

Global Movement of Moderates or *Wasatiyyah*: A Commentary on an Initiative

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Introduction

WHEN I was invited by The Institute of Oriental Philosophy for a short talk some time towards the end of 2010, I chose to speak on the challenges of pluralism in Malaysia and the efforts Malaysia had to make in meeting those challenges. During the talk, I elaborated several initiatives by the government of Malaysia, religious bodies and civil societies and private individuals of all religions in meeting those challenges, especially the challenge of making the citizens of Malaysia appreciate the need for embracing religious and cultural diversity as a means of national integration.

Today, I am going to explore the theme further by talking about the *wasatiyyah* movement, or the movement of the moderates, which is an initiative by the Malaysian government, as articulated by the Prime Minister Mohd. Najib Abdul Razak, to take to the next level the task of nation-building, and simultaneously to involve the rest of the world in the effort for global peace by increasing inter-religious understanding and tolerance. Najib articulated the idea of *wasatiyyah* during his maiden speech at the 65th United Nation General Assembly on September 27, 2010, which reportedly was well-received.

This talk is about the global movement of moderates, or *wasatiyyah* movement that Najib articulated. It is a commentary of its potential and influence as a weapon against extremism, and of activities and programs that have been planned and carried out to concretize the concept, principles and values associated with it. I shall begin by explaining what *wasatiyyah* means.

Wasatiyyah defined

Wasatiyyah is Arabic, quranic and prophetic. It is quranic and prophetic because it is derived from the Quran and Hadith, the two primary sources of Islamic teachings. Arabic is the language of the Quran and of Prophet Mohamad, peace be upon him. Though Arabic, quranic and prophetic in origin, it is not exclusively Islamic. Its message and ideals are universal, transcending linguistic, ethnic and religious divide.

As a term, *wasatiyyah* has been generally translated as moderation, balance or equilibrium. It also translates as excellent or excellence. Its origin is the quranic expression of *ummatan wasatan* (which appeared as part of Surah 2, Ayat 143), which is generally translated as a moderate nation or community. *Wasat* is the root word from which *wasatiyyah* is derived.

Generally, Muslim scholars have reservations about the close association between *wasatiyyah* and moderation. To many a scholar, *wasatiyyah* goes beyond moderation. An eminent scholar in Islamic Studies in Malaysia, Mohd. Kamal Hassan, for example, argues that as a concept, *wasatiyyah* must encompass three key attributes—justice, excellence, and balance or moderation. The inclusion of the attribute of justice is based on a Hadith or Sunnah that was reported by Ahmad on the authority of Abu Sa'id al-Khudari that the Prophet interpreted the word *wasat*, from which *wasatiyyah* is derived, to mean justice or *al-adl*. Kamal argues that, although justice connotes balance, equilibrium or moderation, it stretches further than that to deserve to be a separate attribute. It requires an objective mind that free of emotion, bias or prejudice. Kamal finds support for this opinion from the interpretation by many commentators of the Quran of another verse of the Quran that has the same root with *wasat*, which is *awsat-u-hum*. According to Kamal, many commentators of the Quran interpreted the word *awsat* to mean 'the most just (a'dal) amongst them'.

The basis for incorporating excellent or excellence into the meaning of *wasatiyyah* is due to its usage in Arabic language as well as on a Hadith or Sunnah. Arabs understand the word *wasat* to also mean the best or excellent/excellence. This can be understood from the term *awsat al-Arab* to describe the Quraish tribe from which the Prophet belongs, the term means the best or noblest tribe among Arabs. The Sunnah that Kamal refers to here is the one which reports that the Prophet was the *wasat* among his people, which scholars interpreted to mean 'the noblest among his people genealogically.'

Kamal argues that the relevance of moderation as a third attribute is

not an issue. It has been widely accepted, and it is the most explicit meaning that one can derive from the word *wasat* (Mohd. Kamal 2013).

Kamal also cautions us that moderation is not something that needs to be attained at all costs. “It is defined by the Quran and Sunnah ... there is no moderation if there is no justice and there is no justice by transgressing the definitive injunctions of the Quran and Sunnah”. Moderation is not mediocrity, because Islam enjoins excellence. Rather, it is the middle position between two forbidden extremes, which many Muslim scholars defined as the modes of the excessiveness or *ifrat* and laxity or *tafrit*. It is in this regard that moderation is a just, excellence and balanced concept. It is the striving to uphold that is good and commanded in Islam and to achieve excellence in everything.

Wasatiyyah as used by Najib in his numerous speeches is in the sense the word has been defined and agreed to by most scholars, which takes into account all the three attributes. As an instrument to promote national integration within a pluralism, and also as an instrument to increase the level of international understanding, *wasatiyyah* emphasizes moderation and avoids extremism. By being moderate, the ideals of excellence and just are being realized simultaneously.

Najib’s call for a ‘global movement of the moderates’ or the *wasatiyyah* did not stop at UNGA. After the UNGA’s address, Najib presented his case at many other international meetings and was similarly well received. These included Oxford Center for Islamic Studies, Oxford University, England on May 6, 2011; The Asia-Europe Summit of Heads of State and Government (ASEM) in Brussels, Belgium. The 10th Asia Security Summit in Singapore on June 3, 2011; and Commonwealth Head of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Perth, Australia, on October 30 2011; and East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii, on November 12 2011.

Encouraged by the support he obtained especially internationally, in January 2012 as he officiating The International Conference of the Global Movement of the Moderates, Najib announced the setting up of Institute Wasatiyyah of Malaysia (IWM) and The Global Movement of the Moderates Foundation (GMMF) to provide the institutional support for his project. Operating as part of Prime Minister’s Office, the Institute of Wasatiyyah is to further the pursuit of ‘moderation and balance in all its aspects—respect for democracy, the rule of law, education, human dignity and social justice. The GMMF, on the other hand is to spearhead this work at an international level, to act as a ‘center of first resort for the consolidation and dissemination of information and campaign materials to all those who want to join the fight against extremism,

governmental and non-governmental bodies alike'. It is to complement other initiatives for global dialogue and cooperation.

***Wasatiyyah*, what's so novel about it?**

In his speech at the opening ceremony of the ICGMM, Najib did not regard the call for moderation as novel. He insisted that 'moderation has always been our chosen path. It is a testament to how we gained our independence from the British back in 1957 ... moderation is the *fitrah* ... the solid bedrock on which all of the world's civilizations have been built...'. How true! As a matter of fact, one can argue that moderation as a *fitrah* not exclusively Islamic. It is also the essence of other beliefs. What Prophet Mohamed teaches that 'moderation is the best of actions', Jesus says 'let your moderation be known unto all men'. The Torah teaches people of the Jewish faith that moderation in all things is a 'way of life'. Buddhists are urged to follow 'the middle path'. The 'ying' and 'yang' principles define life's balance for Taoists and Confucianists.

Additionally, even before Najib announced IWM and GMMF, there already exist elsewhere similar institutions engaging in the promotion of moderation. The Al-Qaradhawi Center for Islamic Moderation and Renewal, housed in the Faculty of Islamic Studies, University of Qatar, and The Moderation Assembly for Thought and Culture which was established under the patronage of King of Jordan and The Royal Academy of Jordan were two examples (Mohammad Haniff Hassan 2014).

Nevertheless, the world saw something refreshing in Najib's call for the GMM to get back to 'the center stage'. As such he caught the attention of, and received support from, many world leaders and journalists. James Fallow, a correspondent for *The Atlantic*, expressed his admiration for Najib's speech at the UNGA, saying that it was different from Najib's predecessors who 'would sometimes have crafted such a speech to emphasize the Zionist menace or Western hegemonism as trumping all other threats'. He further said, 'This prime minister took a different approach' (The Atlantic 2010/09). In his address at the 9th World Islamic Economic Forum, London, 29 October 2013, the British Premier, David Cameron was quoted to have said, '... Najib is a newly reelected leader whose pioneering Global Movement of the Moderates (GMM) is uniting and inspiring people across the world in the fight against extremism'. GMM was a welcome inclusion at the 16th Summit of Non-Aligned Movement, as reflected in the following words, "The Heads of State and Government recognized the valuable contributions of

all religions and beliefs to modern civilization and the contribution that dialogue among civilizations can make towards an improved awareness and understanding of common values of tolerance and peaceful coexistence.” And, “The Heads of State & Government reaffirm the commitment of all religions to peace, and the need for the voices of moderation from all religions & beliefs to work together in order to build a more secure and peaceful world. They further recognized moderation as an important value and a common approach to counter all forms of extremism and to promote dialogue, mutual respect, understanding and acceptance. In this regard, the initiative by Malaysia to promote moderation via the Global Movement of Moderates (GMM) is welcomed.”

It is true that an examination of the programs implemented by the GMM thus far reflects ‘a new approach in international relations and foreign policy’ where perspectives and framework of moderation to realize world peace and harmony are being applied as the main goal. Its works in strengthening of people-to-people diplomacy to complement government-to-government diplomacy and in widening people participation in foreign policy decision-making is refreshing. So is its current effort at developing ideas, framework and strategies for moderation on the following five initiatives: digital diplomacy; non-traditional security threats; democracy and governance; social cohesion and inclusive development; and youth, women and civil society. The development of *muqasid al-syariah index* is quite a daunting task.

In Malaysia, the term *wasatiyyah* is currently popular in public discourse. But concepts quite akin to it were already in place during the previous administrations. It was in the policies of the first three prime ministers: Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, Abdul Razak Hussain and Hussain Onn, in somewhat veiled forms, subsumed under the concept of goodwill or *muhibah*.

It was more explicit during Mahathir Mohamed’s administration, in his policy of ‘inculcation of Islamic values’ in administration. In Mahathir’s conception, moderation was one of values to be propagated. The others are: trustworthiness, responsibility, sincerity, dedication, diligence, cleanliness, discipline, cooperation, integrity, and thankfulness.

It was most explicit in the concept of Islam Hadhari or Civilizational Islam put forth by the PM just before Najib, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who put forth the idea to counter religious extremist views and to propagate the middle or civilizational way of Islam. To spread the message of Islam Hadhari, Badawi set up The International Institute of

Advanced Islamic Studies, and another, The Institute of Islam Hadhari, which was housed in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Currently, IIAIS is quite low-keyed & receiving not much official support, and not much is heard of about The Institute of Islam Hadhari. Can this be an indication of things to come—that a set up will be similarly neglected should the project initiator will no longer be in power?

Perhaps not, because for the moment it appears that there are more work to be done in Malaysia, and done immediately. Going by the current trends, it can be safely asserted that Malaysia is relatively free from civil strife. But Malaysia cannot afford to be complacent. She has to be on guard all the time. This is because lately talks and events that could lead to ethnic and religious tensions and discords do crop up more frequent than before.

Even by focusing only to the period beginning from 2000 onwards, we can point out many examples, which include incidents like the body snatches at funeral parlor, confiscation of Bible in Malay language, allegations of mass conversion of Malay Muslims to Christianity, custody battle of children upon conversion of one of the spouses, use of the term Allah in Catholic publications and bible, demolition of Hindu temples, display of disrespect for one religion by adherents of another religion, allegation of religious discrimination, controversy over *hudud* law, cow's head incidents, issues connected with LGBT, and a host of others.

Perhaps, elaborations on some of these events may illustrate the point. First, the case of 'body snatches at funeral parlor'. There were several cases over the years. The most recent involved a person by the name of Teoh Cheng Cheng who died on June 7 2014, after falling from an apartment building in Penang. While the family was preparing for her funeral, a group of officials from Penang Islamic Religious Department (Jaipp) arrived at the parlor to claim the body, armed with evidence to show that she was a Muslim and therefore deserved a Muslim burial. She was allegedly converted to Islam some time in 1996 and assumed the name of Nora Cheng binti Abdullah. The family was startled because as far as they were concerned, she was a Buddhist, and they were not aware of her conversion. After some tensed moments and high drama, with the involvement of high ranking opposition party leaders who were happy to be dragged in such a situation, the family reluctantly allowed the remain to be taken away by the religious officers. To the leaders of opposition party leaders situations like this were always a welcome example of religious authority's thoughtlessness and

insensitivity. The family was advised to take the matter to the court. Four days later, Penang Syariah High Court ruled she was not a Muslim and ordered Jaipp to return the body. Teoh Cheng Cheng was finally given a Taoist funeral when her remains were cremated at Batu Gantung crematorium (Star online, retrieved on 15 June 2014).

There were two recent cases of custody battle of children upon conversion to another faith of one of the spouses. One was the custody battle between K. Patmanathan, who assumes the name of Mohd. Ridzuan Abdullah upon his conversion to Islam, and his former wife M. Indira Gandhi. In April 2009, Mohd. Ridzuan had reportedly taken away their three children, then aged two, 11 and 12 respectively, and converted them to Islam purportedly without Indira Gandhi's knowledge. The Syariah Court awarded Mohd. Ridzuan custody of all three children. The High Court later granted Indira Gandhi custody of the children and, in March 2010 Mohd. Ridzuan was ordered to return the youngest girl to the mother, but he did not comply. On May 30 2014, Ipoh High Court Judge issued a warrant of arrest against Mohd. Ridzuan for alleged contempt after he repeatedly failed to return the girl to Indira Gandhi. It was reported that the police are tracking down Mohd. Ridzuan, and the episode is still without a closure (Star Online, retrieved 25 June 2014).

Public discussions on hudud or Syariah Criminal Law cause some concerns among sections of Malaysian population. They raised questions like why do we need hudud when Malaysia is not even an Islamic state? When it was suggested that the law be applied only to Muslims, some sections of the population were appeased. But when Dr Mushaddad of Institut Wasatiyyah Malaysia, during a forum of religious scholars in Shah Alam on May 6 2014 (The malaymailonline 7 May 2014, retrieved 2014/06/06), expressed the view that the criminal law be applied to non-Muslims as well, then there were protests all over, be it individuals, rights or public interest groups and political parties.

Perpetrators include individuals, leaders of political parties, both the government and the opposition, and rights or interest groups. They are guilty of deeds and words that constitute threats to public order. Malay right group like Perkasa and Isma, Chinese right group like Dong Zhong and Indian right group like Hindraf made controversial and provocative statements from time to time. Even members of ruling coalition do come up with similar statements occasionally. Such statements would come when the leaders feel that their influences are waning so they have to come up with statements that would make them appear to be championing their people. Leaders of UMNO, MCA, MIC and Gerakan

do make such statements from time to time.

Leaders of interfaith dialogues have expressed concern with which the frequency of the occurrence of such utterances and actions. They also express concern over the lack of action, or of selective action, by the authorities over such matters. They think that matters like these should be nipped in the bud.

Therefore, most Malaysians are of the opinion that work in Malaysia's own backyard has to be put in order first before *wasatiyyah* movement is to be brought to a global level, like combating acts of aggression and terrorism against the people of Palestine by Israel, or by the movement led by Buddhist monk Wirathu against the Rohingyas in Myanmar.

Concluding Remarks

Though the idea of *wasatiyyah* is not exactly new, the concept is worth noting, both as an initiative for national integration as well as international cooperation & understanding.

Najib should be congratulated for having the foresight to bring it up for international attention and acceptance. But for *wasatiyyah* to be a success at global level, work in Malaysia's own backyard has to be put in order. Otherwise, Malaysia's friends whom she courts as partners in combating extremism would not be taking her seriously. If or when that happens, it sounds the death knell of *wasatiyyah* or the global movement of the moderates! Or, it will be, as suggested by an opposition leader, 'a political scam' (<http://tonypua.blogspot.jp/2012/01>, retrieved 2014/06/02). As it was, it almost turned into one when in late June Najib called on UMNO members to emulate the courage shown by the fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isil), who recently took over the Iraqi city of Mosul (<http://www.theMalaysianinsider.com>, retrieved 2014/07/10).

Author Biography

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