**TOWARDS A GOOD GOVERNANCE OF PLURALISTIC SOCIETY IN MALAYSIA:
A STUDY ON THE PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES
FOR A SUCCESSFUL INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE (IRD)**

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The existence of various races, ethnic groups, and religions in Malaysia, maps the pluralistic condition of her society. Such co-existences however have exposed Malaysians to potential conflicts. In reality, conflicts did occur due to lack of understanding on each other's religion. To reduce the conflicts, Inter-religious dialogue (IRD) has been propagated as an alternative in bridging religions in Malaysia. The issues at hands are; being a Muslim-majority state, what are needed by the Malaysian government to ensure the success of dialogue? Are Malaysians ready for such engagement? What are the prospects and challenges for a successful IRD in the Malaysian context? This paper therefore, aims to present a research findings pertaining to IRD. The findings are deemed necessary for mobilizing a good governance of pluralistic society in Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

Ideally, religion plays an important role in fulfilling human's spiritual needs. At the same time, religion is influential in constructing one's worldview, values and morality. However, every religious believer faces many challenges in realizing the ideal. Every religion, theoretically, promotes the basic principles of humanity and universal peace. Ironically, the reality provides us with opposite stories. Differences in religions may easily lead to suspicions and prejudices that give birth to clashes and conflicts among different religious followers. In Malaysia for example there have been an increased percentage of inter-religious misunderstandings that hamper pluralistic co-existence of her society. As a matter of fact, lately, religious sensitive issues have been openly and aggressively debated in the media to the extent that they are treated as potential threats to the national security.

The establishment and the commissioning of The Committee to Promote Understanding and Harmony Among Religious Followers (JKMPKA) is meant to improve inter-religious relationship in Malaysia. The Committee envisioned "to become the mechanism of dialogues and mediation in order to create understanding and harmony between followers of different

religions for shaping Malaysia into a peaceful country."[1] In succumbing to the vision for IRD, a research has been executed among the religious followers, religious activists and religious leaders in Kuala Lumpur. This paper is therefore, aimed to present the research findings while also analytically discuss important issues pertaining to the IRD. The analysis will be useful as it may help to provide constructive suggestions in realizing a good governance of pluralistic society in Malaysia.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW ON INTER-RELIGIOUS MISUNDERSTANDINGS IN MALAYSIA

A study done by the Merdeka Center[2] on the perception of Malaysian society towards ethnic relations in 2011 recorded a decreased percentage in the people's confidence from 78% in 2006 to 66% in 2011. In fact in 2011, 33% of the respondents agreed (in comparison with 25% of respondents in 2010) that inter-racial relationship in Malaysia had weakened. 33% of the respondents in 2011 thought that different ethnic groups were further apart compared to 25% in 2006. In this regard, the findings reported a decreased of 28% (36% in 2011 and 64% in 2006) in inter-religious integration. There was also an increased in the percentage of negative perception towards ethnic relations, which was 24% in 2011, compared to 15% in 2006.

The research done by the Merdeka Center provides a general picture about inter-religious relationship in this country. A more detailed account that spells out inter-religious disputes in Malaysia revolves around the following issues;

a) The Issue of Islamization in Malaysia

The Islamization process undertaken by the Malaysian Government has been accused as discriminating people of other religious beliefs.[3] It has been alleged as the main cause that limits the construction of temples and churches as in the case of the construction of Roman Catholic Church in Shah Alam in 2005. In addition, the

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[1] This committee was formed under the Department of National Unity. For details, refer to http://www.jpnin.gov.my/jkmpka/visi_misi2 December 2011

[2] For a detailed report, please refer http://merdeka.org/pages/02_research.html "Survey on ethnic relations 2011, Peninsular Malaysia: Perceptions towards ethnic relations: sentiment, ethnic relations and public policies. Merdeka Center for Opinion Research."

[3] M. Shamsul Haque, "The Role of the State in Managing Ethnic Tensions in Malaysia: A Critical Discourse", *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 47 No. 3, Sage Publication, November 2003, p. 251. http://profile.nus.edu.sg/fass/polhaque/abs.pdf(accessed on 8 December 2011)

expression of Islamic values advocated by Islamization has been blamed for widening the gap between religions in Malaysia. In fact, Islamization has turned the Malaysian educational system to become more Islamic rather than being nationally oriented.[4] Islamization also holds the blame for causing awareness on Islamic Law and *Hudud*. Indeed, Muslims enthusiasm to carry out *Shari'ah* law has caused restlessness among non-Muslims who feel that it will undermine the status of other religious believers, making them a second-class citizen.[5]

b) The issue of freedom to practice religion

    a. The issue of apostasy among Muslims has been treated from the perspective of individuals' rights and freedom of religion. Among the controversial apostasy cases are the case of Hartina Kamarudin (1996), Nor Aishah Bukhari, Jamaludin Othman (2002), and the latest one, Azlina Jailani (2006).

    b. There are also issues concerning the status of religion for those individuals who revert to Islam without the knowledge of his/her family members and that his/her conversion was invalid. For instance, in M. Moorthy's case (2005), Nyonya Tahir's (2006), and Shobanaa Devi a/p Gentagharan's (2011).[6]

c) The issue of equality of religions

This issue has brought about the call for the establishment of *Inter-Faith Commission* (IFC) that was sponsored by the *Bar Council* in 2005. The IFC strongly advocated for Article 11 of the Constitution of Malaysia to be revised.[7] IFC in fact challenged the special rights of the Malay; the group of people who is defined as Muslims in the Constitution of Malaysia.

d) The issue of translation of Christian Bible into Malay language and the usage of particular Biblical terminologies in Malay language.

The demand was first raised in 1981 by the Christians who wanted to distribute the Indonesian version of Bible in Malaysia. 10 years after that, the Christians were prohibited from using important terminologies used by the Muslims among those are

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[4] Revd Dr Albert Sundararaj Walters, "Malaysia: Some Key Issues Affecting Christian-Muslim Relations in Network for Inter faith Concerns: Christian-Muslim" *News Digest*, 4 2009. Refer http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/digest/docs/digest10.cfm(Accessed on 8 December 2011)

[5] S M. Shamsul Haque, p. 250-251.

[6] Please refer to http://harmonymalaysia.wordpress.com/ (Accessed on 8 December 2011)

[7] http://aliran.com/archives/monthly/2005a/6g.html . (Accessed on 8 December 2011)

Allah, Ka'abah, Baitullah and *Solat*. In 2008 however, the prohibition was extended to the Christians print media.[8]

    e) The demolition of places of worships other than those of Muslims'.

    The demolition affected the Christians and Hindus places of worships namely the demolition of indigenous people's church in Kampung Orang Laut Masai, Johor in 2005, and the demolition of Hindu temples.[9]

    f) Issues pertaining to religious celebrations and rituals that are sensitive to a particular religion; the riot in Kampung Medan,[10] the prohibition to call for azan on loudspeaker in mosques in Penang,[11] the slaughtering ceremony at schools in conjunction with '*Eidul Adha*,[12] and the raid done by The Selangor Islamic Department on the Damansara Utama Methodist Church (DUMC) during a thanksgiving event.[13]

These cases are indeed part of the inter-religious tensions that have occurred in this country. Though they have not brought about riots, loss of life and destruction of properties, they instigated grudges and prejudices that acted as a timing bomb.

To reduce inter-religious tensions, more inter-religious interaction, engagement and communication should be encouraged. IRD thus can be one of the potential tools. It is assumed that as there are more interactions, the higher the chances for an improved relationship to be realized. A guided IRD will help to nurture intimacy, bring about the feeling of respect and love (*muhibah*) for each other, and eradicate prejudices.

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[8] http://uk.reuters.com/article/2009/03/11/uk-malaysia-religion-idUKTRE52A1TO20090311?sp=true (Accessed on 8 December 2011)

[9] "Multiculturalism at risk: The Indian Minority in Malaysia, Economic and Political" Weekly September 2, 2006. http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/Diaspora/multicultiatrisk.htm (Accessed on 12 December 2011)

[10] Please refer tohttp://www.indianmalaysian.com/klanglama4.htm#boil (Accessed on 8 December 2011)

[11] Please refer tohttp://www.themalaysianinsider.com/bahasa/article/mufti-larangan-guna-mikrofon-bukan-isu-politik-tapi-arahan-nabi/ (Accessed on 8 December 2011)

[12] Press statement dated 4 November 2011 that was published by MCCBCHST entitled *Respect Religious Sensitivies In School.* Please refer tohttp://harmonymalaysia.wordpress.com/ (Accessed on 8 December 2011)

[13] Press statement dated 8 August 2011 entitled *The Nation Must Be Led With Understanding, Truth Compassion Justice And Respect*. http://harmonymalaysia.wordpress.com/ (Accessed on 8 December 2011)

THE NEED FOR IRD

Problems arising from religious differences should be handled positively. In fact, it is impossible to avoid clashes of views and beliefs due to the lack of understanding on each other's religion. For an instance, the slaughtering of cattle during the celebration of '*Eidul Adha* is a form of ritual in Islam to commemorate the story of Prophet Ismail p.b.u.h and Prophet Ibrahim p.b.u.h. However, this ritual is in conflict with the teaching of Buddhism and Hinduism. A recent case has reported that a slaughtering ceremony conducted at a public school in Malaysia received severe criticism and official condemnation from the non-Muslims.

The incident has led to many questions; are the Muslims sensitive enough towards the Buddhists and the Hindus? On the other hand, as the event was carried out at a national school, claimed as a public space, should Muslims be deprived from the right to conduct the ritual since they are the majority in the country and that Islam is the official religion of the Federation? Do the Buddhists and the Hindus have any regard that the ritual is one sacred event for the Muslims to witness in commemoration of prophets of islam? It seems that the parties involved were either ignorant or heedless of each other's religion. In such cases, how can the clash be avoided or be reconciled once happened? What can be the best way and the best platform for exchanging information about religions to avoid such confusion and the alike?

This is where IRD can play its role. A guided dialogue can become a platform for discussing issues related to religions on the condition that the participants are ethical and respect for differences. A guided dialogue here means a dialogue that is clear in its framework, objectives, methodologies, approaches, and contents. A guided dialogue enables rational exercise to take place so it helps to reconcile problems arising due to differences in religions.[14]

At the NGO level, the call for dialogue has been consistently advocated. However, the dialogues are more focused on issues pertaining to human rights and justice rather than

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[14] For a more detailed explanation on dialogueue, please refer to Azizan Baharadin's, *Peranan Dialogue Peradaban Di Dalam Wacana Tamadun Malaysia*, *Jurnal Peradaban,* Volume 1, 2008, Universiti Malaya.

reflection on central themes in religions.[15] At the academic level, dialogues are intellectual in nature and are steered effectively by the Centre for Civilizational Dialogue of University of Malaya. At present, Saba' Islamic Media is one of the major players in organizing IRDs and inter-religious activities in Malaysia. At the national level, IRD has now become a national agenda for maintaining unity among different religious followers in Malaysia. However, IRD is relatively new and it has yet to bring enough positive impact on the inter-religious affairs of this country.

With the current state of awareness, interest, and vocation, what are the prospects for a successful IRD in Malaysia? Are Malaysians ready to commit with IRDs? The next section seeks to answer the questions posed, based on a research done on the religious followers, religious activists and religious leaders in the area of Klang Valley.

A RESEARCH REPORT ON THE STATUS OF UNDERSTANDING, READINESS AND COMMITMENT TOWARDS INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE (IRD) IN MALAYSIA

a) Introduction and Methodologies

A *cross-sectional survey* has been carried out in the beginning of June and ended in October 2011. The study applied a purposive sampling technique involving 300 respondents in Klang Valley area from various genders, age groups, religions, level of education, careers, income, involvement in IRD programs, and involvement in NGOs. The survey seeks to examine the respondents understanding, readiness and commitment towards IRD.

b) The Reliability of the Questions

The survey consists of 3 parts; 11 questions to test the understanding, 9 questions to test the readiness, and 6 questions to test the commitment. The survey utilized the *Likert* style method to measure the respondents' responses in 5 levels; very weak (1), weak (2), moderate (3), good (4), and very good (5).

The reliability of the questions was tested and then validated. The questions on the understanding show a satisfactory level of *Cronbach alpha* (α = .67), the questions on the

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[15] Among the NGOs that are active are the Interfaith Spiritual Fellowship (INsaF), the Malaysian Interfaith Network (MIN), Aliran Kesedaran Negara (ALIRAN), Saba' Islamic Media and many others.

readiness show a very good level of *Cronbach alpha* (α = .83), and the questions on the commitment show a satisfactory level of *Cronbach alpha* (α = .60).

c) The Repondents' Backgrounds

The survey recorded 150 respondents (50%) were between the age of 21 to 30 years old, followed by 76 respondents (25%) aged 41 years old and above, 56 respondents (19%) between the age of 31 to 40 years old, and 17 respondents (6%) below the age of 20. Muslims were the majority with 171 respondents (57%), followed by Buddhists with 50 respondents (17%), Hindus with 43 respondents (14%), Christians with 29 respondents (10%), and followers of other religions with 7 respondents (2%).[16]

Looking at the educational backgrounds of the respondents, majority of them or 132 respondents (44%) to be exact, were bachelor's degree holders, 60 respondents (20%) were diploma holders, 26 respondents (9%) were master's degree holders, 8 respondents (3%) were Ph.D holders, 47 respondents (20%) were SPM certificate holders, 15 respondents (5%) were STPM certificate holders, 6 respondents (2%) finished school after PMR, and 3 respondents (1%) were under the miscellaneous category. Therefore, it can be suggested that 76% of the respondents are well educated.

With regard to involvement in IRD, 178 respondents stated that they have not been involved in any IRD programs prior to the survey while 116 respondents stated to have been involved; a ratio of 2:3. A cross-tabulation analysis shows that from the 116 respondents who have been involved in IRD, 76 of them were Muslims, 14 respondents were Buddhists, 13 respondents were Hindus, 10 respondents were Christians and 3 respondents were from other religions.

However, majority of the respondents or 206 respondents (70%) have not been involved with any NGOs in comparison to 90 respondents (30%) who have; 62 were Muslims, 10 were Buddhists, 8 were Hindus, 9 were Christians, and 1 from other religions.

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[16] Traditional Chinese religion, Sikhism, and other religions

d) The understanding of respondents towards IRD

  i) The overall level of understanding

The statistic shows that the overall mean of the respondents' understanding towards IRD is M = **2.56** (SD = .34, N = 300); indicating that the level of understanding is weak or is only satisfactory. Less than 1% of the respondents showed good level of understanding (N = 2), compared to 49% of the respondents (N = 148) who showed weak level of understanding. However, the percentage of respondents who achieved satisfactory level of understanding is higher compared to the percentage of respondents who achieved weak level of understanding (50%, N = 150). The result shows a ratio of **1:150** for the respondents with good level of understanding to the overall number of respondents.

  ii) The level of understanding based on religious backgrounds.

The mean score for the level of understanding based on religious backgrounds of the respondents is around M = **2.50** to M = **2.67**, which is satisfactory. 50% of the respondents showed satisfactory level of understanding. No respondent is categorized as 'very weak' in terms of the understanding.

This analysis was executed to gauge the influence of religious backgrounds on the respondents' understanding of IRD. The findings suggest that there is no significant correlation between the respondents' religious backgrounds and his/her level of understanding.

  iii) The level of understanding based on participation in IRD

116 from 294 respondents acknowledged to have participated in IRD. The result shows that respondents who have participated in IRD possessed higher level of understanding (M = **2.68**, SD = .37, N = 116) compared to respondents who have never participated (M = **2.49**, SD = .30, N = 178), t (292) = - 4.74, p < .01. The mean score for the respondents who have participated in IRD is satisfactory, while the mean score for respondents who have never participated is weak.

iv) T**he level of understanding based on involvement in NGOs.**

The respondents who have been involved with NGOs acquired higher scores (M = **2.69**, SD = .39, N = 90) in terms of his/her understanding on IRD compared to the respondents who have not (M = **2.51**, SD = .30, N = 206), t (294) = - 4.53, p < .01.

e) **The level of understanding of respondents who have been involved/have not been involved with NGOs, based on religious backgrounds.**

There is no difference in the level of understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims who have not been involved with any NGOs. Interestingly, the same finding is recorded in the case of Muslims and non-Muslims who have been involved with NGOs.

However, there is a difference in the score of the level of understanding between the respondents who have been involved with various NGOs, and the respondents who have not.[17] Consistent with this result, there is a difference in the score between Muslims who have not been involved with any NGOs and non-Muslims who have.

f) **The readiness towards IRD**

i) **The level of readiness**

The mean score is M = **3.00** (SD = .45, N = 300) showing that most respondents have satisfactory level of readiness. Majority of the respondents (80%) attained satisfactory score for the level of understanding on IRD. The percentage of respondents who are ready to participate in IRD programs is 91% compared to those who are not (9%). The ratio is 9:1.

ii) **The level of readiness based on religious backgrounds**

The mean scores is around M = **2.85** to M = **3.04**. The scores in details are; Muslims (M = 3.04, SD = .42, N = 171), Buddhists (M = 2.97, SD = .42, N = 50), Hindus (M = 2.85, SD = .61, N = 43), Christians (M = 3.01, SD = .41, N = 29), and others (M = 2.95, SD = .11, N = 7).

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[17] Muslims who join NGOs attained a higher score of understanding. The score of understanding for the followers of other religions who join NGOs are higher compared to the score of Muslims who do not join any NGOs

The result also shows that religious backgrounds have no effect on the readiness of the respondents to participate in IRD.

iii) The level of readiness based on the respondents involvement in IRD.

The result indicates that respondents who have participated in IRD possess higher level of readiness (M = **3.10**, SD = .42, N = 116) compared to respondents who have not (M = **2.93**, SD = .46, N = 178), t (292) = - 3.27, p < .01).

The result also shows that the respondents who have participated in IRD attained satisfactory score of readiness. Interestingly, respondents who have never participated in any dialogue programs also acquired satisfactory score of readiness. This statistic suggests that most respondents are ready to participate in IRDs regardless of the exposure they have..

iv) The level of readiness based on the involvement with NGOs

The result indicates that the respondents who have been involved with NGOs attained higher scores of readiness (M = **3.21**, SD = .48, N = 90) compared with respondents who have not (M = **2.90**, SD = .40, N = 206), t (294) = - 5.87, p < .01).

v) The level of readiness of respondents who have been involved/have not been involved with NGOs

There is a difference in the level of readiness between Muslim respondents who are members of NGOs with Muslim respondents who are not, as the former attained higher scores. The result is also consistent when comparing Muslim respondents who are not members of any NGOs with followers of other religions who are members of various NGOs as the latter scored much higher than the former.

Muslim respondents who are members of various NGOs on the other hand, attained much higher scores compared to followers of other religions who are not members of any NGOs. Interestingly, the statistic shows equal high scores between Muslim respondents and non-Muslim respondents who are members of various NGOs. On top of that, the followers of other religions who are not members of any NGOs scored lower than those who are

members of various NGOs. The conclusion that is derived from this is that respondents who are members of various NGOs possess higher level of readiness compared to respondents who are not members of any NGOs.

g) The Respondents' commitment towards IRD programs
i) The level of commitment

The statistic shows that the overall mean score of the respondents' commitment is M = **2.77** (SD = .51, N = 300). This indicates that most respondents have low level of commitment or at best, only at the level of satisfactory. The ratio of respondents who are committed to IRD programs to respondents who are not is 1:3.

ii) The level of commitment based on religious backgrounds.

The result shows that the respondents' mean score of commitment is around M = **2.57** to M = 2.83. Overall, respondents from all types of religious backgrounds, whether Muslims (M = 2.69, SD = .36, N = 171), Buddhists (M = 2.57, SD = .43, N = 50), Hindus (M = 2.61, SD = .37, N = 43), Christians (M = 2.83, SD = .53, N = 29) or of other religions (M = 2.75, SD = .39, N = 7), show satisfactory level of commitment. An inferential analysis[18] indicates that the respondents' religious backgrounds do not affect the level of their commitment.

iii) The level of commitment based on the involvement in IRD programs

The result shows that respondents who have participated in IRD possess higher level of commitment (M = 2.82, SD = .41, N = 116) compared to respondents who have not (M = 2.58, SD = .37, N = 178), t (292) = - 5.02, p < .01).

iv) The level of commitment based on involvement in NGOs

The result shows that respondents who are members of various NGOs attained higher score of commitment (M = **2.87**, SD = .46, N = 90) compared to respondents who are not (M = **2.58**, SD = .34, N = 206), t (294) = - 5.98, p < .01).

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[18] ANNOVA

v) The level of commitment of respondents who have been/have not been involved with NGOs based on religious backgrounds.

The result shows that there is no difference in the level of commitment between Muslim respondents who are members of NGOs and Muslim respondents who are not. The same result is also attained between Muslim and non-Muslim respondents who are not members of any NGOs. In addition to that, non-Muslims respondents who are members of various NGOs possess higher level of commitment compared to Muslim respondents who are not members of any NGOs.

Meanwhile, Muslim respondents who are members of various NGOs exhibit higher level of commitment compared to non-Muslim respondents are not members of any NGOs. Nonetheless, the former scored lower than non-Muslim respondents who are members of various NGOs. Consistent with this result, non-Muslim respondents who are members of various NGOs show higher level of commitment compared to non-Muslim respondents who are not members of any NGO.

Finally, the statistic shows that non-Muslim respondents who are members of various NGOs possess the highest level of commitment towards IRD programs.

h) The correlation between the respondents' understanding, readiness, and commitment towards IRD programs

The correlation between the respondents' understanding, readiness and commitment towards IRD programs has been analysed using two methods; Pearson Correlation and Multiple Linear Regression. The result from the correlation analysis indicates that there exists relationship between the respondents' understanding, readiness, and commitment towards IRD programs.

The result shows that most respondents who possess higher level of understanding also possess higher level of readiness and vice versa ($r = .35$, p, $.01$). The correlation between the respondents' understanding and commitment is also consistent whereby respondents who have higher level of understanding also have higher level of commitment ($r = .38$, p, $.01$), and vice versa.
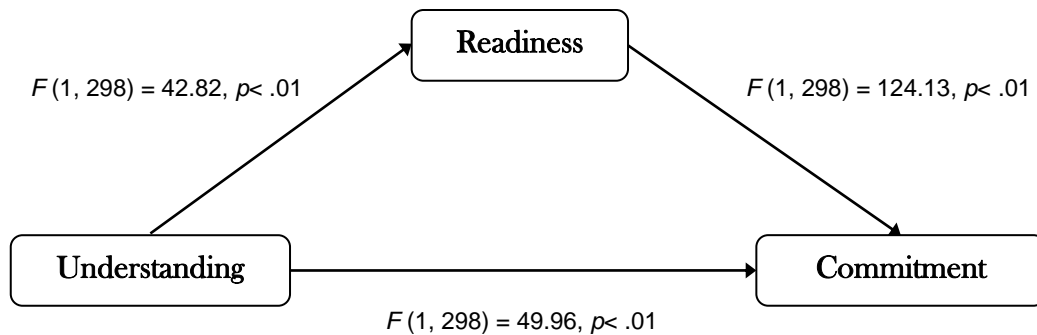
The correlation between the respondents' level of readiness and commitment shows that respondents who possess higher score of readiness also have higher score of commitment (r = .54, p, .01) and vice versa.

Next, the multiple linear regression analysis was done to see whether the respondents' level of understanding and readiness affect their level of commitment, either directly or indirectly. The multiple regression analysis was carried out using Baron and Kenny's method (1986)[19] to test the mediation effect of the respondents' level of understanding, readiness, and commitment towards IRD programs. The result from this analysis shows that the level of readiness of the respondents **partially mediate** the correlation between the respondents' level of understanding and commitment. The level of understanding, however, shows a direct influence towards the respondents' level of readiness, $F (1, 298) = 42.82$, $p < .01$ and their level of commitment, $F (1, 298) = 49.96$, $p < .01$.

The respondents' level of understanding also have an indirect influence on the level of commitment and readiness, thus becoming the mediator between level of understanding and commitment, $F (2, 297) = 74.45$, $p < .01$. In addition, the level of readiness have a direct influence on the level of commitment of the respondents, $F (1, 298) = 42.82$, $p < .01$.

The result from this analysis shows that the respondents' level of understanding and readiness have a direct effect on the level of commitment, while the level of understanding may also have a direct effect on the level of readiness, thus affecting the level of commitment too. The result also suggests that the level of understanding may directly improve the level of readiness and commitment towards IRD. In addition, the level of understanding may also indirectly affect the respondents' level of readiness and later on increases the level of commitment towards IRD programs. Lastly, the level of readiness may also directly increase the level of commitment.

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[19]   Baron, R. B. & Kenny, D. A. (1986). "The Moderator Mediator Variable Distinction In Social Psychological Research: Conceptual, Strategic, And Statistical Consideration" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* , 51 (6), 1173-1182.

Readiness

$F(1, 298) = 42.82$, $p< .01$ $F(1, 298) = 124.13$, $p< .01$

Understanding   Commitment

$F(1, 298) = 49.96$, $p< .01$

i) Summary

The result shows that half of the respondents have little understanding on IRD as only two of them exhibit good level of understanding. On the other hand, majority (91%) of the respondents are ready to take part in IRD. The total number of respondents who are prepared to commit into IRD programs is also promising; 74%.

In general, the respondents show encouraging level of readiness and commitment towards IRD. However, the lower score of understanding may lead to negative implications such as unorganized dialogues and misinterpretations towards dialogue and its purpose, which may lead to the failure of dialogue programs.

The result of varied sampling (T-test) shows that the religious backgrounds of the respondents does not affect their level of understanding, readiness or commitment towards IRD programs.

On the contrary, the respondents' involvements in dialogue programs and NGOs have a positive impact on the respondents' level of understanding, readiness, and commitment, whereby respondents who have been involved in dialogue and NGOs show higher level of understanding, readiness, and commitment compared with respondents who have not. However, involvement in NGOs does not affect Muslim respondents' commitment on IRD.

DISCUSSION

The result from this research indicates that there is a need to improve understanding towards IRD. Improvement is indeed necessary, as most religious activists are ready to be involved in dialogue programs. In addition, there should be more effort to encourage more religious followers and activists to get involved in NGOs and IRD since the study indicates that their involvements bring about positive outcomes to their understanding, readiness, and commitment towards IRD.

The survey shows that there is a high demand for IRD, but the understanding on it is still inadequate even among members of NGOs. It is also interesting to note that the Muslim respondents show lesser commitment compared to the non-Muslim respondents. Another significant observation is that membership in NGOs open wider prospects for followers of religions to be involved in IRD.

These findings are crucial as a pilot study to gauge the level of understanding, readiness, and commitment towards IRD. The results, however, cannot be used into generalization of principles as there were limitations in terms of the study design, sampling techniques, and most importantly, the size of the samples involved.

Nonetheless, the survey has produced significant findings that should be pondered for the improvement of inter-religious relations in Malaysia. The government, who govern Muslim-majority country, should be in position to ensure a constructive and guided IRD. Thus, it is essential for the government to take necessary measures to improve national understanding on IRD.

With regard to Muslims' interest in IRD, it can be assumed that the low-level of interest shown is due to the perception they hold as the majority of the population in this country. The question to reflect now; why the statistic indicates that the majority has lesser interest in IRD compared with the minority? It is therefore crucial for the government to reconcile between these two groups. To be more precise, how can the Muslim-majority state juggle the affairs of the minority effectively? Do the minority deserved to be given a platform to be

heard, or is it that since they are the minority, democracy principle is applied and therefore, they will have to abide by the principle?

Concerning the affiliations with NGOs, the government of Malaysia, being a Muslim-majority country, should be ready to acknowledge the pressing role of NGOs today. Perhaps the government should conduct a comprehensive study on the role of NGOs in Malaysia. Ideally, NGOs plays an important role in providing constructive ideas to the government. However, will NGOs help to uphold to the constructive role of IRD in Malaysia? The ideal situation would be that the government and the existing NGOs work hand in hand in making IRD a success in Malaysia.

Based on these findings, a more detailed research that covers a significant number of research sampling should be done in order to generate findings that are more reliable. Those findings will be useful in assisting the government to ensure a good governance of Muslims and non-Muslims, or the majority and the minority respectively, in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

It is hoped that IRD can act as a positive tool for the engagement between the existing religions, thus helping in reducing religious tensions in Malaysia. Indeed, it is a high time for the government to adopt pro-active measures in dealing with inter-religious issues. The establishment of The Committee to Promote Understanding and Harmony Among Religious Followers (JKMPKA) is instrumental in developing a guided approach towards IRD. Such is a top-down mandated agency established by the present government as an authoritative caretaker of the pluralistic society of Malaysia.

The statistics have also indicated that NGOs play significant role in mobilizing religious followers. In this regard, a bottom up strategy is also needed. The present government therefore needs to collect feedbacks on issues pertaining to IRD at the grassroots level as it involves the NGOs as the key players. Ideally, IRD should lead to improvements in inter-religious engagements and relations. It should be able to prevent issues that may create more confusions and dissensions among the pluralistic society of Malaysia. There should be

mutual correspondence between the NGOs and the relevant government agencies in moulding the shape of the IRD.

Most importantly, IRD should uphold the integrity of all religions. IRD should not be misused to fulfil one's personal agenda or to become a platform for infusing certain dogma or ideology. In the case of Malaysian pluralistic society, IRD should be advocated in propagating *muhibah*, creating harmonious co-existence and reducing religious prejudice. If the above recommendations are realized, it is believed that IRD may bring about positive changes to inter-religious affairs and therefore maintain the harmonious relationship between religions in Malaysia.

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