malaysian Religious Higher Certificate (STAM) and accepted as the national examination certificate and the certificate acknowledgement as the university entrance qualification
2004	The registration of the SMAR as Government-Aided Schools

Source: Azizi, 2011

#### *Creating the Laws of Financial Assistance:*

The law was formulated and included in the 1961 Education Act, yielded from a report known as the Committee Report for The Financial Consideration to Government-Aided Religious Schools (Federation of Malaysia 1957). Under Section 3(1) and Education Law (Amendment) 1963 the condition is mentioned as such (Federation of Malaysia 1963):

(1) Subject to such conditions and limitations as the Minister thinks fit, financial assistance by way of grant may be given out of moneys provided by Parliament to any Muslim institution which is not maintained by the Minister under the Education Act, 1961, or by the government of a State and which either is school within the meaning of that Act or is only not such a school because the teaching there is of a purely religious character or for a purely religious purpose.

Based on the above jurisdiction, an amendment on the 1961 Education Act had come to be made effective in 1963, to provide the authority to the Minister of Education to weigh the assistance rendered to Islamic non-government religious schools, under the condition that the schools are commonly with the educational laws and only prepare religious education. The education act amendment in 1995 also brought consolidation in creating education act laws to the SMAR when they are retained in the new education act namely 1996 Education Act. In section 52, the laws of financial assistance have been explained.

The authors begin the discussion of institutionalization in the aspect of finance, as the financial aspect serves as the very first step of the SMAR first being elevated to form a fraction of the needs of the institutionalization to be given financial help as soon as the country achieved its independence. History also demonstrates that a unit of school relationship especially for the public religious schools had been created under the Ministry of Education's School Division starting from 1959. Table 2 shows the rate of the granting of assistance per capita since it was first introduced at the beginning of the year.

**Table 2:** The Increased Rate of Financial Assistance to SAR

Level	1959	1977	1983	1996
Primary	RM10	RM20	RM30	RM60
Lower Secondary	RM14	RM30	RM45	RM90
Upper Secondary	RM20	RM40	RM60	RM120

Source: Azizi, 2011

This assistance is given for the purpose of paying off for the teachers' salary and allowance plus other school expenses. SAR, at the primary level only receive assistance in the form of money whereas at the secondary level (SMAR), they are entitled to get help in the form of money and text books. This assistance is used for salary payments and expenses of teaching equipment with the ratio of 70:30. This indicates that 70%

for the total per capita for every school is dedicated for teachers' salary whereas the remaining 30% is to for school equipment related to teaching aids (Malaysian Education Ministry 1996).

*The Acquisition of the SMAR As Government Schools (Full Assistance):*

The acquisition of the SMAR started on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1977 simultaneously with other State Religious Secondary Schools (*Sekolah Menengah Agama Negeri* or SMAN) through a decision made by the Cabinet (Ministry of Education, 1978). The acquisition effort is also done, to fulfill parents' intention and urges other than those expressed by religious teachers' association and several Islamic bodies. In actuality, the acquisition of the SMAR as government schools was based on the acquisition model of the Malaya Islamic College on the 1st January 1967 as the first step and making it the first school administered by the Ministry of Education starting from 1965. The acquisition of the institution also serves as a trial step towards acquiring the SMAR and SMAN in the future (Ismail, 1993).

The Ministers' Board Meeting also discusses the plan paper of the Ministry of Education in acquiring a Secondary Religious School from every state and the need to adhere to the regulation established as follows:

Article 8 (b) the schools acquired as in (a) above are subject to 1961 Education Act as well as its amendments, and the 1956 Study Course regulation with special attention to Religious Studies and Arabic (Dangiran, 1999).

There were as many as 13 SARs and SANs administered by the Ministry of Education at the early stage in 1977, which were 11 in the Peninsula and 2 in the East Malaysia. The proposal of this acquisition requires the approval of the state religious authority. Basically, the Federal Government was not allowed to establish religious schools at the time as it was not in its jurisdiction. The main objective of the school's acquisition was to offer an opportunity to the students to gain enough national education other than religious lessons and Arabic, and the Islamic identity stressed in the school.

The history of the acquisition of the SAR in 1977 also proves that the change of status of teachers' incumbency had caused so many problems when they were converted to government schools. A lot of teachers had not been able to be assimilated into the government schools due to the non-existent basic qualifications and the fact they had to move to a new government school until it was time for them to retire. Experiences as the founder, principle, administration board member, and teacher are not a guarantee and are not contemplated in the incumbency selection process. However, for the authors, what happened in the history or in the past has definitely changed now. Suitable with current development and the evolving policy, old history does not necessarily repeat itself in the same form.

*The Founding of Lembaga Penasihat Penyelarasan Pelajaran dan Pendidikan Agama Islam (LEPAI):*

This measure relates with an organisation that has become part of the federal machinery and this has been discussed previously in this chapter. The authors will not elaborate in detail the history of this organization but instead will explain the intention and aim of this organisation. As the outcome of the flaws and complexities experienced by the Ministry of Education in managing the SMAR, the government opines that there needs to be another organisation in coordinating the school, especially added to this is the fact that the secretariat of Islamic affairs is created in the Religious Division, Prime Minister's Office (Rosnani 2004).

A proposal was established to set up LEPAI which was finally endorsed by the Royal Council in 1983. The basis for the founding of LEPAI was to coordinate and assist in the State and Public Religious Schools or any religious schools that had not been run by the Ministry of Education. Based on the regulation of LEPAI, it has a role of coordinating the Islamic education and learning in State Religious Schools and People's Religious Schools throughout Malaysia from the perspectives of the quality of education, learning and career opportunities, teachers training and counseling to Islamic State Departments (JAKIM, 1983).

*Coordinating the Islamic Religious Schools Monitoring Enactment:*

The coordination step of this enactment is one smart move of LEPAI after its set-up, to make sure that the religious schools are strongly protected from the angle of legislation, especially the state's own legislation which is also the main source of jurisdiction to the SMAR. This enactment is a fraction of the existing state enactment from its mother source namely the State Islamic Religious Enactment. The law enactment had finished being formulated at the beginning of 1987 and had been applicable in every state like Selangor 1988, Penang 1989, Johor 1991, Perak 1996 and several other states (Azizi, 2011).

Such a coordination can be assumed to be a cunning measure and should be applauded as the SMAR is given valid authority in the state enactment that had been so much different from one another. Due to the differences, the SMAR had been neglected easily when there was a clash of conflict among various parties involved. Among the content of the clauses in this enactment was the Registrar, School Management Board,

Religious Schools Enactment, Inspector, Account, Management Method letter and other matters relevant to the respective states. Before the enactment was made effective, most SMARs move in the name of the *Majlis Agama Islam Negeri* (MAIN) Enactment or the self-formulated regulation by the local community in the name of the School Administrator Board.

*The Uniformity of the SMAR Religious Higher Certificate as the Malaysia Religious Higher Certificate:*

Starting from the year 1999, Al-Azhar al-Sharif had made an agreement of understanding with the Government of Malaysia in coordinating various types of religious certificates in Malaysia. Before the year 1999, Al-Azhar received approximately 25 types of religious certificates as the entrance requirement to the university. Such a big number of religious certificates has been practised before the independence (Malaysian Education Ministry, 1999). The Malaysia Religious Higher Certificate (STAM) has value similar to the A'liyah Certificate in the old Religious Higher Certificate (*Sijil Tinggi Agama* or STU) system to all Religious Secondary Schools. The proposal of this uniformity of religious schools had long been proposed since 1984. Now, it is placed under the Malaysia Examination Board structure and applies the syllabus of the Ma'ahad Bu'uth Al-Azhar as a condition of entrance to further studies.

The STAM is also being acknowledge by the local universities through the consideration of religious subjects as the credit for students' enrollment into religious faculties. This had been brought into practice in the early 1970s on the religious subjects in the STP/HSC (Azizi, 2007) examination. Furthermore, it can also be used to enter faculties other than the religious faculty in local universities, such as science social and the like. It needs to be reminded that before the coordination was done, al-Azhar and the Federal Government were producing excellent and quality students and had not any problems.

*The Registration of the SMAR as Government-Aided Schools:*

The registration process of the SMAR was materialised after the approval and directive from the YAB Prime Minister at the time, who was Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. The endorsement came about from the Examination of the Islamic Education Issues Committee Report, The Role of the Public Religious Schools and Consolidation of the National School Pertaining to the Islamic Education. This report is known as the Tan Sri Murad Special Committee which proposed that the SMAR was to be registered with the Ministry of Education, enabling the granting of a better assistance. This step carries the purpose of improving the education quality for that particular school.

Following the sources from the Ministry of Education, to date, the number of registered religious schools as the Government-Aided Religious Schools (*Sekolah Agama Bantuan Kerajaan* or SABK) was 154 from 380 in total. The number of the schools can be categorised into two, namely the 54 schools of primary level and the 103 schools of secondary level. The secondary school was categorised into four types of schools namely the Public Religious Schools, the State Religious Schools (owned by the state government and state Islamic religious council), State Government-Aided Religious Schools (SABK) and Common Secondary Religious Schools (no curriculum of the *Diniah* or the *al-Azhar* curriculum). This indicates the fact that only 40% are registered as Ministry-sponsored Government-aided Schools (Dangiran, 2008). This includes the *madrrasah*-system non-SMAR religious schools similar to the beginning of their establishment.

The proposal to make SMAR government-aided schools actually is not the outcome of the report alone, as the study and proposal of the registration had been prepared by the Ministry of Education since 1996. In 1999, another report by the Ministry of Education proposed for the registration to be delayed on several factors (Malaysia Education Ministry, 1999). The termination of assistance per capita was based on the excuse that the SMAR had not used the allocation in the best way possible. As the outcome of the termination, a report forwarded by Tan Sri Murad suggests that the SMAR is registered as Government-Aided Schools based on the 1996 Education Act. With this registration, the SMAR not only regained the per capita assistance it had obtained previously, but they are also entitled to obtain other types of aids.

Up until 2004, it can be said that all efforts to institutionalise SMAR in all aspects had been complete as the insitutionalisation had undergone all aspects of SMAR development like the aspects of finance, power, human resource and the curriculum. However, not all aspects produced impressive success. Perhaps, from another aspect, it has shown small success but success in terms of raising the position of SMAR as mainstream schools, has not illustrated any positive outcome, but seemed to have met with failure and abandoned, as compared to other national streams of education.

Basically, the mechanism of this proposal is dissimilar to the one proposed at the initial stage of the study. The early proposal had still placed the roles of LEPAI and the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (*Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* or JAKIM) as the Secretariat to SMAR. In turn, the Secretariat in the registration process of the SABK that was first implemented actively in 2005 was the Islamic Education Division with the cooperation with other important divisions in the Ministry of Eduaction. Once, the

management process of the SMAR had changed, after it was entrusted to LEPAI and JAKIM, it provoked controversy, just like it was in 1977 when it was handed over to the Ministry of Education. To cushion the blow from the controversy, Tan Sri Murad was appointed the LEPAI Vice-Chairman in early 2006 carrying the intention that there would be mutual understanding and cooperation. The intention was short-lived when he passed away shortly after.

The agreement for the registration was sealed, through a memorandum of understanding between both parties so that both would play their own respective roles. Seeing that the implementation was done in line with the time of writing, the authors' early findings have been able to show that there are still worries and doubts among SMAR administrators and state religious authorities on the registration, especially where the power of administration and curriculum were involved. There were also SMAN that had taken their own initiatives to also be registered as the SABK. Though, SMAN was not the priority in the original proposal of the special committee. However, the SMAR that has registered, did experience change, from the perspectives of human resource, facilities and infrastructure. It needs to be mentioned that among the significant agreements achieved between both parties were the retaining of the *Diniah* subject curriculum in SMAR and the fact that it needs to continue being managed by the state religious authorities, also the SMAR administrators themselves until the Federal government was given the authority through the agreement of the Royal Council to manage the *Diniah* subject curriculum.

The registration process implemented had seemingly failed to receive full cooperation from the state religious authorities and the SMAR administrators. This was something difficult to understand, as the proposal to convert the SMAR to SABK had been made before. Originally, it meant the school was entitled to full per capita assistance and capital assistance from the Ministry of Education. The assistance also included issues like school management, the principle's salary, the teachers' salary, subjects per capita and all other governmental assistance. Meanwhile, the school and its compound were still under the ownership of the school management board. The *Diniah* subject curriculum could also be retained as such.

Based on issues aforementioned, the authors have derived two important conclusions. The first is that, any effort made to institutionalise the SMAR has often been seen to fail, as there have been various constraints and problems, especially in both the management and development processes. The effort for the institutionalization had fallen short in ensuring that its position is at par with other mainstream education. Secondly, there had been two authoritative parties in the administration of the SMAR since early independence. To add, such authorisation came up with two conflicting interpretations. The two parties of authority are the state government and the Federal Government. The first party comprises of the state government authorities, the religious council and the SMAR administrators who serve as parties having validated power and authority ownership in handling and determining the policies upon the SMAR for decades. The power is the power of tradition that has been long instilled as a valid power in developing *madrrasah*-system religious schools. It is based on the fact that it carries matters related to Islamic affairs.

The second party would be the Ministry of Education, JAKIM or LEPAI seen as the ones in authority in representing the Federal Government in helping, and managing part of the administration of the SMAR. This condition is based on its sole concern, looking at various aspects which are pertinent to education. Yet, LEPAI which places its administration under JAKIM is the only one succeeding in helping to determine the policies of the SAR in comparison with the Ministry of Education. The measures taken had not aroused any major conflict in developmental process of the SMAR although they did not have any executive power on the SMAR. Within the period of 25 years of the establishment of LEPAI, they have managed to systematically established the SMAR where basic aspects are concerned like the legislation and the certification, compared to the long-standing effort of the Ministry in providing assistance although the duration of the assistance has exceeded 50 years.

There are two authoritative parties in institutionalising the SMAR since early independence. The Ministry of Education is in one side that represents the Federal Government, whereas the state government authority is the other party represented by LEPAI and JAKIM. Although LEPAI and JAKIM serve under the federal government, the executive power of the policy implementation of the SMAR rests with the state religious authority. LEPAI serves only as the mediator for the Federal Government. This will result in governance issues - having two authorities in an organisation. Table 3 below can depict the difference of roles of both the organisations.

**Table 3:** The SMAR Institutionalization Organisation

Year	Steps of Institutionalization	Name of Organisation
1963	Creating the law of financial assistance in 1961 Education Act (1963 Amendment)	Bahagian. Sekolah, Ministry of Education
1977	Taking over the SMAR as Government's Fully Aided Schools	Religious Education Division, Ministry of Education
1983	Founding <i>Lembaga Penasihat Penyelarasan Pelajaran dan Pendidikan Agama Islam</i> (LEPAI)	Religious Division, Prime Minister Department,
1990	Coordinating Islamic Schools' Monitoring Enactment	JAKIM

2000	Making uniform Religious Higher Certificate to <i>Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia</i> (STAM) and accepted as national examination	Secretariat of LEPAI, JAKIM
2005	Registering the SMAR as Government-Aided schools	Education Division, Ministry of Education

### Conclusion:

From this study, the authors' view that the SAR registration process is the same with the acquisition effort that took place in 1977. The differences of these measures only lie in the compliance and the regulations established. In 1977, the compliance had been on the 1961 Education Act, whereas the registration today adheres to the 1996 Education Act. Both have various instruction forms, be it in terms of regulations, circulars and other related acts. From the authors' opinion, the institutionalization of the SAR rate of success depends on the parties involved in developing it in the following years. If there had been no concerted effort done, previous conflict would only be repeated in the next step or that the issue would drag for a long time. The next step or effort will materialise if the parties involved make the effort to strengthen religious schools through guaranteed authoritative power in the state legislation and the federal Acts. Apart from that, the *Diniah* curriculum that has become the identity of the school should be accepted and acknowledged and its status elevated to become the national curriculum, or at least a fraction of it.

This could serve as the guidance to the new generation to adopt a careful attitude in making change. In a closer context of registering the SABK, the approval of the registration is under the conditions that the legislation over the enactment must be consolidated, administration structure must continue to be under the state administration or the School Administration Board (*Jemaah Pengelola Sekolah* or JPS) with the accompanying Administration Method letter, with flexibility on management regulation and not too-rigid a service like terms and conditions of the granting of financial assistance and the appointment of teachers' incumbency, with consideration of the government and the State Islamic Council's endorsement, and the special procedure in the appointment of the principle.

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