

## **Creativity and Innovation of Muslim Scholars in ASEAN Socio-Politics**



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### **Abstract**

*The major difference that separates the survivors and perishers in human society is how the critical issue of "change" - which is the only constant in our lives - is being managed. Those that succeeded in managing "change" and constantly improving themselves, will proceed further and progress, while others who slumbers oblivious to the changing environment, will be left behind. Central to the progress and modernization of societies and civilizations as they meander the vicissitudes of life, is the ability and willingness to embrace the principal catalyst for change, namely, "creativity and innovation". In the context of ASEAN, against the backdrop of a rapidly globalizing world environment, new knowledge and new ideas, together with fresh and bold approaches are required to enable the ASEAN community to stay ahead and progress. It is here that Muslim scholars and intellectuals in this region can and should exercise some leadership in this matter. They should spur the governments and peoples of ASEAN to accord greater focus and emphasis on the pertinent issue of "creativity and innovation" in all aspects of their endeavours, including in socio-politics. In this latter regard, these scholars (ulama, especially mujtahid) have a role in articulating socio-political issues that are not only in sync with the Islamic governing and development paradigms but also offer alternative ideas and approaches that can complement existing approaches to ASEAN's nation building agendas and programmes. For this particular Paper on socio-politics, our attention will be devoted towards discussing the role of Muslim scholars in helping to bolster further ASEAN's effectiveness in general, and in urgently calling for reforms (read: creativity and innovation) in Governance, Ideology, and Education in particular.*

*Keywords: Creativity and innovation, socio-politics*

## Introduction

In human society – and arguably, in the history of all species created by Allah – the major difference that separates the survivors and perishers is how the critical issue of “change” is being managed. Those that succeeded in constantly improving themselves with new ideas and newer ways of doing old things – in other words, engaging in creative and innovative tasks - will proceed further and progress, while others who stubbornly stick to traditions and practices that are no longer germane to the radically changing environment, will be left behind. Today, there is something common in the world’s “ideas capital” – London, New York, Paris, Silicon Valley, etc. – i.e., they are permeated with the magical spark of cerebral curiosity, combined with a spirit of derring-do that makes these places lively, dynamic and vibrant.<sup>1</sup> Of course, these intellectually and culturally effervescent places today merely replicate some of the more noble and salutary practices and cultures of earlier civilizations, both East and West, that have made them the trailblazers and torchbearers of human progress – from the ancient Greeks to the Persians to the Islamic and European Renaissance.

In the context of ASEAN, to continue to remain relevant and progress in this rapidly globalizing milieu, new knowledge and new ideas, together with fresh and bold approaches, are indeed the way to go. Not only must ASEAN ensure sustainable development goals that will benefit not only individual member states but the regional entity as a whole, lessons must be learnt from the mistakes of other regional political and economic groupings. A recent case that come to mind is the current malaise besetting the European Union and the rebellions against excessive capitalism, manifest in the “Occupy Movement”.<sup>2</sup> Towards this end, Muslim scholars and intellectuals (the *ulama*) have an important role to goad the governments and peoples of ASEAN to give greater credence to the catalyst for change, namely, “creativity and innovation” in all aspects of their endeavours, including in socio-politics. In this latter regard, they have the *amanah* to articulate socio-political issues that are in line with the Islamic governing and development paradigms and in the process, complementing and enhancing existing approaches in ASEAN’s nation building agendas.

In this Paper, we shall first define, albeit briefly, the key terms of “socio-politics” and “creativity and innovation”. This will be followed by observations as to why this creative and innovative ethos are not only Islamic in spirit but are necessary if peoples and states wish to progress in today’s ever-changing globalization environment. Finally, we shall deliberate on a few key areas and issues by which Muslim scholars and intellectuals can articulate more publicly and effectively the importance of creativity and innovation in ASEAN’s socio-politics. Since the range of issues under the ambit of socio-politics is large and wide, our focus will be confined to discussing only the following: enhancing the overall effectiveness of the ASEAN entity; democratic governance; multi-cultural ideology; and educational reforms.

## Defining “socio-politics” and “creativity and innovation”

By ‘sociopolitics’, we are generally referring to the combination or significant interaction of social and political factors in a given country or community. Such an interaction involves a broad range of issues that affects a country’s nation building process in general and its stability and prosperity in particular – both domestically and internationally. The local or domestic sociopolitical imperative of a country include the following: the nature of it’s ideology and governance, it’s state-society and majority-minority relations, the extent of cohesion among its plural polity, and the divides/gaps at various levels of the society - income, gender, urban-rural, and older-younger generation, etc. – as well as broadly, issues pertaining to the use of power and authority and how these were employed to manage societal problems and challenges.

Obviously, sociopolitical issues also transcends the domestic confines of countries and affects the wider, global environment as well, such as the on-going debates on global warming, trans-national migration, communicable disease control, radioactive waste disposal, resource management, food safety, fish and wildlife management, biotechnology, endangered species protection, pollution management and related issues.<sup>3</sup> These sociopolitical issues are also intertwined in that they also impact other crucial factors in the development agendas of all countries - from economics to science, arts to entertainment, culture to health, etc. Hence, in many universities, there are faculties and disciplines that reflects this interwoven dynamic, i.e., Political Sociology, Political Economy, Political Geography, etc. Clearly then, governments must address these perennial sociopolitical issues since they affect the overall stability and wellbeing of the people and the country as well as the international community at large.

Insofar as ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’ are concerned, though closely related and symbiotically interwoven, they are slightly different from each other. Broadly, ‘creativity’ is the added quality that an individual brings to any activity. More specifically, it is the capacity to “generate or recognize ideas, alternatives, or possibilities that are useful in solving problems, sometimes transforming an existing idea into a better one...the ability to view things in new ways or from a different perspective...”<sup>4</sup> A ‘creative person’ is one who thinks “outside the box” – who expresses unusual, interesting, stimulating, fresh thoughts and insights on a given issue and in the process, added value to the idea or product. Unlike ‘creativity’, ‘innovation’ usually extends beyond the individual but is more institutionally driven, i.e., the organizational capacity to transform accumulated knowledge and research into economically valuable outcomes. Obviously, innovation not only involves unpredictable risks (including failure) but requires much funding resources, R & D and preliminary inventions that once achieved, can then be produced and marketed to a much wider audience or target groups.

‘Creativity’ and ‘innovation’ can be applied at both the micro and macro levels of analyses and thereby, are applicable when discussing matters affecting both individuals and larger entities. It is not difficult to detect ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’ in our midst. As an illustration, recently, archaeologists excavated human remnants that showed that the earliest human beings were not directly evolving from ancestral apes but from different sources in different continents, each with different survivalist capacities. This led to its conclusion that the one specie that survives in Africa (upon which some Western scholars claimed to be our predecessors :) was the one with the greatest survivalist traits in confronting the ‘environment’ such as its ability in making tools to hunt for food, etc. Put differently, the survivalists in human evolutionary history are those with “creativity and innovation”.

The message that this latest discovery convey is not new. Apparently, all past and successful civilizations had achieved their glory and splendour – in matters such as trade and industry, diplomacy, astute governance, social compact, enlightenment, cultural progress, etc. - because of their relative advances in the ‘knowledge enterprise’, which also imply the employment of ‘creativity and innovation’. Today, more and more countries are emphasising on an even more qualitative shift of this knowledge paradigm – from “knowledge management” to “knowledge creation”, in that it is insufficient to merely manage existing knowledge and expertise in different fields of human endeavours, but to move towards “creating” new and more relevant knowledge. This is especially crucial in this age of globalization characterized by rapid changes of the global environment – economically, socially, politically, etc.

Obviously, innovation is not only a very costly enterprise, it is also very risky because it is so unpredictable.<sup>5</sup> Lord Kelvin, the President of the prestigious Royal Society, once said that heavier-than-air flying machines were impossible, and the Chairman of the major computer company, DEC, had earlier opined that no-one would want a computer in their home. Clearly, very knowledgeable people can get their predictions in this field hopelessly wrong. But innovations often succeed in unpredictable ways. The computer and Internet were developed as tools for scientific research with no idea of their mass market appeal. When the laser was developed it really had no commercial applications, but now its utility extends from surgery to CD players. When 3M developed the ‘Post-It Note’, it pasted this non-sticky glue on notice boards, to which ordinary pieces of paper could be attached. It took some time before it realized that it would be even better if the glue was put on the now ubiquitous little notes.

### **Role Of Muslim Scholars In Fostering ‘Creativity And Innovation’ In Asean’s Socio-Politics**

Now that we have briefly defined the key terms in this Paper, it’s opportune to highlight the role of Muslim scholars and intellectuals (broadly the *ulama*, especially those with the

*mujtahid* mindset) in buttressing and consolidating the sprit of ‘creativity and innovation’ within the ASEAN community, specifically in its socio-politics. Other than the roles of politicians, mass media and NGOs, our ulama have the *amanah* to foster the spirit of creativity and innovation within the Islamic framework of man as *Khalifah fil-ard*. Otherwise, the expected materialistic and capitalist progress that ensued consequent to the adoption of creative and innovative ideas might actually create more problems and tensions. And whatever ‘progress’ that have been achieved, will not last – as depicted in Qur’anic stories and demonstrated repeatedly in the experience and history of past civilizations, however glorious and advanced they have been praised in human history.<sup>6</sup>

### **Between forbidding *bid’ah* and fostering *ijtihad***

To begin with, Muslim scholars has the duty to quickly clarify and put to rest the well-known Hadith that has often been misinterpreted, which claims that “innovation” (*bid’ah*) is forbidden in Islam. *Bid’ah* originates from the word *Bada’* which refers to creating something new. Rasulullah (saw) was reported to have said, whoever innovates into this affairs of ours will be rejected and the worst of things are the newly invented things... which are misguidances... and every misguidance will lead to Hellfire.<sup>7</sup> It is important to put this particular Hadith in context: it was referring to innovations in the affairs of Faith, especially in matters relating man’s relations with Allah swt (*hablum-minaullah*). However, in matters relating to our relations with others and with humanity at large (*hablum minannaas*), innovation is indeed necessary. Otherwise, technological and scientific advancement in particular and human growth and progression in general will not be possible – and will indeed contravene the Islamic teaching itself. Here, one is reminded of a key Islamic principle, which has a direct relevance to our discussion about creativity and innovation in human society, namely, *ijtihad*.

*Ijtihad* (briefly, the creative and adaptive resort to managing life’s pursuits and challenges independent from the specific injunctions in the *Qur’an* and *Sunnah*) is in fact very much encouraged in Islam. This is reflected in the Hadith which proclaims that those who engages in *ijtihad* will be rewarded by Allah (swt): if the result of the creativity and adaptability is proven to be successful or beneficial, there will be two rewards, and those whose *ijtihad* did not eventually produce the desired positive outcome will also get a reward, one reward. Thus, the tendency by some ulama in our midst to adopt the “closing of the gate of *ijtihad*” (*taqlid*) mindset and the equally outmoded culture of practicing Islam within an exclusive *mazhab* mentality irrespective of one’s changing environment, has to give way to *taqdir*. If Muslims failed to adopt this creative and adaptive psyche, particularly in this age of globalization, they will be left behind - if they have not already been so.<sup>8</sup> Thus, *fatwa* cannot be fixed and ‘cast in stone’ but must be subjected to continuous *ijtihad* and should be changed or modified whenever the situations warrant them, so long as it does not contravene the *Shari’ah*.<sup>9</sup>

As illustrations, let us consider as to how the creative modifications to earlier *fatwas* that are no longer as relevant have benefitted Muslims at large – such as those relating to organ transplant, *wakf* and smoking. As is known, for a long time, smoking was declared as *makruh* or *mubah* in many parts of the Muslim World but are now declared as *haram* by many ulama after medical evidence reveals its ill effects not only to affected individuals but eventually to their families and communities. The same relates to the once controversial issue of organ transplant, which used to be regarded as *haram* among many Muslims but are now, given its life-saving function, accepted as permissible in many parts of the Muslim world. Yet another example is the *fatwa* about donating one's land for *wakf*. This long-standing ruling within some ulama in the Shafi'e *mazhab* is recently being creatively expanded to go beyond land donation, but involving cash donations and other forms of property (*wakaful nuqud*). The related creative utilization of *wakf* land by selling off unprofitable *wakf* properties to newer and higher yield ventures are other examples.<sup>10</sup> The same apply to the the broad acceptance of *Ilm Falaq* when sighting for the new moon to determine the beginning of Ramadhan. Clearly, the advances in science and technology and the unveiling of new knowledge - including those relating to the life sciences such as DNA, gene therapy, cell/tissue incubation, etc. - calls for new *fatwa* from our ulama, which can no longer be fixated to exclusive *mazhab* considerations.

Today, newer issues and challenges require equally newer and bolder (read: creative and innovative) reinterpretations and approaches from our Muslim scholars towards overcoming them. Consider the example of the issue of 'over-population', which many populated states have failed to grapple with: our *ulama* must be able to explain in convincing ways what seems to many non-Muslims to be an irreconcilable situation – between Allah's promise of *reski* to every soul that are made to be born on the one hand, and the Islamic emphasis on quality of the ummah, which an over-populated Muslim society cannot deliver and hence, the necessity to support family planning, on the other. Similarly, Muslim scholars must be able to offer alternative Islamic perspectives to some common but important secular terms and concepts – such as "progress", "success", and "modern". As is known, in the Islamic scheme of things, "successful" men and women are those with *iman* and *taqwa* in that a successful person is one who possesses more than just knowledge, skills, creativity and innovativeness per se, but also who consciously adheres to Allah's injunctions and commandments.

### **The call for creativity and innovation, not new in Islam**

Muslim scholars in ASEAN should drive home the message that creativity and innovation are neither new in Islamic history nor in the experience of Muslims in Southeast Asia. To begin with, these qualities have been embedded ever since the time of Rasulullah (s.a.w) and his Sahabah during the period of the Qur'anic generation in the first century, and emulated by successive Muslim states. A few illustrations would suffice here: during

the Khandaq war, Salman al-Farasi's creative suggestion to the Prophet (saw) to dig a trench – something not known in Arab battle strategy of that time - finally helped Muslims overcome the enemy siege; the big expansion of Muslim territorial rule during the reign of Umar ibn al-Khattab could not have happened without the new tactics and strategies that were employed both in moments of war and peace; and the glorious and long periods of the Islamic Renaissance when Muslim scholars, scientists and inventors were the world's leading trailblazers would also not have taken place without their creative and innovative acumen and prowess.

In fact, this call for Muslims to pursue the teachings and principles of Islam in new and creative ways is also not alien to this part of the world. As is known, historically, it was the arrival of Islam that ushered in the modernization of the 'Malay world' of present Southeast Asia,<sup>11</sup> a transformation that has some semblance to the radical change that Rasulullah (saw) brought to the then Arab *jahilliah* environment. For the Malay World, at the height of the Islamic reformist movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, reformists such as Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, Abbas Taha, Tahir Jalaluddin, Dr. Burhanuddin el-Helmy, etc., – to mention only a few names – went public to goad the Muslim elites (both political and religious) to shed their old and tradition-bound ways of managing the plight of the Muslim ummah. So today, Muslim scholars in ASEAN should continue this Islamic tradition of reformist intellectuality. And they do not have to re-invent the wheel: other than referring to the two principal sources of Islamic teachings, i.e., the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah*, much has already been thought through and offered by earlier classical and more contemporary Islamic thinkers and intellectuals. These included: Shah Wali'ullah (India), Shawkani (Iran), al-Sanusi (Sudan) and Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Redha (Egypt) and in more recent times, *mujtahids* like Fazlur Rahman, Abu Hamid Sulaiman, Ahmad Totonji, Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohamed Arkoun, Tariq Ramadhan and Khaled Abou Fadl, to name a few.<sup>12</sup>

But since ASEAN's socio-political landscape is necessarily pluralistic in that the populations are diverse and heterogeneous, to erase any remaining doubts about how Islam and Muslims fit into this plural milieu, our ulama's approach should bear this verity. They should emphasize the message that the Muslim quest for Islamic identity does not compromise their loyalty and patriotism to the country, and that they can still be progressive and inclusive in their relations with fellow citizens in plural societies. Muslims know very well that their religion extols them to live a life of moderation (*ummatun wasota*), to be good to all (*ummatul khair*) and to confront whatever challenges and problems with hard work and wisdom (*hikmah*). As adherents of Islam, they also know that their faith not only believes in but encourages pluralism and diversity, within which people of different faiths and cultures share common aspirations while still cherishing their particular norms and identities. Additionally, the universality of the Islamic worldview and principles means that there is no contradiction at all between becoming a citizen of any country and pursuing one's Muslim identity.

The present and existing societal and political structures and processes in ASEAN can only move forward if and when some fundamentally creative ideas are put in place by its leaders and peoples. The present relative progress and modernization that different countries within ASEAN have exhibited amongst each other would also suggest that the ones that have a better future will be those which have embarked on bold creative and innovative policies and related initiatives. Let us deliberate, with specific examples, some pertinent issues that needed attention in ASEAN's socio-politics and for which the Islamic framework can be utilised and upon which Muslim scholars can assist in articulating them. We shall cover the Politics (especially efforts at bolstering ASEAN effectiveness in general and the crucial issue of Governance and Ideology in particular), and Social (specifically, Education) aspects.

Some of the 'innovative' ideas upon which Muslim scholars can exercise some leadership to assist ASEAN to move ahead in tandem with the rapidly changing socio-political environment, include the following areas and issues:

### **Bolstering ASEAN's Effectiveness**

In a sense, ASEAN has gone some way in its goal to remain relevant in this changing world. The last three decades have witnessed some significant economic and political-security collaboration and agreements. These included the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation in 1989 and the Asean Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994, and the Asean Free Trade Area, created in 1992, and has now been re-launched as the Asean Economic Community 2015. Still, the disappointment about the slow pace of progress in ASEAN lingers on, some of which is due to ignorance or lack of understanding as to the limits and parameters of ASEAN collaboration – such as its *raison de'être* when formed in 1967, its different political and socio-cultural environments (history, regime types, race, religion, etc.) as well as its equally dissimilar economic agendas and priorities. The ASEAN Secretariat is also not equipped to play an active role, thereby limiting its effectiveness. This concern at what is generally perceived to be the slow rate of progress in intra-ASEAN cooperation is understandable, since it has been more than four decades that this regional enterprise was established.<sup>13</sup> But Muslim scholars can contribute their share with realistic and feasible ideas in bolstering further ASEAN's effectiveness, progress and intra-group resilience.

A few illustrations as to how ASEAN's effectiveness can be further buttressed –and the role that Muslim scholars can play towards this end - may be mentioned here, as follows:

- 'Prosper thy neighbour' philosophy: since the development gap among ASEAN partners is conspicuously uneven, the richer countries should extend their hands to those less able to catch up.



- More effort at fostering people-to-people relations: this was reiterated by Malaysia recently, in March 2012 (<http://www.aseansec.org/26810.htm>).
- Urgency in domestic reforms: these include gaps in infra-structure; lack of human resources; inadequate institutions to deal with various societal ailments; inadequate private sector involvement in development agendas; etc.<sup>14</sup>
- Greater intra-ASEAN trade integration: the trend towards bilateral trade and FTA with major powers and economies (with Japan/Korea; USA/Mexico, etc.) if not complemented by intra-ASEAN trade, might impede the declared vision to create an Economic Community by 2015.
- Effective mechanisms to settle rows, potential conflicts and crises: the recent Cambodia/Thailand border clashes, the robust claims to South China Sea islands/contigual zones by a few states, the huge oil spills, terrorist attacks, etc., can only be peacefully and effectively mitigated if effective mechanisms (other than the agreed ‘Treaty of Amity and Cooperation’) are put in place.
- Balancing the ‘non-interference principle’ in each other’s domestic affairs on the one hand, and rallying together when violations against international law and civil liberties and freedoms by individual member states occur, on the other.

The above are only some examples of innovative initiatives by which ASEAN can undertake together as a regional group. If this same innovative spirit can be adopted at the level of individual member states, some of the other pressing domestic problems and challenges can have a better chance to be alleviated.<sup>15</sup> These problems include the following: popular participation in nation building agendas; relations with foreign countries and neighbours; corruption, nepotism and collusion; the respect for the rule of law; treatment of minorities, including indigenous citizens and managing the continuation of armed resistance groups; inter-party and intra-party squabbles especially in coalition governments; readiness to confront global economic crises; managing aspirations of the young, internet generation; etc.

## Democratic Governance

Beyond the effort to engender a more effective ASEAN, the spirit of creativity and innovation can also be applied in the ASEAN states’ modality of governance, specifically in the practice of ‘democracy’. In this regard, the importance of leadership legitimacy must continue to be articulated with greater earnestness, since the greater the enlightened leadership and governance, the more legitimate the rule, the more sustainable the economic growth and the more the people will live happier and fulfilling lives – and these have a better chance to materialize with a democratic form of governance. Ruling government

elites (Presidents, Prime Ministers, Cabinet Ministers, Generals, etc.) must set an example by governing equitably, living frugally within their stipulated income, are non-corrupt, and have the welfare and interest of the people in their heart.<sup>16</sup>

While far from perfect, on balance, the democratic form of governance have the best chance to engender greater legitimacy to the governments, while also ensuring greater progress and stability. Arguably, democracy can be perceived as 'Islamic' if the governing paradigms that are stipulated in the *Qur'an* and *Sunni* are adhered to – such as practicing the *shura* (consultation), emphasising *adl* (justice) for all, and attaching special care towards the rights and welfare of 'minorities' (be they gender, race/ethnicity, religion, etc.), as well as those who are left behind in the development process. Admittedly, many less developing countries, including in ASEAN, have strong reservations about the applicability of this Western, liberal democratic model to their own states; hence, the option that has a better chance to succeed in this period of ASEAN development, is perhaps the 'illiberal' brand of democracy. Essentially, this latter minimalist model entails the respect of basic norms of equality, freedom, popular participation and the rule of law, as well the acceptance and recognition of political pluralism in the development agendas of states.<sup>17</sup>

Accepting democracy imply that rulers can no longer 'rule' but 'govern'. By this is meant that ample and fair opportunities are accorded to citizens to actively participate in the affairs of the country and by sodoing, inculcate the feeling of stakeholdership amongst the polity. Leaders must also demonstrate accountability and incorruptibility and initiate processes that will enable the regular renewability of leadership to younger talent to take place without hindrance. There must also exist institutions that guarantees the people's freedoms to choose their governments through regular and fair Elections and the credibility and integrity of other institutions of the state apparatus must be upheld. Furthermore, the right of citizens to peacefully disagree publicly against government policies and to form associations that will represent their interests – hence, the engagement with 'civil society' - must be respected and institutionalized.<sup>18</sup> Finally, there is the need to preserve the 'checks and balances' mechanism among the key branches of government, i.e., the Executive, Legislature and Judiciary, to prevent encroachment of the constitutional rights and obligations of these branches by leaders and elites with dictatorial tendencies. In some ways, Indonesia is setting a good example: it has conducted three popular elections in relatively peaceful setting; so too, with the progress of Myanmar, which recent democratic initiatives have received kudos from the international community, enabling its military leaders the potential to erase its previous image as an international *pariah*.

Only with good governance practices can states prevent a further worsening of some of the development problems and ills confronting states in this age of globalization and the stresses and strains associated with the many divides now plaguing countries, even in ASEAN: income divide,<sup>19</sup> digital divide, rural-urban divide, etc.

## **Ideology Of ‘Multi-Culturalism’**

In terms of ideology, as is known, there are a few common governing worldviews that are practiced today, even by Muslim-majority states that declared themselves as ‘Islamic states’. These included capitalism, secularism, multiculturalism, etc. In reality, however, there are very few, if any, countries that practice fully the original and pristine ideas of these ideological constructs; as an example, even the United States and Britain, in spite of their declared ‘secular’ ideological orientation, have strong Christian undercurrents. For Islam too, adopting fully secularism and capitalism per se as developmental paradigms in the nation-building process is not permitted. In this Paper, we shall only focus attention on the promise of ‘multi-culturalism’ as a viable governing ideology for all ASEAN states. Arguably, not only is this ideology acceptable within the Islamic worldview, it seems to offer the only workable governing ideology for ASEAN, whatever the different historical, cultural and political background of each of its member-state. After all, all countries within ASEAN are pluralistic and heterogeneous and have to grapple with the crucial issue of national integration and the pursuit of a common national identity from amongst their polyglot (ethno-religious, majority-minority) citizenry.

It is rather foolhardy to believe that with urbanization and modernization, heterogeneous, multi-ethnic societies would cast aside their ethno-religious values and predispositions in favour of a broader, unitary, common national outlook. Even globalization has not fully succeeded in erasing people’s attachments and resilience to their racial (ethnic) and religious affinities. And Muslim scholars can forward the argument that this is also the Islamic position of human society, namely, that human plurality and diversity are a deliberate act of God. The ‘melting pot’ idea whereupon an integrated nation is believed to have a better chance to actualize itself if a country’s different ethnic and minority groups were to merge and subsume their separate and parochial interests and identities under an all-encompassing, national identity has little, if any, success stories in the world. Thus, the common suspicion about the loyalty and patriotism of ethno-religious minorities from many governments should cease and be replaced by creative and innovative policies and programmes (in such critical areas of housing, education, political representation, cultural exchange, etc.) that will enable these disadvantaged minorities to maintain their identity within a larger national outlook. Lest it be forgotten, in many developed multicultural countries, these particular preserves and traditions are respected since they come within the ‘private domains’ or religious sanctity that each ethno-religious community has been allowed to uphold.

While on the surface ‘multi-culturalism’ seems a fair and equitable ideological approach in the governance of plural societies, the lessons from countries in this region shows that it is important to implement this ideology in ways that do not prejudice especially ethno-religious minority communities. It is here that Muslim scholars can exercise some

intellectual leadership. As an illustration, while many ASEAN governments constantly goad citizens to demonstrate their unreserved commitment to a “multi-cultural nation” – seeing this pluralistic path as the only viable panacea for the future progress of their multi-ethnic, multireligious, polyglot society – the psyche and approach of some countries seems fixated within the old ‘multiracial’ mould. As is known, the ideological difference between ‘multiracialism’ and ‘multi-culturalism’ is more than nuanced but quite fundamental: multiracialism regard plural societies as liabilities that have to be calibrated, while multi-culturalism instead view such heterogeneity as assets that should be celebrated.

The same principle and approach can be taken when dealing with issues relating to intra-Muslim unity: Muslim scholars can articulate the idea that this accommodationist spirit and approach can also be applied whenever differences among the Muslim *ummah* occur, including in matters of interpreting faith. As an example, the spirit of “many voices of Islam” or “different paths to Jannah” (similar ideology, different methodology) should be cultivated, however contestable such ideas are. After all, in a Hadith, Muslims were told that differences of opinions, presented peacefully and with integrity, are a *rahmah* (blessing) to the community.

In other words, in the pursuit of national integration and unity, ‘multiculturalism’ must be implemented in such a way as to be widely felt to be sufficiently inclusive and accommodative – namely, accepting and accommodating the plurality and diversity of cultures and other peculiarities of the citizenry. Here, of the three major strategies adopted by multi-cultural states in their national integration agenda – namely, assimilation, domination and accommodation (Brown 1994; Fenton 1999; Glazer and Moynihan 1975; Horowitz 1985; Lijphart 1980; Rabushka and Shepale 1972; Smith 1965) – the one that has to be adopted is ‘accommodation’. Not only is ‘accommodation’ encouraged within the Islamic worldview, it is one where the government, through its ‘implementer institutions’ such as trade unions, mass media, grassroots organizations and the bureaucracy, engages with all citizens emphatically, including minority ethno-religious groups, towards common positions on national issues, while still maintaining its overall leadership of the state.<sup>20</sup>

Governments should not intrude into the ethno-religious space and other sacred preserves of minority communities, nor should it coerce such minorities to adopt ‘mainstream’ national orientations. Multi-culturalism can still function effectively even in countries where the indigenous communities – given historical and related imperatives – feel a greater stake of ownership of the land, as exists in some ASEAN states. The current ‘1Malaysia’ experiment in Malaysia is a good example of promoting an inclusive and accommodative approach towards nation building – but the real test of its success will lie in its implementation. Perhaps, a more innovative approach that Muslim scholars can posit as food for thought is to move away from championing ethno-religious rights but more on issues of common citizenship and common justice.

## Educational Reforms

Other than the 'Political' dimension as discussed above, more can be done to address urgent 'Social' problems and challenges within ASEAN. Towards this end, a few examples can be posited here:

- While interactions among ASEAN politicians and ruling elites have been many and generally cordial, much work is required to transfer such knowledge of and cordiality towards each other to the peoples of ASEAN itself.
- More intra-ASEAN collaboration is needed to address the range of social problems and issues confronting ASEAN states.
- Examples of some of these problems and issues: encroachment of liberalist Western worldviews and values; wasteful debates amongst religious elites on less relevant issues of growth and development; the plight of broken families, drug addicts and delinquent youths; the feeling of anomie and alienation in urban centres; and related enigmas and challenges.

For the 'Social' component of this Paper, however, we shall focus primarily on the critical issue of education since this core imperative will have a big impact on other aspects of life's endeavours. To begin with, Muslim scholars and intellectuals can highlight to the wider ASEAN community the different perspective with regard to the Islamic educational paradigm. As is known, the end-goal of education is to inculcate values of men and women as *khalifah fil ard* so as to build and develop families, societies, countries, etc. who knows the *raison de'être* of their lives and that the definition of an 'educated person' is one with *Ilm*, *Iman*, 'Aml and *Ihsan*. In an environment where Muslims are lagging behind fellow nonMuslims in the key area of educational competencies, a useful topic to start is to highlight the Islamic emphasis on the quest for knowledge and one that is a life-long endeavour. As is known, in a *Hadith*, not only are Muslims reminded that if they wish to succeed in this world and the next, they require knowledge, but their life today should be better than yesterday, and tomorrow, better than today.

Muslim scholars can also articulate the dire need for reforms to various aspects of teaching and learning, such as curricula and pedagogy. These are urgently needed if ASEAN states and their citizens were to progress in this rapidly changing world while also not losing their moral compass. To begin with, good teaching must reflect personal and pedagogical philosophies that will produce outcomes that will benefit students holistically. To achieve this, a "good teacher" needs to be more than a teacher but an educator in that he/she requires more than knowledge but also passion, talent, humanity and humility. Excelling in one's field is critical since it will equip oneself with the wherewithal to speak with a certain air of confidence, competence and authoritativeness. Here, needless to say, these educational reforms and transformations can only come about with a mantra of

“creativity and innovation”. Studies have shown that such creativity improves pupils’ self-esteem, motivation and achievement. Pupils who are encouraged to think creatively and independently have all the potential to become more interested in discovering things for themselves, more open to new ideas, keen to work with others, and, when pursuing an idea or vision, willing to work beyond lesson time. As a result, their pace of learning, levels of achievement and self-esteem increase.<sup>21</sup>

The educational curricula must be able to help students develop analytical thinking skills and more than just imparting information, the curricula must enable students adequate room to learn, re-learn and think for themselves. The learning process must be a life-long endeavour that students can retain long after graduation when they go into the “real world”, and the learning process must be open enough to enable better ideas and approaches to prevail irrespective of their origins – race, religion, nationality. In today’s global environment, graduates of the educational system must be equipped with multi-tasking skills that will enable them to be adaptive enough to tap the huge potential in the global marketplace beyond their national boundaries. Lest it be forgotten, today, labour and expertise are highly mobile and those without the prerequisite aptitude and skills that are relevant in this global economy will face the real risk of not only being unemployed, but worse, unemployable. But those who are equipped with the innovative and creative mindset and skills, will reap the bountiful opportunities beyond what their own countries can offer; as an example, there is a vast opportunity in the Islamic and banking sector with a total asset of \$ 1.4 trillion and more than 1,000 institutions operating in many countries worldwide.<sup>22</sup>

Muslim scholars must also utilize their expertise and network to try to influence the governments in ASEAN not to procrastinate in initiating subsidized skills’ upgrading programmes and other educational opportunities that can uplift technical and professional competencies of the workforce. While these are admittedly costly, they are more than necessary to ensure that the workforce, especially local manpower, are trained and prepared well to face a competitive global labour market. The experience of some countries, which saw less encouraging take-up rate of these schemes from those groups for which such schemes were specifically targetted at, has to be creatively addressed. There is this reality that must be noted: low-paying jobs and low incomes will not only have grave consequences to such workers (such as adversely affecting their family stability and the resultant social ills for their children) but also widen the income gap between them and other citizens. ASEAN must not fall into the trap of the Muslim World, which accords miniscule resources to ‘Research and Development’ (R & D); although costly in the short term, will reap huge benefits for the peoples and countries in the longer term.<sup>23</sup>

Another area that Muslim scholars can offer their views relates to the plight of indigeneous communities. Many of these communities, for historical and other reasons, seemed to

have found the key subjects of relevance in the New Economy (such as Maths, Science, English and Computer Science) difficult to manage. If necessary, new and creative ways of upgrading their competencies in these subjects be experimented – as was done by new Chinese immigrants who failed in English when they first enrolled in Singapore schools but whose results after barely two short years, jumped from F9 (lowest grade) to A1 (highest grade). (*Straits Times* 11 January 2011: B1) Insofar as the teaching of the new but important field of Information, Communications and Technology (ICT) is concerned, imbibing the creative and innovative spirit can be done by introducing “coding” programmes that will instil students not only the ability to use existing knowledge but produce and create something out of nothing. In this latter regard, they could be assisted to utilize fully the wide availability of the “open source support” that is accessible on-line via the internet. Clearly, to produce creators such as the many scientists, intellectuals, historians, inventors and other trailblazers of knowledge that flourished during the Islamic Renaissance (around the 8-12 centuries AD) or even today’s Bill Gates (Microsoft), Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook) and Steve Jobs (Apple), one requires the skills and brains of those with creativity and innovativeness.

Finally, Muslim scholars can alert governments at the fundamental inconsistencies that presently exists in many countries within ASEAN in the treatment of learning and intellectual discourse. It appears that while many countries want to see the innovative spirit flourished, such an emphasis is deliberately confined to only particular, officially sanctioned spaces. Governments want creative thinking in industry, but pegged qualification standards to academic grades wholly – forgetting that flexibility in education and open-mindedness in civil society go hand in hand. The experience of many countries has shown that it is not possible to preach innovation and creativity in profitable endeavors while stifling free expression and freedoms elsewhere.

### **Reforms In Islamic Education**

Insofar as educational creativity and innovativeness of Muslims in ASEAN are concerned, they too must double their efforts towards reforms, including reforms in Islamic education. Here again, the role of Muslim scholars in showing the way to the Muslim masses, cannot be under-estimated.<sup>24</sup> While remaining true to their ideological commitment to Islamic principles and embed the ‘knowledge culture’ in their worldview and lifestyle, Muslim educators can do more to inject elements of realism and pragmatism to improve the educational performance of their students in both ‘Islamic’ and ‘secular subjects’.<sup>25</sup> While they embrace such quest for knowledge and expertise as a life-long endeavour, they must also rescind some of the traditional and cultural habits that are no longer in sync with a progressive Islamic lifestyle, and a new, globalized world. And since Islam defines education holistically (encompassing both ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ education) Muslims must be prepared to double up their efforts on these two fronts.<sup>26</sup> Where their religious

education is concerned, greater innovativeness must be employed in both curriculum and methodological approaches. As an example, in terms of curriculum, the first emphasis must be accorded to the acquisition of knowledge of *fard 'ain* (including The Qur'an, Hadith, Arabic and knowledge that will strengthen their *'aqeedah*) while not neglecting *fard kifaayah*. If we can do this, pedagogically, we can produce an "educated Muslim" whose physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual make-up will enable him/her to fulfil his obligations at both levels of relationships, i.e., *hablum minallah* and *hablum minannaas*.<sup>27</sup>

In terms of methodology, Muslims must not repeat the glaring inadequacies of Islamic education that still haunts many Muslim countries today. Many traditional Islamic school systems and institutions are still employing old and redundant methods of rote-learning and strict memorization and refused to explore newer and more creative ways and means in learning and teaching. The traditional methods of *hafalan* (*al-Hafz*) and repetitions (*al-Tikrar*) – which might work well for certain subjects such as memorizing the Qur'an – should give way more to questioning (*al-Khiwar*), experimentations (*al-Tajribiyah*) and inductive reflections (*al-Bakhs*).<sup>28</sup> Rote-learning and rituals must give way to developing capacities of thinking, internalizing and implementing knowledge in one's daily life. In recent decades, Western-style Islamic schools have attempted to 'Islamize' education, such as through the 'Islamization of knowledge' global movement, which merge the two Islamic-secular approaches within a holistic curriculum. However, developments in the formalization of knowledge (via. institutions and large enrolment classes especially in urban areas) seemed to have changed little of the old methods of teaching and learning in Muslim societies.<sup>29</sup> Not many Islamic teachers (*assatizah*) are well trained in the pedagogy of knowledge, less so equipped with the effective strategies of teaching that are essential to educational success in modern societies.

Today, tensions between these competing traditional-modern approaches still persists; so too between the 'official' Islamic scholars (*ulama*) whose salaries are paid by the government and are naturally more constrained by official policies of a secular state, and the more autonomous ones who can afford to be more independent in offering alternatives to issues confronting the Muslim community (*ummah*). One result of these tensions has been the dichotomies and wasteful competition which, for so long, has disadvantaged the traditional Islamic schools and their students.<sup>30</sup> As an example, let us take two recent cases in Singapore, where Muslims are an ethnic minority living in a modern, secular capitalist state. Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister, had gone public to express his view, if not concern, that 'madrasah don't teach critical skills' (*Straits Times* 11 May 1999: 45 ). Fortunately, rather than getting worked up with his statement, all the six full-time *madrasah* in the Republic and MUIS (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore) decided to 'bite the bullet' and addressed the issue head on. MUIS has revamped its Islamic Education Program (IEP), which emphasizes project-based pedagogy and greater use of English to balance the traditional teaching of the subject that was mostly in Malay. Another example



of this creative and innovative approach in solving problems of Islamic education was another recent initiative by MUIS to establish a *Wakf 'Ilm* (Knowledge Endowment Fund). This Fund will allow local Muslims to make any form of donation beyond the traditional land/property, to also include cash contributions to be placed under *wakf*. These will later be invested in profitable, Shari'ah-compliant ventures and products and the proceeds channelled to further improve and upgrade Islamic education, including the *madrasah*, both full-time and part-time, throughout the island.<sup>31</sup> By so doing, both the donor and Muslim community will reap the rewards in perpetuity.

Insofar as education and knowledge are concerned, the traditional Muslim attitude that since Islam is the best religion and Muslims the best of ummah, therefore Muslims should not endeavor to learn from others on the ground that they are *kuffar*, must be left to history. One is here reminded of the well-known saying, 'Go in search for knowledge, even to China'. Muslim scholars must lead the way to emphasize the message that pursuing knowledge is obligatory to all men and women and only with knowledge, together with *taqwa*, can real progress and success be achieved.

## Conclusion

More than ever before, in this phase of the globalization phenomenon, to modernize, progress and advance, peoples and countries have to manage the 'change' imperative judiciously and urgently. Insofar as ASEAN is concerned, more can be done towards embracing more consciously and fully a major catalyst for change, i.e., creativity and innovation. Obviously, the financial cost is high and so too the risk – but not to adopt this qualitative approach towards progress and modernity is not an option.

In the realm of socio-politics, governments and other elites must be prepared to adopt much-needed reforms in their nation-building agendas and processes – such as in the critical areas of governance, ideology and education. If this can be managed well, the long-term stability and sustainability of ASEAN will be more assured and this regional grouping can look forward to a more effective existence that will not only improve the lives of its citizens but can be a reference model to other regional political-economic entities the world over.

For Muslim scholars and intellectuals in ASEAN, more can be done to exercise some form of intellectual leadership in articulating and guiding member-states, especially their elites (political, religious, educational, economic, socio-cultural) to address broader and pertinent issues of growth and development. Although admittedly, the capitalist and secular bases of ASEAN states would limit their role and influence, they still have the responsibility to offer the Islamic framework and paradigm in a broad range of nation-building issues, including in socio-politics, such as governing ideology and modality of governance,

and much needed domestic reforms in areas such as education, as well as creative and innovative ideas towards making ASEAN a more united, prosperous and hence, effective regional grouping.

## End Notes

- 1 Obviously, in highlighting these Western capitals as examples, we are merely referring to the more positive features of their progress and advancement, specifically, the extent of their creativity and innovativeness in confronting change. We must also note the ills and other weaknesses that these capital cities are presently burdened with as a result of their overly liberal, secular and capitalist excesses.
- 2 The income of this top 1 percent in the United States has increased over the last thirty years from 10 percent of the national income to 23.5 percent, while the real income of the poorest 20 percent has gone down over this period. The poor are becoming poorer while the rich are getting richer by getting huge bonuses and pay rises even in the midst of a serious financial and human crisis. This is the speech by Mohammed Azmi Omar, director general of IRTI, on the occasion of the IDB Prize ceremony recently: *Arab News*, 22 April, 2012.
- 3 For this latter definition on the international dimension of sociopolitical issues, see for instance, <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080402213628AAYIfOx>.
- 4 For some useful definitions of “creativity”, see this collection: <http://www.csun.edu/~vcpsy00h/creativity/define.htm>
- 5 The above paragraph is taken from: C:\Users\AdminNUS\Desktop\Why is creativity and innovation so important in modern society - Yahoo! Answers.mht
- 6 This has been the repetitive lesson in human history - when Allah regularly replaced and replenished tribes, countries, nations with others when the former’s receptivity to creativity and innovation was not similarly implemented in their policies and practices, which acknowledges God’s Laws and guidelines.
- 7 From Bukhari and Muslim; a summary of these Hadith is adapted from <http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.217979688245644.55684.130977973612483&type=3>
- 8 One is reminded of another Hadith that says that the time will come when Muslims will grow in big numbers but will be so mercilessly helpless against others that they become like food in a big plate being devoured from all sides by others – or the Hadith about Muslims will be like bubbles in the ocean that are easily and quickly wept over by the winds.
- 9 Obviously, *ijtihad* is not for ordinary people to engage in but to the *mujtahid* and its implementation must not only adhere to Islamic guidelines and take cognizance of contexts and circumstances but should be geared towards benefitting the common good (*maslahat umum*).

- 10 These are done in Singapore; see the *Berita Harian* report entitled “Wakf Ilmu di lancar dan disambut baik”, 6 September 2012, p.1.
- 11 From their ancient animistic cultural beginnings, Malays set themselves free from their dependence on superstitions, taboos and other worldviews after the arrival of Islam, which extols them to seek help from Allah as they improve themselves with knowledge and put in the necessary effort - through creative and innovative ideas and reforms - to live successful lives in this world. (Alattas, Naguib 1972 ).
- 12 Some of these issues were taken from my recent book, *Singapore Malays* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012). This book explores all aspects of the Republic’s Malay-Muslim plight and offers alternative viewpoints and pathways to enable Malays and Muslims to have a better future in a global city-state. (<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415509633/>)
- 13 This criticism about the lack of support to the Secretariat was reiterated very recently: <http://www.bt.com.bn/news-national/2012/03/31/asean-secretariat-needs-play-more-effective-role>. I also wrote an article many years ago discussing this same theme of challenges facing ASEAN: H. Mutalib, “At thirty, ASEAN looks for challenges in the new millennium”, in *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 19, pp.74-95.
- 14 Some of these necessary reforms were highlighted in a recent book, *Achieving the ASEAN economic community 2015...* ed. S.B. Das, Singapore: ISEAS, 2012.
- 15 These are highlighted in a recent publication by the ISEAS, *Regional Outlook: Southeast Asia 2012-2013*, Singapore, 2012.
- 16 It is uncertain if the charges against the lavish lifestyle of Russia’s President Putin – including 20 residences and a palace - are true. If indeed it’s proven, his leadership legitimacy will continue to haunt him: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/28/world/europe/for-russia-president-vladimir-putin-report-says-perks-are-piling-up.html?\\_r=1&ref=world](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/28/world/europe/for-russia-president-vladimir-putin-report-says-perks-are-piling-up.html?_r=1&ref=world).
- 17 Obviously, much has been written about the concept and varieties of Democracy – as in the works of Andrain (1997), Dahl (1963, 1966), Harris (1997), Levine (1993), Rawls (1998), Sartori (1965).
- 18 Some of these issues were highlighted in a recent publication, *Regional Outlook: Southeast Asia 2012-2013*, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp.35-44.
- 19 Even a developed country such as the US is facing a big decline in the share of income of ordinary middle class since their proportion has been usurped by the rich and affluent class: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-19351183>
- 20 For instance, see Bernard Grofman and Robert Stockwell’s ‘Institutional Design in Plural Societies: Mitigating Ethnic Conflict and Fostering Stable Democracy’, *Research Paper*, Center for the Study of Democracy, available online at HTTP: <t <http://www.democ.uci.edu/democ/papers/stock.html>>.
- 21 This quote is taken from: C:\Users\AdminNUS\Desktop\Why is creativity and innovation so important in modern society - Yahoo! Answers.mht

- 22 This was highlighted by Khurshid Ahmad, chairman of the Islamic Foundation UK and the Institute of Policy Studies in Pakistan in his lecture on “Global economic crisis and the role of Islamic Economics” at the Islamic Development Bank headquarters in April 2012. Prof. Ahmad said Islamic banking and finance makes an annual growth of 10 to 15 percent when conventional banks make less than one percent and that countries that sought loans from the IMF and World bank have all not succeeded in growing their economies.
- 23 They should not make the mistake of many countries within the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), which allocated a mere 0.1% of their GDP to R&D.
- 24 Much has been written by Islamic scholars on the Islamic concept and principles of education and knowledge. See for example: Ahmad Marimba (1962), Hassan Langgulung (1979), Mohd Salleh Samad (1980), Syed Naguib al-Attas (1980).
- 25 In the Islamic worldview, there is no conscious demarkation between “Islamic knowledge” (‘fard ain’: knowledge in one’s direct relations with Allah swt such as about the Five Pillars of Islam) and ”secular knowledge” (‘fard kifaayah’: knowledge in one’s relations with humankind, such as competencies in various fields and disciplines of studies of benefit to all.
- 26 It is somewhat far-fetched to re-claim the once golden era of ‘Islamic renaissance’ period in the 11th to 15th centuries, where Muslim scholars, scientists and other jurists were the leading torchbearers and trailblazers in the world in the knowledge and learning enterprise. But Muslims in modernizing, secular societies must continue to tap the positive aspects of the Western educational experience and experiments, and also learn from Islamic scholars and institutions that have done well in non-Muslim countries.
- 27 These pedagogical characteristics have also been much written by Islamic scholars and jurists since early times: alGhazali, the four Imams (*mazhabs*), Ibn Khaldun, etc.
- 28 For many less developed Muslim societies, the modes of teaching and learning were informal, teacher-centered, and decentralized. The teaching of subjects such as *Al-Qur’an*, Arabic, *Fiqh*, *Hadith*, *Seerah* that were mostly by rote-learning and repetition of the teacher’s instructions have seen little change in many Muslim countries. So too with the tremendous authority accorded to religious teachers, many of whom still adopt corporal punishment methods.
- 29 In this regard, sadly, even the famed Al-Azhar University from which many Muslim students who aspire to community leadership graduate, should be more innovative and reformist in its curricula and pedagogy.
- 30 Obviously, there has been the regular calls for reforms. But these are not new concerns since they have been goaded in the many World conferences on Muslim Education (starting in Makkah in 1977) but also, highlighted in the earlier writings of scholars such as Ismail al-Faruqi, Syed Hossein Nasr, Fazlur Rahman, Syed Naguib al-Attas, Bennabi, Tibawi, Abu Hassan Nadwi, Khurshid Ahmad, Badran, Kamal Hassan, and Koraishy.
- 31 This was highlighted on the front page of *Berita Harian* of 6 September 2012.