

# **ABIM'S ROLE IN BUILDING BRIDGES TOWARDS HARMONY THROUGH VALUES AND PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE**

## ***Peranan Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) dalam membina Keharmonian Bangsa Malaysia melalui Nilai dan Hidup Bersama dalam Budaya Damai***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article discusses the role of Muslim Youth Movement Malaysia (ABIM) in addressing harmony through values and peaceful coexistence by active involvement and engagement with various social interfaith stakeholders in Malaysia. This article conducted to fill the gap in the previous literature related to ABIM writing contributions in addressing socio-culture issues in Malaysia. Its main objectives are as follows:

- a. To analyze factors and approaches which made ABIM's role is significant to engage with social interfaith stakeholders in Malaysia
- b. To highlight the challenges faced by ABIM in addressing harmony through values and peaceful coexistence.
- c. To examine the effects and way forward of ABIM's engagement and active involvement with various social interfaith stakeholders in Malaysia.

This study adopts the methods of textual analysis and historical research through a critical examination of the primary source materials. The major primary sources used in this study are ABIM

Annual Report, Brochures, Media Release, Press Statement, Mukhtamar Speeches and through interviews. Secondary sources were collected from library studies based on scientific materials, books, newspaper, and online data. The results prove that participation and engagement of ABIM with other interfaith group in Malaysia able to create awareness dan instill the spirit of unity among nations as well as being recognized as a stakeholder of Committee for the Promotion of Inter Religious Understanding and Harmony among Adherent (JKMPKA) under the purview of the National Unity Advisory Panel.

Keywords: Peaceful Coexistence, ABIM, Interfaith, Nation Building, Cosmopolitan

## **INTRODUCTION**

At a time when identity politics and nationalist politics are threatening to erode values of moderation and tolerance, it is more important than ever to highlight and champion the concept of peaceful coexistence. Identity politics, religious extremism, and hyper nationalism invariably exacerbate traditional and non-traditional security challenges such as xenophobic, hate speech, terrorism, forced migration, and territorial conflict.

The conviction that societies of different ideological, racial, or religious makeups can live and thrive in peace with each other underpins the concept of peaceful coexistence. In other words, peaceful coexistence assumes that friction and conflict are not unavoidable, especially if societies commit to dialogue and mutual understanding

Promoting peaceful coexistence is more than just a theoretical or conceptual exercise. A critical step would be to encourage dialogue and the establishment of common ground between societies from various backgrounds. Since the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) began his call to Islam in Makkah and unfolded one of the greatest political documents in human history, the Sahifah Madinah or the Constitution of Medina, peaceful coexistence and harmonious cohesion with other religious communities have been

well documented in Islamic history (622 AD). As the first social contract document in Muslim history (Imarah, 2005), the treatise embraced 20 major principles such as unity, diversity, conduct, fighting injustice, seeking or striving for peace, religious freedom, and the rule of law.

The source of the Surah Al Hujurat “Human beings, We created you all from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Verily the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most God-fearing of you. Surely Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.(49:13).

Islam gives equal rights to all, rich and poor, noble and ignoble and there is no superiority of anyone over anybody else in Islam , except in terms of Taqwa. And this is the basis of Islamic society.

Siddiq Fadzil (2015), mentioned that a culture that adheres to the guiding principles of "plurality within the framework of unity" will not accept the method of a melting pot in which cultural identity is dissolved or diluted. The proper way is not to force all races to blend their cultural identities into something that is no longer authentic or meaningful. "Plurality within the framework of unity" means allowing diversity to exist while avoiding conflict, clashes, and disunity.

This necessitates a strong and resilient framework. This framework of unity in Malaysia can take the form of loyalty to the King, Rukun Negara – National Pillars, the national language, the national anthem Negaraku, our flag, the Jalur Gemilang, the National Educational Philosophy, and other mutually agreed upon covenants that express our national aspirations. The Malay world is no stranger to cultural diversity. The civilization of this region is made up of the various civilizations of the many islands. To manage such cultural diversity, our forefathers had their own unique wisdom, encapsulated in the slogan *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* from Indoneisa which means unity in diversity.

Later Siddiq Fadzil (2016), in his book entitled *Pembinaan Bangsa: Kepelbagaian Dalam Bingkai Kesatuan*, he proposed the

formulation of a new political fiqh (jurisprudence or thought) and give a fresh and practical interpretation to the concept of peaceful coexistence as follows:

- All Malaysians are recognized as brothers/sisters of “full citizenship”;
- The term “*ummah*” (society) includes a “Malaysian ummah” and is not limited to a “Muslim ummah”; and
- The term “*ukhuwah*” (brotherhood) includes brotherhood in citizenship and humanity and is not limited to Islamic brotherhood.

He also mentioned the concept of “*Lita’arafu*” emphasizes that getting to know each other is the best way to avoid misunderstandings and respect sensitivities. This is important to ensure that the people truly have strength in unity

One of the most important things ABIM has done is to represent the silent majority voice calling for religious tolerance and racial harmony. The emergence of recent vocally loud extremist groups that base their orientation on aggressive right-left wing demands and tactics necessitates ABIM's opinions and expressions to portray the aspirations of a relatively large pool of middle-class society while providing applied alternatives, as it has done previously throughout its history. This is, in many ways, proper conduct that reassures non-Muslims who are often confused and misled, as well as winning support from progressive, intellectual Muslims through consensus building and deeper understanding to precisely contextualize problems.

Malaysia's unique nature is that many races rely on each other to build a harmonious ecology that strives towards greater national successes. ABIM actively moves forward by having pleasing cooperation with various groups on the interfaith platform, such as the Friendship Group of Inter-Religious Services (FGIS) establish in 2001 and Malaysia Youth Council (MBM) establish in 1948 in an attempt to reduce the widening gap created by political

agenda settings and also the 'silo mentality' established through constant implementation of distorted fear and often ignorant prejudices. Here, ABIM and its entire affiliations clearly recognize the situation of a multi-ethnic Malaysia while maintaining its appreciation for its historical description, participating distinctively in the journey endured with its own approaches and thus earning high esteem from its contemporaries.

## **ABIM'S ROLE AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION (PAST AND PRESENT)**

A country with a multicultural society cannot be separated from religious differences. In this regard, Malaysia is well known as a country with a multicultural society comprised of various races, religions, and customs. Taking into account factors of tolerance and understanding among races over the years, Malaysia would find itself performing reasonably well in comparison to other countries in terms of peace and social stability.

Since its establishment in 1971, Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) has been regarded as one of the most prominent and matured Islamic Youth Movements in Malaysia, acting as an agency to play that specific role in conveying an understanding of Islam and a message of peace to its own sphere of Muslim audiences as well as to other faiths practises in Malaysia.

ABIM was considered to be the most influential and significant national Muslim Youth organization in the 1970s, as claimed by Osman Bakar in "Agree to Differ" published by UNESCO 2015. According to him, ABIM had successfully embedded its organizational structure and members within the five key elements that shaped itself. These were Inclusive, pioneering, intellectually oriented, taking a middle position, and bringing a hybrid of Eastern and Western ideologies and worldviews into a local context. As a result, the presence of ABIM as an Islamic NGO in the Malaysian context was extremely timely, and it is hoped that it will change Malay Muslims' understanding and practices toward Shariah law in the hope of a better life.

*“Islam regards discrimination as a criminal act because it is contradictory to the (Islamic) call to unite different communities and to encourage tolerance, friendship and mutual respect among all human beings.”*

This quote was taken from 8<sup>th</sup> ABIM’s Presidential address in 1978 by Anwar Ibrahim entitled “Islam as a Solution to a Multi-Racial Society”. Prior to this speech, many stakeholders i.e., political leaders, CSO, International actors actively engaged with ABIM. Ghazali Basri and Abdul Halim Ismail in “Dialogue to Peaceful Coexistence”, had mentioned that ABIM’s role started since 1980s on the theme “Partners of People of Other Faiths’ organized by The Young Men Christian Association (YMCA) in which ABIM was sent representatives to the seminar.

This shows that ABIM’s role in building bridges towards harmony through values and peaceful co-existence by active participation in various dialogue, seminar and activities continue until today. As a result of Malaysia’s character as a precarious pluralistic society, therefore, ABIM’s role in engaging with various interfaith stakeholders is relatively strategic in order to build a just society based on ethical moral values.

There are four approaches that bring ABIM’s role towards harmony which are:

- 1) Discourse and Advocacy
- 2) Sports, Culture and Art Performances
- 3) Volunteerism
- 4) Courtesy Visit

Apart from these approaches, there are eight platforms of ABIM’s involvement in program and activities engaging with various formal and informal interfaith stakeholders.

**Figure 1: Eight platforms ABIM’S involvement in engaging with various formal and informal interfaith stakeholders.**



Figure 1 shows eight platforms ABIM’s involvement in engaging with various formal and informal interfaith stakeholders.

The first one is **Malaysian Youth Council (MBM)**. MBM is the national umbrella body of youth organisations in Malaysia. The council was established on July 23, 1948. It has three million members in 40 affiliates. Among joint agencies are Regular Youth Organizations, Uniformed Youth Organizations, Religious Youth Organizations, Student Youth Organizations, State Youth Councils and ABIM as one of the Religious based Youth Organizations which involve in development and self- development youth in Malaysia.

The current President of Malaysian Youth Council (MBM), Mr Jufitri Joha, was a former Vice President of ABIM incharge on Interfaith and International Affairs. Among the programs and activities organized by ABIM in collaboration with MBM was Round Table Discussion: Role of Youth in Interfaith Understanding in 2016. The objective of this event is to create an atmosphere of harmonius living among the multi-religious community particularly among youth leaders in Malaysia.

Second, is **Friendship Group of Interfaith Services (FGIS)**. This is an informal gathering of major religious groups representing Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism for the purpose of promoting interracial and interfaith harmony through community services. It is presently chaired by Prof Dr Suresh Govind. The Participating Religious Groups are Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), Buddhist Maha Vihara, Council of Churches of Malaysia, Malaysia Hindu Sangam, Malaysian Gurdwaras Council. For about 21 years of establishment, FGIS members share a strong sense of camaraderie, used to organise Divine Wind programme at the event themed “Blowing the wind of love and unity” wherby the participants visits to houses of worship like mosques, temples and churches to enable its members to get a better understanding of other religions. Malaysia's challenges and its vibrant diversity were harmoniously presented in a stage production titled Bridges and Walls in 2015. Bringing together a song sequence played using traditional instruments such as er hu, harmonium, rebana and dhool, and a drama which speaks of problems Malaysians face like water supply disruption, dengue, brain drain and migration, the show was well-received by the multi-cultural audience of young and old. The one-hour drama, which included elements of empathy and humour, was presented by the FGIS members. In additon, together with National Unity and Integration Department (JPNIN) FGIS organized many Inter-Cultural Youth Leadership Training (IYLC) fort he singular aim of promoting nation building through national unity in Malaysia.

Therefore, interfaith groups should gather regularly instead of meeting only when there is an incident. During Ramadan, for instance, some of the non-Muslim members would participate in a



breaking of fast event in a mosque to see for themselves what it was like. In this group, ABIM was involved as Muslim Representative to give clear overview and explanation about misconceptions about Islam. The FGIS believes that “learning and engaging” among the essential way to get the leaders to function as a unified team that support Malaysia’s ideal for national unity.

Next is, ***Jawatankuasa Mempromosikan Persefahaman dan Keharmonian Antara Penganut Agama (JKMPKA)***, this committee is under Department of National Unity and Integration (JPNIN), committee of the Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia. The council members come from various group of people, consisting Religious Leaders, NGO leaders, Academicians, Youth leaders, and also Sabah, Sarawak representatives. In order to discuss and identify ways to integrate Malaysian multiracial and multireligious people, this steering group was formed to proposes solutions to issues that may raise disputes among religious adherents: Religious conversion, Child care rights, Claiming Rights of the deceased provision for houses of worship, humiliation against religions, religious propagation and use of words of religion or any new issues that being raised.

Fourth, is **Islamic Outreach ABIM Centre (IOAC)**. ABIM works closely with other interfaith community on matters of shared concern, and gives, receives moral support and practical assistance. Islamic Outreach ABIM, one of its agencies offers services to non Muslim and new reverts the oppurtunities to learn about the fundamental and practical aspects of Islam. ABIM has long been aware of the importance in the propagation of Islamic knowledge and understanding among the non-Muslims communities, which brought about the strengthening and enhancing of its efforts towards educating and mobilizing the new converts whose numbers are steadily increasing year by year. Among IOA’s signature program is Mosque Tour Guide, which specializes in training tourists guide to explain the Islamic essence reflected in country’s major mosque such as Masjid Negara, Masjid Putra, Putrajaya and Masjid Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin, Putrajya. Thus, IOA focuses on transparency; differences of opinion are encouraged in an endavor to seek the truth, They learn

through intellectual discourse, talks, and public presentations in addition to providing reading materials. This efforts is to encourage the thought and reflection on issues of life and man's position, status, role and function on earth for existing and converting Muslim. IOA believes there is no compulsion in Islam thus upholding the fact that learning and acquiring knowledge and understanding of Islam by non-Muslim do not necessarily lead to conversion to Islam. By presenting our faith through wisdom and proper conduct, they strongly believe of leading others towards better understanding of Islam.

Fifth, is **Global Peace Mission (GPM) Malaysia**. Global Peace Mission (GPM) Malaysia is a Trust Foundation which is incorporated under the Trustee Act (Incorporation) 1952, Legal Affairs Division (BHEUU), Prime Minister Office (PMO) of Malaysia. It was established on 26th September 2001 as a movement protesting the declaration of war by the United States and its allies against Afghanistan after the events of 11th September 2001. When Afghanistan was invaded in early October of the same year, GPM had mobilized a humanitarian and medical aid mission to help the victims of war. Since then, aside from actively providing emergency assistance, GPM has been providing other humanitarian aid not only to Afghanistan but to nearly 30 countries in need worldwide. GPM has been actively involved in promoting the importance of fostering and maintaining universal peace through awareness programs and information for the community as well as raising funds to assist victims of war and natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, famine and tsunami. As a humanitarian wing of ABIM, GPM and other related agencies representing religious communities are using dialogue to support the international development community in humanitarian aid efforts by addressing social inequalities and offering services such as refugee relief, job and housing provision and clean water, sanitation, post disaster event. For example humanitarian assistance in Kelantan (flood) and round table discussion on "Humanitarian Principles: Dialogue with faith based NGOs. This event held on 15 November 2018 together with International Committee of Red Crescent (ICRC). Faith based

organisations are important partners for humanitarian organisation and often are key players in promoting humanitarian values to their communities. The aim of the dialogue is to bring the various organisations together to explore and discuss humanitarian values from the various traditions, in a closed door dialogue. To date GPM establish and among the pioneer of Malaysia For Syria (2012), Malaysia For Uyghur (2019) and MyAqsa Defenders (2021) and Malaysia For Palestine (2021) to advocate and give awareness to the Malaysian and to seek partnership and engagement from all stakeholders.

Sixth, **Projek Yayasan Rakyat (POWR)**. Projek Yayasan Rakyat is a sosial movement and youth based platform that uphold the principle of democracy, decentralization and unity among Malaysian. This group bring the idea of Bangsa Malaysia which is a concept that can provide those principles and emphasizes on similarities rather than differences, and what brings people together rather than what drives people apart.

In the words of ABIM President Faisal Aziz, *“The unifying values of Bangsa Malaysia should include a united front against poverty, corruption, and conflict, as well as a shared resolve to protect and raise the dignity of all Malaysians. These shared values are the bases of the middle road that will keep our nation from falling into either the pitfalls of assimilation on one hand, or segregation and division on the other.”*

Therefore, by this engagement, ABIM can actively participate in building harmony through spreading values and peaceful co-existence. Since then, Projek Wawasan Rakyat (POWR) launched the #FrontlinersFirst project to raise funds to help pay for childcare requirements for Ministry of Health (MOH) staff amid the Covid-19 shutdown and livestream Derma Kilat Rakyat (2021) that aims to raise funds for pandemic relief.

Seventh, is **MY SOLIDARITY GROUP**. This group was later named after the successful inter-faith platform to response the urgent calls for help from Public Hospitals and Healthcare professionals for the supply of varied medical equipment to cope with the high

number of critical Covid19 patients. Another initiative worthy of highlighting is the Malaysia Solidarity Covid-19 Fund spearheaded by Tzu Chi Foundation Malaysia and jointly supported and endorsed by 20 multi-ethnic and multi-faith organizations, including ABIM. It was started in mid-June 2021 and it was closed on 18th September 2021 with a Concert entitled Raising Hope.

Meanwhile, as part of its bid to build religious harmony and national unity, ABIM featured the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso in an online forum on Islam and Buddhism with the theme "Compassion and Mercy as the Common Values Between Islam and Buddhism" in September 2020. This event is jointly organised with the Tibetan Buddhist Culture Centre Malaysia.

Last but not least, **Malaysian Interfaith Climate Change Network (MICCN)**. ABIM engage with this group together with other coalition of religious-based NGOs, civil society organisations, express their full commitment to defend climate justice and the future of the earth from destruction and pollution that have resulted in the current climate emergency. One of the group objectives is to continuously strive spread a clear understanding to all respective religious communities on the dire importance of conserving the environment as one of God's greatest creations and blessings.

MICCN are always mindful of the ongoing climate crisis and problems of environmental degradation around the world. This situation requires concrete actions by all parties that take the initiative to care for the environment. By this platform, MICCN launched "Destroying the Earth is Against My Religion" campaign. This campaign aims to inculcate the importance of environmental care among religious communities. As part of this campaign, ABIM calls upon the authorities in Malaysia such as the religious department and other accredited international bodies to include environmental-friendly criteria as prerequisites for halal certification.

## **CHALLENGES**

There are challenges faced by ABIM as a one of interfaith actor in bringing harmony through peace and co-existence. Perhaps the main challenge that must be faced is the exclusive attitude which is common in religious life. Regardless of what religion a person believes, such attitude exists with different intensity. It has been illustrated about the significance of this exclusivity and its justification, so to deny it altogether is impossible. What is advocated is the ability of the person to control this exclusiveness in the form of provocations and in a contrary, to show respect on the differences in belief held by friends of other religious.

Other challenges faced by ABIM is to get as many comparative religions graduates involved, engaging and actively participating in programs and activities with the interfaith stakeholders. Still, there is gap from graduates to activist and at the same time the need to create more actors or spokesperson in dealing and discussing issues pertaining interfaith theme is increasing from time to time.

Since ABIM's involvement in representing Muslims in a variety of activities, questions about "who is the true authority to represent Islam" have arisen. If there is no authority involved in this context, they may have misconceptions and misunderstandings about any issue related to interfaith discussions. Ironically, when ABIM participates in and engages in interfaith activities, we are frequently labelled as pluralism and liberalism.

Based on ABIM's experience engaging and participating in various interfaith programmes and activities over the past 50 years, there is a need to engage with media for programme coverage to highlight the positive impact and outcome of the events, rather than the media focusing on the negative news or controversies made by the public.

Another major challenge that ABIM faces is promoting a new understanding and discourse on Fiqh (theory and practise), Fiqh Taayush (peaceful coexistence), and Fiqh Al Muwatanah (Fiqh of Citizenship) to the general public and religious leaders.

It is therefore timely for local Muslim scholars to produce popular writings on the related subject, thereby replacing the traditional

demarcation between Muslims and non-Muslims with a new and progressive one.

## **WAY FORWARD FOR BANGSA MALAYSIA**

Working in a variety of mixed groups provided activists with numerous opportunities to engage in genuine grass-roots dialogue and share their experiences and perspectives, which was one of the benefits of engaging with different religious groups. Furthermore, ABIM activists learned a great deal about other religions, including misconceptions and Islamophobia from various perspectives, discrimination, prejudices, and stereotypes, identity, and inter-religious dialogue.

Muhammad Faisal, speaking at ABIM's 49th Annual General Assembly on December 26, 2020, expressed regret that Bangsa Malaysia has been misinterpreted through political lenses as either "a tool of elite Malays to dilute the identity of other races" or a "Malaysian Malaysia" call to weaken "the majority race's identity."

Using the proper lens, he claims, one can detect "an inclusive, unifying factor" in the "national and civic identity" proposed by Bangsa Malaysia. Then, in Amartya Sen's formulation, Bangsa Malaysia can be accepted as one of "multiple competing identities," a moderate one that keeps ethno-religious identity free of extremism. A culturally diverse nation can thus take the "middle road," avoiding ethnic assimilation or segregation.

When Muhammad Faisal speaks of creating "an integrated identity, informed and inspired by the shared values and qualities of all ethnicities and cultures," he is treading on familiar ground. He does, however, take a bold step forward by suggesting that the "unifying values of Bangsa Malaysia" should inspire a united front to combat poverty, corruption, and conflict.

Muhammad Faisal imaginatively preserves a multicultural worldview that is not alien to Malaysia's richly diverse culture by linking that vision to a "cosmopolitan ABIM. A cosmopolitan worldview and spirit are critical to this reinterpretation of Bangsa

Malaysia. When referring to the cosmopolitan roots of Islamic civilization, which had learned and benefited from Indian mathematics and astronomy, Greek logic, and Persian jurisprudence, the ABIM President draws on ABIM's long multicultural tradition. He recalls Southeast Asia's "Muslim cosmopolitanism," which had an inherent respect for "universal values embedded within one's own customs and tradition." For this, he looks to Anwar Ibrahim, the former President of the ABIM 40 years ago. Anwar emphasized in *The Asian Renaissance* the unique, creative, and cosmopolitan manner in which Islam historically arrived in Southeast Asia without causing resentment and hostility.

## **CONCLUSION**

While the existing interfaith efforts undertaken by the university, government, NGOs and the civil society like ABIM are commendable efforts, there are still a lot more to be done to further entrench the culture of dialogue and interfaith engagement by addressing harmony through values and peaceful coexistence. It is a big help to perceive their presence as the chances, as they were also a big contributor to the country and driving together towards the advancements of the nation. Distinct features of differences among the main religions and ethnics would lead to a severe conflict to the society if no room provided to settle down the problems exist. Another note, rather than focusing exclusively on theological similarities and differences, attention must be given to increasing mutual awareness, understanding, and respect. The goal is to correct stereotypes and misinformation and to find ways to work together to solve problems of mutual concern whether in social, political, economic, and environmental issues.

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