

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Acquisition and Registration of Islamic Religious Schools by the Malaysian Education Ministry

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ABSTRACT

This is a comparative study on the measures taken by the Ministry of Education in registering Public or State Religious Schools as Government-Funded Religious Schools (SABK) since 2004 against the taking over of Public and State Religious Schools that took place in 1977. A suitable comparison method has been employed with the intent to establish a guide which will be used to gauge what is happening during the take over, so that the adverse impacts will not be repeated in the future. Interviews and document analysis were the used tools. The study found that although stakeholders and issues are slightly different, situation wise they are quite a number of repetitions from history. Lessons should have been taken from history so that any action taken must be preceded with caution in avoiding the loss of religious schools identity, the identity which *Al-Azhar* curriculum has served for decades. Authors have proposed that the way to register the schools need revision and the modification of the management system restructured with a more acceptable and bearing less conflict new structure.

Key words: Islamic Religious school, Education Administration, History of Education, Ministry of Education Malaysia

Introduction

History is a discipline of arranging knowledge of occurrence and events systematically. It assembles the knowledge of the past based on chronology. Ibn Khaldun is the first known scholar to attempt to establish a definition of history. Ibn Khaldun, a Muslim historiographer and historian, defines history as information about political events, dynasties and occurrences of the remote past. These elements are 'elegantly presented and spiced with proverbs' (Ferraton, 2010). As for Collingwood, a historian must be able to recount and narrate the history of the past in his own mind (Collingwood, 1946). Issawi (1962) analogises past events to those of the future like water to water. In the Holy Book of al-Qur'an, Allah s.w.t. dictates which means: "Indeed in the stories of the Apostles, there is a lesson for those with intellect" (Yusuf: 111).

Sidi Gazalba (1966) opines that history is the picture of the past on human and his surroundings, functioning as a social creature that has been structurally arranged. The history of education suggests some events of education with consecutive incidences. It occurs in a particular point in time and has its own incomparable pattern (Barnadib, 1982). Events in history serve as the knowledge for the past (Mohd Yusof, 1986). The knowledge of history, in turn, is a broadened field towards achieving the goals predetermined by the Islamic education. The historical factor is presupposed as one of the key factors in influencing the philosophy of education either from the perspective of the system, or the purpose (al-Silmi, 1988). Based on these views, authors have proven that discussion on the history of institutionalising religious schools is correlated to one another, by way of comparative study and one that can be of reference to what is planned for growth in the future.

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Methodology:

Writers are the main agents in the qualitative research, for the data to be able to be obtained instantly, for them to explain, make conclusions as the study is being done and have the capacity to explore some inconsistent feedback (Merriam, 1998). Research questions necessitate authors to interview respondents, review documents and make comparison of the data obtained from the respondents before and after the respondents are interviewed. Therefore, the writers/authors need to obtain resources or informants before actually collecting and analysing the substantial data. To prevent from being biased towards the feedback given by the respondents, authors normally record the interview and note down some points as the interview is taking place.

The semi-structured interview is categorised between two types of interviews, namely the structured and the unstructured interview. In this process, author would pose a few formal questions that have earlier been formulated prior to the interview session, but the interviewer is also allowed to ask and probe in more detail on the answers given by the respondents (Chua, 2006). Interviews are crucial because the author would be able to understand others, as it relates with the ability to detect experiences gained by others. Respondents would normally adopt their own language style and author would be able to empathise with the views and thoughts of other individuals, those that would not have been possible if one does not interact with the respondent face-to-face (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This is because, the process requires that both parties should be able to interact directly and actively (Mohd. Majid, 1994). Nevertheless, the interview method contains some shortcomings especially when it comes to the time involved. This is due to the fact that the method requires finding the suitable respondent to be interviewed through other individuals beforehand.

For serving officers, difficulties may arise when it comes to making appointments as they are also occupied with other work obligations. For officers who have retired, they are more inclined to share their experiences and thus, the interview would be more time-consuming. Author needs to be prepared to listen to everything, including those irrelevant information. It is also unsatisfactory to interview the respondents only once as the authors would not know in detail the study issues that have been outlined. This has contributed to some of the respondents having to be interviewed a few times, especially those at the policy-making stage.

The semi-structured interview method format lies between the structured and the non-structured interviews. The author would ask some of the questions formulated before the interview session is conducted. The questions are also given to the respondents earlier before the appointment which is through the accompanying attachment and an official letter of application for appointment. In this method, the interviewer is given the freedom to formulate additional questions by asking and exploring in further detail respondents' answers from one formal question that has been asked previously. The author used the document analysis as one of the data collection methods in this study. Diverse types of documents such as acts, enactments, methods, regulations, circulars, official reports, memorandums, minutes of meetings, official letters, paperwork and internal administrative documents are analysed. Materials published in the mass media such as in the newspapers are also used in this study analysis. Following Merriam (1998), documents are usually divided into three types, namely, public records, personal documents and physical or artefact materials. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), documents are any written materials that are available when requested by the researcher. Fraenkel and Wellen (1996) point out that the advantages lie in the fact that there is little distraction when analysing the documents as researcher would be able to read and observe without the presence of the respondents. Basically, documents are robust proof with less possibility of anything narrated by the respondents during the interview being misquoted, missinformed or mission altogether. The tangible representation date from the document makes it convenient for the author to provide evidence of a statement and complete the data from other sources (Sabitha, 2005).

Religious Schools Taken Over As Government Schools:

The decision made by the Cabinet (Ministry of Education, 1978) to take over the public Religious Schools (SAR) and the State Religious Schools (SAN) was made public on 1st January 1977. The appointment of these schools was included in the Third Malaysia Plan (1976-1980) with proposal discussed earlier in the Cabinet meeting held on 2nd July 1975. The implementation was also tabled in an Islamic Education Advisory Council meeting at the end of May 1976. These effort of taking over the schools was to satisfy the intention of the parents, the religious teachers' association and several Islamic bodies (Azizi, 2011). Its model is based based on the Malaya Islamic College model, appointed on 1st January 1967 as the first religious school to have been administered by the Ministry of Education starting from 1965. The acquisition of the institution also served as an attempt towards acquiring SMAR and SMAN (Ismail, 1993).

Consequently, from the acquisition, several issues arose despite the fact that the education system at the secondary level stays the same as other SMARs and SMANs. The schools seem gradually to be losing grip on their exclusive identities, one that had been the source of their excellence previously. The excellence indicated here, is the curriculum based on the *madrasah* system, in which, had introduced *Al-Azhar* subjects. Its prior successful existence has manifested itself in truly skillful generations of students- being skilled in the basics of

the religious fields as they prepared themselves to be the experts in these fields. In the first ten years of the acquisition, the schools had no longer brought to light the *Al-Azhar* subject curriculum and were more interested into highlighting the science based subjects instead of the religious based subjects that had been so dominant in the preceding era.

As a fully government-owned schools, several changes in the national education that happened within that period had also been imposed onto the religious schools. It is undeniable fact that these schools are accomplished too, producing credible Muslim professionals. However, they lack scholars and reference experts in religious disciplines instead of being at an admirable trait at the early stage of their founding. Various parties, including the schools' own educators had expressed disappointment in this matter. The authors stressed that the goals and intention of establishing these schools have deviated from what is intended originally, especially concerning the religious knowledge fields. This issue spark resentment among parties who are strong advocates of Islamic education, towards any more steps to steer the *madrasah* education to comply with the national education policy.

In the process of acquisition, several initiatives need to be made to cater to current needs, prevalent in the national education policy. Such measures can be valued as part of the indirect institutionalising process of SMAR and SMAN. Among these measures are:

- SMAR and SMAN students sit for national examination certificate privately.
- SMAR and SMAN students have introduced national subjects in their schools.
- SMAR and SMAN introduce national examination certificate at their schools, apart from the religious certificate.

For the Federal Government, this acquisition has brought about great success to them where the Islamic contribution to the national development is concerned. The wave of change of the traditional-oriented Islamic education system into the mainstream education has been well-received. They have this assumption that the Malaya Islamic College can stand tall as a model to other SMAR and SMAN schools. On the other hand, urges of concern have been rife, coming from various angles who witness to the decline of the SMAR in term of religious education.

The Minister Board Meeting in 1975 brought to attention the Education Ministry's planning paper to take over one Religious Secondary School from every state (Dangiran, 2008).

Article 8 (b) of the acquired schools as in (a) above must be subject to 1961 Education Act also its amendments, and 1956 Study Course regulations with special attention to Religious Studies and Arabic Language.

13 SMKAs administered by the Ministry of Education at the early stage of the development in 1977, comprised of 11 schools in the Malaysian Peninsula and 2 more in the East Malaysia. The Federal Government basically was not permitted to establish religious schools at the time as they were not in its jurisdiction. The above list also shows two categories of schools namely the SMAR and SMAN. It is really difficult to distinguish between the SMAR and the SMAN due to the fact that both have come a long way of history. The main objective in the schools' acquisition was to provide an opportunity to the students to get sufficient dose of national education other than to retain religious education and Arabic as well as stressing on the Islamic identity in the particular school. Other than the 13 schools, there were also other SMARs that were acquired although a bit later. In 1979, two religious schools in Penang namely the Al-Mashoor Religious School for boys and the Al-Mashoor Religious School for girls had been taken over. The proposal to acquire both schools was actually in 1977. Such a delay in acquisition was rooted from a land ownership issue which was rather time-consuming. Wataniah Religious School in Machang, Kelantan was the last SMAR acquired by the Ministry of Education. It was taken over with the endorsement by Kelantan Islamic Foundation's Board of Director in 1984.

The acquisition of the SMAR back in 1977 also shows that the change of status of the teaching incumbency had contributed to various conflicts when the teachers came to be transferred into government schools. A lot of teachers were not able to be transferred due to their non-existent professional qualifications. Experiences as a founder, principal, administration committee member and a teacher are not sufficient enough. However, for the author, what had taken place long ago cannot be equated with the incidences that are currently prevailing. In tandem with current progress and the change of policies that have developed, old history does not have to repeat itself in the same form or sequence.

SMAR's Registration As A Government-Aided School:

The process of registration of SMAR has been implemented based on the agreement and under the order issued by the Former Prime Minister, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. The agreement was materialised, having received a suggestion from the Special Committee Revising the Islamic Education Issues Report, the Public Religious Schools' Roles and Consolidating National Schools Especially Related To Islamic Education Reports. The reports are known as Tan Sri Murad Special Committee which suggests that the SMAR to be registered

under the Ministry of Education to enable better assistance to be provided. This step has been taken to improve the quality of education for the schools. It is meant to register the SMAR throughout the country and making them government-aided educational institution based on Section 16 (b). Category (a) is the government education institution, whereas the third category or (c) is the private education institution. In the Act, the meaning of government-aided schools is also provided which is "... educational institutes which receive full contributions and provisions of capital and assistance."

The assistance is further explained "... any payment from public money, other than the contribution in the form of capital".

Meanwhile, the provision of capital is interpreted as:

Payment from public money to an educational institution for (1996 Education Act):

- (a) the Provision of buildings;
- (b) the alteration to or extension of existing premises;
- (c) the provision of furniture or equipment for new, altered or extended premises; or
- (d) such other purpose as may be prescribed.

According to a source from the Ministry of Education, to date, the number of registered religious schools as the Government-Aided Religious Schools (SABK) is 154 out of 380 schools in total. The schools can be categorized into two levels namely the primary level, which is 54 schools and the secondary level, 103 schools. This means that only 40 percent of the schools are ready to be registered as Government-Aided Schools organized by the Ministry (Dangiran, 2008). This includes the *madrrasah*-based non-SMAR religious schools, as it was at the initial stage of their establishments.

The proposal to make the SMAR the government-aided schools is actually not birthed from the report outcome alone, as the study and proposal of the registration had already been prepared by the Ministry of Education since 1996. In 1997, another report from the Ministry of Education had proposed that the registration was postponed on several factors (Ministry of Education, 1977). As the after-effect of the 11th September event, whereby the SMAR was depicted as one of the sources that gives rise to violent elements to the Muslims, the per capita assistance that had been relayed to the schools was unfortunately, terminated. In 2002, as the SAR issues were hotly debated in the mass media and the parliamentary meetings after the 11th September incident, the YB Minister of Education (who, at the time was Tan Sri Musa Muhammad) himself had led the urge for the SMAR to be registered as Government-Aided School. The termination was decided on the excuse that some parties behind the SMAR had not utilized the provisions given to them the best way possible. As the result, a report forwarded by Tan Sri Murad suggests that the SMAR is to be registered as the Government-Aided Schools based on 1996 Education Act. With the much-anticipated registration, the SMAR would not only gain back the per capita assistance but they would also be entitled to other special provisions and advantages.

Up until 2004, it can be said that all efforts to institutionalise the SMAR in all aspects are complete, as the institution has undergone all aspects of the SMAR development such as the aspects of finance, authority, human resource and curriculum. However, not all the aspects yield impressive accomplishments. Probably, from another aspect, it has shown little success and the accomplishments that should have come in the sense of elevating the status of the SMAR as a mainstream school, has obviously failed to show any positive outcome and has been undermined, as compared to other national education streams. In basic, the mechanism of this proposal is not similar to the mechanism proposed at the initial stage of the study. This is because the original proposal still places the roles of LEPAI and JAKIM as the Secretariat to the SMAR. However, as it was first implemented actively in 2005, instead the secretariat for the registering process of the SABK was the Islamic Education Department with the cooperation from other departments in the Ministry of Education. This change of administration could easily given rise to controversy like the way it happened in 1977 when it had been handed over to the Ministry of Education.

The SMAN also takes its own initiative to register as SABK although SMAN is not in the list of priority in the original proposal of the special committee. SMAR that has registered, does, indeed experience some changes in terms of human resource, facilities and infrastructure. It is worthy of mention that among the key agreements that have been sealed by both parties is retaining the *Al-Azhar* subject curriculum at the SMAR and it needs to be continuously and permanently run by the state religious local authority and the SMAR management, until the Federal Government was given the power through the endorsement of the Royal Council to administer *Al-Azhar* subject curriculum. The above mentioned registering process has seemingly failed to receive full cooperation from the state authority and the SMAR administrators themselves. This is not difficult to understand because the proposal of turning the SMAR into the SABK changes from what has been done previously. Originally, this indicates that the school will be fully financially assisted, in terms of per capita and capital from the Ministry of Education. The assistance should cover school administration, principal and teachers' salaries, the subject per capita and all other types of government aids. Also, the school lot still remains to belong to the school's administrative board and the subject curriculum of *Al-Azhar* is to be retained.

The Analysis of Comparison:

For the convenience of the discussion on the historical comparison drawn between the two events above, the authors have depicted this in a table, by emphasising on the crucial aspects. In another study earlier, the author has also conducted a comparative study but the comparison is made between the history of taking over the religious schools with the appointment of al-Qur'an schools in 1956, during the British reign. What follows is the comparison structured in a table below:

Table 1: The Comparison of Taking-Over and Registration

| Aspect | The 1977 Appointment | The SABK 2004 Registration |
|---|--|---|
| Autonomy Resource | 1961 Education Act | 1996 Education Act |
| Order and Reinforcer | The 1975 Cabinet | PM's Approval |
| Type of School | Government School | Government-Assisted School |
| School Concept | SMKA | 'SABK' |
| State Acceptance | The rejection of Pahang, Perak and Kedah | Kelantan (30% from the SAR and SAN are not provided) Pahang, Johor - rejection |
| Purpose | Education that prioritises Arabic and SMKA Islamic teaching, professionals with Islamic values | Religious scholars who adhere to existing goals |
| Ministry of Education | Dr. Mahathir Mohammad (Minister of Education) | Tan Sri Musa Mohammad and Dato' Hishamudin Husien |
| School Level | Secondary | Secondary and Primary Religious Schools with the Non-existent <i>Al-Azhar</i> |
| Conditions for Full Assistance | 1956 Teaching Course Regulations formulated by the Ministry | 1996 Educational Act National Curriculum |
| Teachers | Transferring to the state-owned school, temporary service until the service expires | Permanent, given option, Need to undergo training in service |
| Federal Structure | Islamic, KPM and JPN Educational Departments | KPM and JPN (Islamic Educational Sector) |
| Federal Structure (National Council of Islamic Affairs) | LEPAI yet to exist | LEPAI not having any role and is reduced |
| State Jurisdiction Source | None | State Enactment and Act Conflicts |
| <i>Al-Azhar</i> Curriculum | Change into Advanced Islamic Subject/Elective | The challenge in defending it |

Source: Azizi, 2011

Based on the table of comparison above, it shows that any given event that has happened serves as a history that should be made a lesson and value to us all. In the context of the registration of the SABK, the main thing that needs to be learned from it is the status and assurance that rests with the *Al-Azhar* curriculum in the national education system. One thing that needs to be considered seriously is how the religious school curriculum's implementation is acknowledged and becomes part of the National Curriculum. If the acknowledgement fails to exist, then any effort to maintain it is merely vulnerable, and is exposed to conflicts and could stray away from the main goals and purposes of its establishment.

Conclusion:

All in all, both events had taken place in such a brief period of time between 1977 and 2004. A history has repeated itself in the period not more than 30 years, one which is supposed to function as an easy guide to policy makers and religious schools' administrators alike. At both times, the measures are major effort exerted by the Federal Government in placing religious schools into the national education stream through a number of mechanisms, persuasion even some amount of coaxing. The State Government, in turn, does not find this easy to accept based on its past experiences, especially when deciding on a decision so major and crucial.

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