#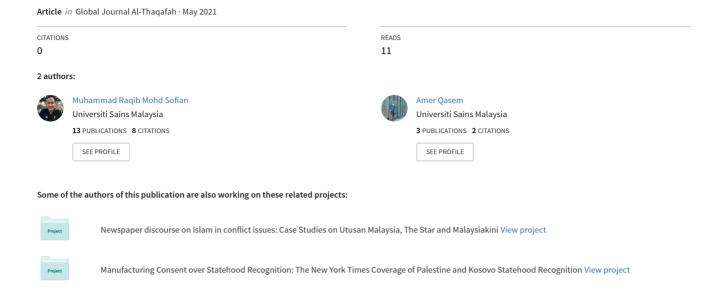 Counter-Hegemonic Discourse on Islam in Malaysia: A Case Study of Malaysiakini's Coverage Regarding the Issue of Halal Certification by Jakim

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Counter-Hegemonic Discourse on Islam in Malaysia:
A Case Study of Malaysiakini's Coverage Regarding
the Issue of Halal Certification by Jakim

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Abstract

News reports on Islam have gained more attention in recent times because they are often associated with conflicts, which have led to a negative public perception of the religion. In the context of Malaysia, Islam is often associated with conflicts arising from political factors or actions taken by religious authorities against any organisation or individual that provokes public discussion. Islam is also said to have been used as a hegemonic tool by the government to maintain the existing status quo and control public perception. However, the discourse on issues involving Islam has also become more open after the emergence of digital news portals that enable hegemonic counter arguments to be discussed widely among members in the mentioned medium. This study focuses on the discourse by a digital news portal, Malaysiakini, involving the application of halal certificate by Aunty Anne's, which was rejected by Jakim. Using the critical discourse analysis and approaches introduced by van Dijk (2006), the findings showed that Malaysiakini has provided fair and equitable coverage of the case study, which is thoroughly discussed in this article. Nonetheless, Malaysiakini equally appears to be bold in criticising and questioning the actions taken by Jakim and links it with Islamisation in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Islam, Hegemony, Ideology, Counter-Hegemony, Media and Religion*

Introduction

Religious news reporting, especially on Islam, is gaining traction in the media following recent conflicting issues that are affecting the political, economic, and social environments. In the context of Malaysia, Islam is often used as a hegemonic tool by the ruling government to continue to dominate the public by making religion their political capital to gain power and maintain the status quo (Neo, 2006; Aini Maznina & Nerawi Sedu, 2015; Wan Norshira, 2019).

Islam has become increasingly prominent in the public sphere of Malaysia (Neo, 2006: 95). Islamic discourse is gradually becoming salient due to the clashes between the previous government, Barisan Nasional under the leadership of UMNO (the United Malays National Organization), and PAS (Parti Se-Islam Malaysia) that champions Islam (Neo, 2006; Osman, 2013; Ahmad Fauzi, 2018). UMNO responded by introducing Islamic policies and rules that "go against" the version of the Islamic struggle championed by PAS for the purpose of maintaining the support of the Malays and by highlighting the role of UMNO as a Malay fighter (Neo, 2006; Osman, 2013; Ahmad Fauzi, 2018). Hence, the Islamisation process is seen as nothing more than UMNO's efforts to curb the influence of PAS among Malay Muslim communities in Malaysia (ibid). As a result of the rivalry regarding 'who is more Islamic' between UMNO and PAS, various polemics and religious policies have been highlighted without considering the views and reactions of non-Muslim societies in Malaysia (Neo, 2006; Zaki, 2010; Osman, 2013; Rashaad, 2016).

This rivalry has also caused reports on Islam to gain the attention of the Malaysian press and these types of news are often influenced by the ownership of that media organisation. News media in particular is used by the government as a hegemonic tool to control the mind of the citizens. One thing that needs to be understood is that the media are not operating in a vacuum and they are viewed as a medium to structure the process of creating meaning in a society. Apart from making a profit, government-controlled media have a certain ideology that they need to subtly delineate to the masses to maintain the existing order established by the government (Juliana & Mahyuddin, 2009).

However, when the media and the Islamic religion have been manipulated for a long period of time to maintain the status quo of the ruling class, a hegemonic crisis can occur as the public increasingly rejects forms of leadership that are deemed irrelevant in the local socio-political leadership discourse (Noor Sulastry & Nor Azila, 2013). Counter-hegemonic actions are reflected in the actions of the masses that have grown emboldened to publicly voice their opinions and this scenario has expanded with the emergence of online news portals.

In this age of the internet, many governments across Asia are losing their tight control over the media (Zaharom & Wang, 2004). Similarly in Malaysia, the previous ruling party had a tight hold on the mainstream media (Zaharom & Wang, 2004, Mohd Faizal, 2016). This reign is slowly weakened with the widespread use of the Internet, which is used by individuals and organisations to change the current political environment (Mohd Faizal, 2016). By going against the pro-government stand of the mainstream media, Malaysiakini has become an unconventional media channel. Their brazen reporting practice has opened more chances for the opposing parties to voice their political views. Moreover, Malaysiakini and other alternative news portals are consolidating a pro-democracy atmosphere and secular trend through their reporting of sensitive racial and religious issues, which are in contrast with the mainstream media (Pui, 2014; Mohd Faizal, 2016).

Due to this nature of reporting, some quarters of the public mostly composed of Malay Muslims have been accusing Malaysiakini as being anti-Islam through the promotion of liberalism in its reporting on Islamic issues in Malaysia. For example, Malaysian mainstream newspapers have criticised Malaysiakini over their provocation of racial and religious hatred in an open discussion that was conducted during a Friday prayer sermon at a mosque (Guan, 2005). Malaysiakini was also labelled as an enemy of Islam by the Mufti of Perlis, Datuk Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin (Islam under attack? Stop adding oil to Muslim rage, Zaid tells leaders, 2016). In addition, several allegations were made regarding how Malaysiakini has been manipulating facts with fluctuating stances against the government, apart from provoking Islamophobia among the public (Malaysiakini and Malaysian Insider Are Evoking Islamophobia, 2016).

When Jakim rejected Auntie Anne's application for halal certification for their products, articles published by Malaysiakini were deemed as instigating anti-Islamic notions. In their web portal, the *Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia* (ISMA, or Malaysian Muslim Solidarity), a non-Government Organization that actively conducts Islamic propagation activities with the Malay communities and Muslims in Malaysia, claimed that Malaysiakini's articles compared the halal status of local food with several names of foreign food that they claim are confusing to Muslims (Athirah, 2016). These articles have the effect of twisting the statements released by Jakim. Apart from that, Malaysiakini was accused of manipulating Islamic issues and attracting the hatred of their readers against Islamic law, institution, and several popular Islamic figures in Malaysia (ibid).

Thus, based on the argument that a newspaper discourse involving Islam is a product of a non-vacuum culture, which is full of specific ideologies that are subtly used to refine certain ideas, this study sought to demonstrate how the discourse on Jakim's halal issue was reported by Malaysiakini, with the intention of going against the current social order. Wang (2015: 12) reported that the concept of hegemony and its application can increase the public's awareness that social reality does not exist in a vacuum, but it is gradually formed. Thus, such practice must be exposed.

It is imperative to study reporting on Islam because negative/positive reporting can create

good or bad perceptions among news readers. In the context of Malaysia, public perspective, especially among the non-Muslim community, on Islam is influenced by articles and newspaper reports, either from the international or local media (Mohd Azhar et al., 2013). The Malaysian media has played their role in strengthening the bad perceptions of Islam among the non-Muslim community, in addition to the bad portrayals by the international media.

Methodology

As part of the Critical Discourse Analysis in this study, van Dijk's (2006) ideological square and lexicalisation approaches were employed to analyse the nature of news coverage. This study has analysed newspaper reports to better understand the practice of reporting controversial religious issues. This study has also analysed news narratives to determine how the alternative media in this country delivered the selected case study.

Ideologies are an integral part of socio-cognitive structures that can be manipulated through daily discourse within a society. According to van Dijk (2006), ideologies can be used to identify a group or individuals that believe in them, which is how the polarisation of political in-group and out-group occurs. This phenomenon has four moves, namely, to emphasise our good things, to emphasise their bad things, to deemphasise our bad things, and to deemphasise their good things (ibid).

According to Shojaei et al. (2013), ideological polarisation can be developed through several forms of discourse, for example, through lexical choices that have both positive and negative assessments. During a discourse, binary oppositions are established based on lexical items to represent in-group ("us") and out-group ("them" or "other") either as being positive or negative, respectively. This method is known as lexicalisation, which is part of the ideological square analysis.

The units of analysis for this study included regular news, editorials, columns, public opinions, and letters from readers. The present study also utilised a census sample method to examine all units of analysis. Many scholars agree that the census sample method is very useful to be applied on a particular event or

series of events (Yang & Md Sidin, 2012).

Results and Discussion

In total, Malaysiakini has published 12 articles on this issue. The findings showed that the earliest article published by Malaysiakini (Exec: Auntie Anne's halal application rejected over 'Pretzel Dog') only explained that the application for a halal certificate by Aunty Anne's Food was rejected by Jakim without further explanation from Jakim. This article failed to provide the reasons why this application was rejected and appeared to paint Jakim in a bad way for refusing to accept the halal certificate application.

Table 1: Malaysiakini's News Headlines

1.	Exec: Auntie Anne's halal application rejected over 'Pretzel Dog'
2.	Jakim wants Auntie Anne's 'dog' changed to 'sausage'
3.	A 'Pretzel Dog' by any other name is still...
4.	Eight traditional Malay kuih that should not get halal certification
5.	Hot dog hullabaloo - getting to the meat of halal certification
6.	Jakim and dietary laws
7.	Jamil Khir: No halal cert doesn't mean food is haram, but...
8.	Khairy, do you want to know why Islamophobia happens?
9.	Malaysia, the land of absurdity
10.	No ban, minister puts a muzzle on hot dog furore
11.	Umno, PAS leaders bite into hot dog saga, reject need for name change
12.	My pick for top news story and newsmaker of the year

The following quotes are as written in the article:

'Pretzel Dog', a sausage wrapped in a pretzel, is ONE of the reasons why popular pretzel chain Auntie Anne's was not granted halal certification by the Department of Islamic Development (Jakim).

Auntie Anne's quality assurance cum halal executive, Farhatul Kamilah Mohamed Sazali, said the company has proposed a new name and is awaiting feedback from Jakim.

Section 3.7.4 of the Malaysian halal food guidelines states: "Halal food and halal artificial flavour shall not be named or synonymously named after non-halal products, such as ham, bak kut teh, bacon, beer, rum, and others that might create confusion."

"Once we have Jakim's decision, we will change our menu boards before making a fresh application (for halal status)," she wrote on Facebook.

She said Jakim also instructed Auntie Anne's to apply for certification for its central kitchen and to make separate applications for outlets according to zones to simplify the auditing process. (Exec: Auntie Anne's halal application rejected over 'Pretzel Dog', 2016).

Jakim did offer their reason for making this decision the day after the article was published. Their representatives explained that Auntie Anne's need to meet several requirements for halal certification. They also added that the name "dog" should be changed to "sausage" because there are specific provisions in the regulation for similar cases. The following excerpts outline Jakim's reasons for rejecting the halal certification application by Auntie Anne's:

Pretzel store franchise Auntie Anne's has been asked by the Department of Islamic Development (Jakim) to change the name of one of its menu items from 'pretzel dog' to 'pretzel sausage'.

Jakim's Halal Division director, Sirajuddin Suhaimee, said this is because the department's assessment panel cannot approve the original name of the menu item as it refers to dogs.

The company submitted its application for halal certification before, but it could not be processed due to several technical issues, such as supporting documents for the ingredients.

"However, after several improvements were done, the status of Auntie Anne's food products is in the process of being certified halal and its central kitchen has entered the halal auditing phase," Jakim said in the statement (Anne Muhammad, 2016).

Meanwhile, Malaysiakini appeared to be bold in criticising Jakim's actions for rejecting the application. Malaysiakini dared to question the Malay supremacy and Islamisation approaches that are allegedly imposed on the non-Muslim community. According to Malaysiakini's coverage, these actions were deemed unreasonable and triggering Islamophobia to non-Muslims in Malaysia. On top of that, these actions are purported as the result of protecting the "ketuanan Melayu" (Malay supremacy), which is further classified as attempts to impose Islamic regulations on the daily life of non-Muslims in Malaysia.

The rejected application was also linked to the actions of religious authorities that have previously prohibited the non-Muslim community from using certain words that were said would be confusing to Muslims. It is clear in the context of the ideological square that Jakim's actions are painted as negative actions and are classified in the "them" category. The following excerpts were taken from related articles that contain condemnation and opposition of Jakim's decision:

In the case of Auntie Anne's, I can never imagine how anyone can be that much of an ignoramus to even suggest that names like 'hot dog' or 'Pretzel Dog' have to be changed to some other names so that Muslims will not be confused, or before Jakim issued the halal certification.

In fact, there is more to this. Quoting from S Thayaparan's article, "In Selangor, the Selangor Non-Islamic Religions (Control of Propagation Among Muslims) Enactment 1988 passed by the then-BN state government prohibits non-Muslims in Selangor from using 35 Arabic words and phrases used in Islam, including 'Allah'."

I have mentioned in an earlier article that one of the words, 'Nabi' came from the Hebrew word, Nevi'im (plural for the word, Navi) which is, in fact, the root word for the English translation for 'prophet'. To therefore forbid non-Muslims from using the word 'Nabi' and 35 other Arabic words, including 'Allah', simply makes no sense at all, even to some well-known Muslim scholars.

This, Khairy, is unique in Malaysia because of this problem called 'ketuanan Melayu' (Malay supremacy) (Stephen Ng, 2016).

In addition, P. Ramakrishnan, the former president of Aliran, the acronym for Aliran Kesedaran Negara (or the National Consciousness Movement), "a multi-ethnic reform movement dedicated to justice, freedom, and solidarity," has consistently criticised the related actions taken by Jakim by arguing in an article that they should contextualise their decision rather than narrowly following the limited procedures. The author is also seen as "ridiculing" Jakim by insinuating that Jakim is "narrow-minded" and always focusing on trivial issues. The author also questioned the fact that Jakim had never oppose the country's tax revenues from businesses deemed haram in Islam, thus, Jakim should have looked at this issue from a broader context.

..... It is ludicrous to suggest that the name 'pretzel dog' be changed to 'pretzel sausage'.

.What difference does it make? It is still the same stuff; the same ingredients are used to make it; it is made in the same manner.

Has Jakim heard the saying, "A rose by any other name still smells just as sweet?" What do they hope to achieve by being absurd?

Must we forego expressions like 'dog in the manger', 'dog eat dog', 'going to the dogs', 'let sleeping dogs lie', 'top dog', and 'underdog' just because Jakim cannot stand the name 'dog'?

We get a lot of money from non-halal businesses. High taxes on liquor mean more income. We receive taxes from gambling saloons, from 4-D operators, from Toto that Jakim must view as haram money. Doesn't this haram money contribute to the salaries of working people? Isn't this money used for development? Will Jakim oppose this income for the government?

Jakim needs to look at larger issues concerning justice, fairness, honesty and other enduring social values in the right perspective instead of picking on petty issues. Stop making a mountain out of a molehill! (Ramakhrishnan, 2016).

Another article was written by Thayaparan, who marked the issue as the most interesting issue throughout 2016. In this case, he linked Jakim's decision with the current political situation, as well as the enforcement of Islam that took place in Malaysia and its impact on non-Muslims. Once again, Jakim was associated with negative implications. Words like "embarrassing", "declare war", and "divide us as a nation" show the negative connotations the author wrote about Jakim. The following quotes were extracted from his article:

Doggone - literally - but this was embarrassing. This was the year that the Department of Islamic Development (Jakim) decided to declare war on Auntie Anne's hot dog. This is why the humble hot dog is my choice as the newsmaker of the year. In a year where there is a host of personalities to choose from, I choose this particular fast food as my top newsmaker because in many ways, it describes the deep doggie doo we are in.

...this goes further than just a quirky religious anecdote. The boundaries are constantly tested, and provocations are subtle, but the intent is to

further divide us as a nation and people. When some obscure religious body mooted the idea of specific labels for "Muslim-produced goods", this sparked off a turf war with Jakim.

With each corruption scandal and a strongman whose leadership is in peril, covert Islamic extremists choose to flex their muscles and provoke confrontations between the diminishing secular forces in this country and a Muslim polity that seems cowed by these so-called religious guardians.

People who take exception to these provocations are labelled anti-Muslim or suffering from Islamophobia, but the reality is that our public spaces, not to mention commercial spaces, are constantly under attack by forces, which are anathema to democracy and rule of law.

What we are left with are religious bodies that find succour in the UMNO state, creating mischief while the secular forces in this country are paralysed or are indifferent because it is politically expedient to do so.

There was a time when Islam did not intrude into the lives of Malaysians and I am willing to bet that during those times, although we may have had our problems, we thought of ourselves as Malaysians as opposed to what a little box on official documents said we were.

These days, the state sometimes chooses not to act against Muslims who transgress state laws. Certain words are forbidden to non-Muslims. Outsourced thugs are common place and operate with impunity in an environment where anyone who does not support the UMNO political party are traitors to the nation (Thayaparan, 2016).

Despite being condemned by several parties for their reports on Jakim, Malaysiakini did publish an article by Rehan Ahmad, who defended Jakim's decision. As a research fellow at the Malaysian Institute of Islamic Strategic Studies (IKSIM), the author presented several justifications based on the Islamic belief. Several quotes from the author are presented as follows:

Recently the Islamic Development Department of Malaysia (Jakim) was ridiculed all the way to Europe and America because they rejected an

application for halal certification by Auntie Anne's, and the history books got a new syllabus. Chaos ensued, even the Americans did not get so much bad press after dropping two atomic bombs.

Many lost their ability to be fair and veracious. Some were hellbent on condemning Jakim for not allowing names, such as 'bacon', 'dog', 'beer', etc. For your information, Jakim's certification is sought after worldwide due the high standards practiced. I would like to share my opinion in order to clarify the issue.

I do not see a reason for the malice associated with Jakim. Many condemned the poor department of being inept and incapable of reason, hence the effort to share a Muslim's experience so that the rest may understand. Sometime ago, new food products were introduced that bore names like bacon, ham, etc.

In an effort to understand the ingredients of this alien menu, help was sought. The infamous 'dictionary' did not help much either. Bacon is defined as, 'cured meat from the back or sides of a pig'. We also have ham, which means 'salted or smoked meat from the upper part of a pig's leg'. This actually led to more questions than answers, partly because of the nature of the food.

Many of these products were introduced by multinational corporations. Some of the names were unfamiliar to the locals. Bacon, ham, among others created confusion among the people. The definition of the words was one aspect. The other was that many of these edibles did not follow the prescribed mannerisms in Islam.

In order to resolve the arising issues, Jakim introduced certain measures. Any franchise that wants to obtain a halal certificate has to apply for its central kitchen first, only then for the outlets. Auntie Anne's did not follow the procedure by applying for the outlets prior to the application for the central kitchen. (Rehan Ahmad, 2016).

Malaysiakini later published an article with explanation from the former Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Jamil Khir Baharom and his former Deputy, Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki in relation to the issue. Malaysiakini also released an article listing ways to acquire

Jakim's halal certification by providing guidelines and steps that need to be taken in order to obtain the necessary document (Hot dog hullabaloo - getting to the meat of halal certification, 2016). In this regard, it is safe to say that Malaysiakini has been fairly successful in terms of being balanced in its reporting. The following excerpts are from the mentioned articles published by Malaysiakini:

.... He said halal certification was completely voluntary, but had the added value of assuring consumers, both Muslim and non-Muslim, that food items were not only halal, but were prepared in a clean environment.

It also helped with those who might not be familiar with non-local cuisine.

"There are some among the rural community, the old and so on, when you mention root beer, the kampung people ask, ni bir ke rut ke (is it beer or a root)?

"These are situations where halal certification plays a role in marketing, but it is not compulsory," Jamil Khir said. (Zikri Kamarulzaman, 2016a).

"Earlier in the House, Jamil Khir's deputy Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki said there was space for negotiations when it came to the naming of food items.

Asyraf explained that the branding of products was part of the toyyiban (good) aspect of halal certification, which also take into consideration other factors, such as cleanliness.

He also blamed the entire issue surrounding Auntie Anne's food item on a fake social media account.

It is as though Jakim said Auntie Anne's products were not halal. Jakim has never banned, or marked (Auntie Anne's) as a non-halal company" (Zikri Kamarulzaman, 2016b).

In summary, it can be argued that Malaysiakini has provided a fair and equitable coverage of the case study, as discussed throughout this article. This finding is in line with the findings of previous studies, which reported that Malaysiakini has provided a wide range of opportunities for those involved in an issue to

explain themselves and not just focus on one side of the story (Yang & Md Sidin, 2011, 2012; Yang & Leong, 2017).

Malaysiakini plays an important role in introducing new scenarios to the Malaysian media, as opposed to conventional reporting that has focused only on a particular orientation. Most of their reporting are widely known to be very bold considering their news are directly delivered to the audience, with the emphasis on the multicultural, racial, and religious diversity in Malaysia. Meanwhile, Yang and Md Sidin (2015) have stressed that a counter-hegemonic discourse is apparent in the coverage of Malaysiakini on interethnic and religious conflicts.

The editor-in-chief of Malaysiakini, Steven Gan, stated that it has been the goal of Malaysiakini to write stories that are not easily accessible in the mainstream newspapers for the purpose of providing the netizens with reliable information on news that have sensitive contents (Yang & Md Sidin, 2015). According to Yang and Leong (2017), most of the news covered by Malaysiakini are prone to voice reservations regarding the capability of the ruling government. Therefore, in the context of this study, the policies developed by the government related to Islam and Islamisation in Malaysia are being questioned by Malaysiakini through published opinion articles.

The findings of this study are also in line with Holst's (2011) view that Malaysiakini often discusses the rights and interests of minorities and those who are allegedly oppressed by the policies set by the government.

Conclusion

Hence, this study concludes that the anti-Islam allegations faced by Malaysiakini were the consequence of them highlighting different viewpoints to discuss current issues, which are in contrast to the reporting of mainstream media. However, the findings of this study are consistent with several studies, which illustrate that Malaysiakini is inclined to report an issue relating to Islam more deeply, openly, and dare to question the religious authorities in Malaysia (Yang & Md Sidin, 2011, 2012, 2015; Mohd. Nizam et al., 2013). Malaysiakini is seen as an effective medium to enable a discourse against

hegemony that takes place from a religious standpoint to be discussed among the people.

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