

ANALYSIS ON INTER-FAITH RELATIONS IN FRIDAY SERMON TEXTS IN PAHANG, MALAYSIA: A PRELIMINARY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to (1) to study the process of determining the content and focus of sermon texts in Pahang, Malaysia (2) review categories of sermon in Pahang, and (3) analyze the frequency of sermon focusing in Inter-faith relations and its contributing factors in the state of Pahang. This study utilized a documentation approach on sermon texts in the state of Pahang for a period of 10 years (2001 to 2010). The collected data were analyzed using Matrix and Analytical Methods. Conclusions drawn from this studies are as follows (1) there are seven categories of sermon texts in the state of Pahang namely K1: Religious festivals in Islam, K2: Public holidays, K3: Belief, K4: *Sharia* (legal systems) and *Ibadah* (acts of worship), K5: Morality, K6: Current issues abroad and K7: Inter-faith relations. (2) Studies indicate that major focus was given to category K7 (Inter-faith relations) and was ranked as the second highest with 59 times (17%) discussed in Friday sermon over the 10 year period.(3) Factors associated for this interests are; (a) awareness on inter-faith issues in the part of Mufti Department of Pahang (or *JMNP- Jabatan Mufti Negeri Pahang*), (b) the introduction of *Islam Hadhari* concept, (c) issues pertaining to religious freedom especially the Lina Joy case, (d) Pahang Islamic Department (or *JAIP- Jabatan Agama Islam Pahang*) initiatives towards new Muslim converts.

Keywords: Inter-faith relations; Friday sermon

1. Background of the study

Friday sermon or *Khutbah*¹ is a branch or medium of *dakwah* in conveying information to the Muslim community. Among the general functions and roles of sermon is (1) as medium of information (Ainuddin Kamaruddin, 2010), (2) weekly reminder (*maui'zah*) (Mustafa Kamal Haudin, 2002), (3) agent or medium for the call to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong (*amar ma'ruf nahi mungkar*) and (4) medium of communicating *dakwah* (Hashim Fauzy Yaacob, 2008). Thus in the current context, sermons can be instrumental in improving people's understanding in matters related to Inter-faith relations as well as platform of information for inter religion issues or conflicts especially in cases involving Islam and other religions (Khairulnizam, Khadijah Khambali and Suzy Aziziyana, 2012). Looking at current situation, there are issues that can trigger conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims. Khairulnizam and Suzy Aziziyana (2009), have outlined issues of Inter-faith relations in Malaysia that are related to "(1) administration of religion itself, (2) implementation of the laws or government policies which affect the construction of houses of worship, civil court and *sharia* court system, issues of conversion, (3) issue over the usage of Qur'anic terminologies and Arabic language, (4) issue of new converts' funeral, (5) issue of *dakwah* to other faiths whether directly or indirectly, (6) issues of understanding other religions and customs. The authors assume that these issues are caused by the lack of understanding in the fundamentals of the relationship between religions as emphasized by Islam. Therefore, one of the appropriate mediums to enhance these understanding amongst Muslim community in issues related to the relationship or conflict between religions is through Friday sermons as previously suggested by Khairulnizam, Khadijah and Suzy Aziziyana (2012) considering that Muslims gather in large number during Friday prayer, and was put under the category of Intra-Dialogue process (dialogue within the community). Initial analysis conducted by the authors found that there was no study focusing on Friday sermons as a medium to improve the understanding of peoples in matters associated to inter-faith relations.

Further observation on Friday sermon indicated that the focus was mainly in issues such as (1) effectiveness of sermon delivery methods (Mohd Fadzilah Kamsah, 1992), (2) issues of faith in sermon texts (Faizuri Abd Latif, 2011), (3) the use of technology in sermon delivery (Nor Idayu

¹ An address or public prayer (on Friday) read from the steps of the pulpit in mosques by an *Imam*, offering glory to God, praising Muhammad (pbuh) and his descendents.

Zulpabli, 2011 and Zulkiple, 2001) and (4) issues of acceptance and understanding of the content of sermons among Muslims attending Friday prayers (Ainuddin Kamaruddin, 2010).

Thus, by re-examining this problem statement, it can be safely said that there is a need to assess the focus of Friday sermons content in delivering understanding or making clarification on information or issues related to Inter-faith relations to the Muslims as they lived in a plural society of Malaysia. Friday sermon composed important role in disseminating knowledge, information and advice since through it, the Muslim community can improve their knowledge and understanding on current issues particularly Inter-faith relations or conflict between religions.

2. Objectives of Study

The objectives of this study is to (1) examine the process of determining the content and focus of Friday sermon in Pahang, (2) examine sermon categories in Pahang, and (3) analyze the frequency of Friday sermons focusing on issues related to Inter-faith relations and its contributing factors in Pahang. The scope of this study is the collection of Friday sermon texts from the year 2001 to 2010.

3. Methodology

a) Data Collection:

This study employs a triangulation method (Chua Yan Piaw 2006:9-10). Since this study is qualitative in nature, the source must be observed from various angles, namely (1) Documentation: Since this study focuses on the topics and content of Friday sermons, the main data for this study is Friday sermon texts provided by the Pahang Islamic Department from 2001 to 2010, (2) Structured interviews with respondents, namely the sermon reviewer committee from Pahang Mufti Department and officers from Pahang Islamic Department from the unit responsible for managing Friday sermons, (3) Observation and participation in Friday sermon sessions as well as the authors' own experiences in delivering Friday sermons at mosques around Pahang.

b) Data Analysis (Descriptive):

Among the methods of data analysis employs in this study is the Matrix Analysis Method (Chua Yan Piaw 2006: 48). Using this method, the authors will be able to draw a rough picture of Friday Sermon – Intra Dialogue relationship, assigning process of the title-sermon content and the content

or topics of sermon found during the period of 2001 to 2010. Hence, the authors was able to infer the causes and determinant factors for such focus to be given to inter-faith relation.

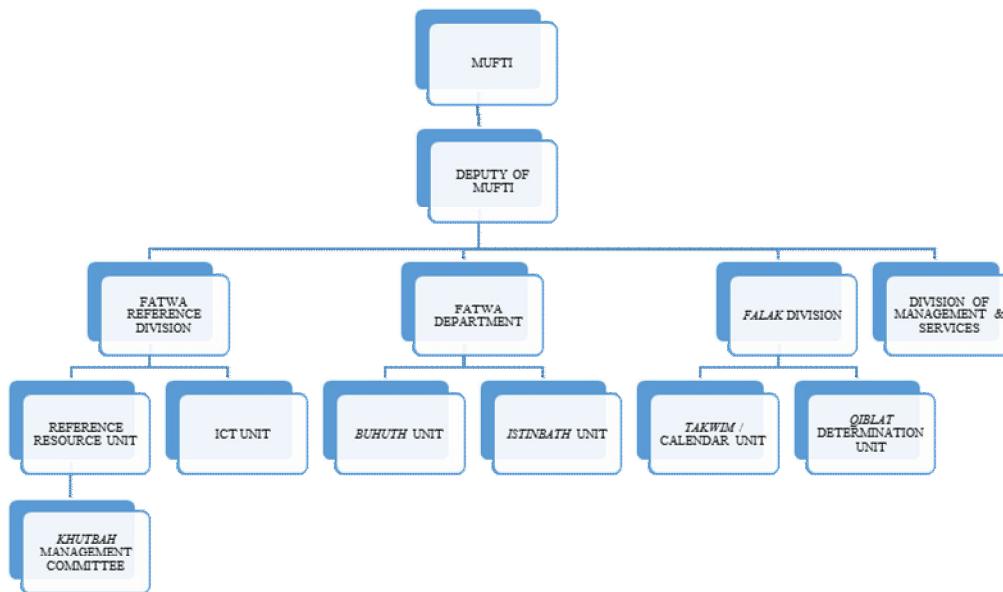
4. Sermon Management, Pahang Mufti Department

(a) Structure of Sermon Management Committee.

The Management of Friday sermon was entirely placed under the supervision of Pahang Mufti Department since 2000. A sermon committee and a panel of authors and reviewers were established, with both chaired by the Mufti and the most recent is Dato' Haji Abdul Rahman bin Osman (Ahmad bin Man, 2013).

Pahang Mufti Department is responsible in the management of the affairs of Islamic laws and *fatwa*-related matters at the state level. In Pahang, the Mufti acts as advisor to His Royal Highness Sultan and Islamic Council and Malay Custom of Pahang as stipulated under enactment 3, 1991 (section 35. Mufti's Authority).

Table 1: Organizational chart of the Sermon Management Committee, Pahang Mufti Department.



Source: Pahang Mufti Department

Table 1 shows the organizational chart for sermon management committee, a body entrusted to manage sermon-related matters. Dato' Hj. Abdul Rahman, as the grand Mufti of Pahang, alongside

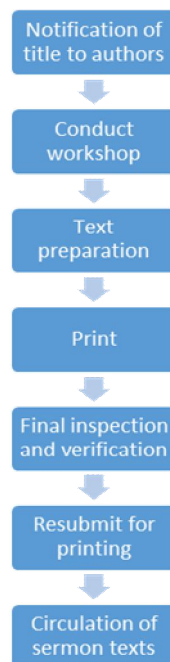
his deputy and JMNP, were supported by four other division which is; *Fatwa* Reference Division, *Fatwa* Divisions, *Falak* Division and *Management Services* Division. *Sermon Management Committee* is placed under the *Reference Resource Unit* which manages the preparation of sermons through the establishment of a secretariat for the sermon text preparation chaired by an assistant director with Mr.Ahmad bin Man being the current one.

(b) *Sermon Management Process at the Pahang State Mufti Department (JMNP)*

Friday sermon management process is carried out by this department for a particular year, starting with determining topics during a workshop held biannually for this purpose. In practice, a month before the workshop is held, sermon text writers will be notified in advance following topics determined earlier by the *Sermon Management Secretariat*. Topics are arranged according to the calendar, taking into account festive days, particular events and religious seasons throughout the year as well as current developments. (Ahmad bin Man, 2013)

Upon distribution of topics, the authors were instructed to prepare a complete draft with an introduction, arguments from the Holy Quran including names of chapters and verses. Quran translations must be conform to “*Al-Quran Mushaf Malaysia dan Terjemahannya*”. In addition, *hadiths* are taken from “*Maktabah Al-Syamilah*” website complete with its translation and narrator. (Ahmad bin Man, 2013)

Table2: Flow chart for the JMNP’s Friday sermon text publication process



Source: Pahang Mufti Department.

Table 2 indicated the flow chart for the Friday sermon text publication process obtained from the Pahang's Mufti Office. The process in the flow chart caters as preliminary provisions to obtain MS ISO 9001:2008 certification.

5. Result and Analysis of Study: Issues of Inter-faith relations in Friday Sermon Texts in Pahang

The scope of this study is narrowed down to the content of Friday sermon from the period of 2001 until 2010. However, according to Ahmad bin Man (2013), the collection of Friday sermon texts was only published in book form starting from 2003 through JMNP initiative. This study however, found that there were only seven compilation of Friday sermon texts in JMNP's possession namely for the years of 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010. The compilation of Friday sermon texts for the year 2004 was on the other hand not in JMNP's possession. Thus, the authors only refer to the existing Friday sermon texts held by JMNP.

(a) Categorization of Friday Sermon Headings.

There was indeed no fixed guideline on the categorization of Friday sermon headings. Ainuddin (2010), however, divides Friday sermons into several categories, namely (1) festivals in Islam, (2) public holidays, (3) belief, (4) *Sharia* (legal systems) and *Ibadah* (acts of worship), (5) morality, and (6) general issues. Since issues pertaining to Inter-faith relations and conflict, unity and tolerance among religions and racial have lately become an important matters at national level, hence the authors feel that there is a need to include new category of "Relationship and Conflict/Unity and Tolerance among Religions and Races". The authors use abbreviations to denote each category as in the table below:

Category	Focus of sermon's content
K1	Festivals in Islam such as <i>Maal Hijrah</i> , <i>Maulid Al-Rasul</i> , <i>Israk Mikraj</i> , etc.
K2	Public holidays such as New Year, Independence Day, Labor Day, etc.
K3	Belief over the unseen reality such as the signs of the Hereafter, the realm of the grave, deviant teachings, etc.

K4	<i>Sharia, ibadah or fiqh</i> such as Hajj, fasting during the month of Ramadan, banning of alcohol and gambling etc
K5	Morality such as courtesy, showing respect to parents, moral decadence among youth, drug abuse, etc.
K6	General issues and current prevailing events occurring inside and outside the country such as the Palestinian issue, natural disasters such as the tsunami, financial crises, etc.
New Category	
K7	Relationship and Conflict/Unity and Tolerance among Religions and Races

Table3: Categorization of Friday sermon

(b) Highlight of sermon content following their categories for the year 2003 to 2010

CATEGORY	FREQUENCY							TOTAL	PERCENTAGE (%)
	2003	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010		
K1	5	5	4	5	7	6	9	41	12%
K2	3	2	4	1	3	2	4	19	5%
K3	8	10	2	8	9	11	7	55	16%
K4	8	14	14	8	9	10	12	75	21%
K5	3	11	13	5	10	13	4	59	17%
K6	8	2	5	6	5	6	9	41	12%
K7	13	9	10	11	4	4	8	59	17%

Table 4: Categorization of JMNP's Friday sermon for a period of 7 years

Findings of this study are derived from the analysis carried towards the Friday sermon texts collected from 2003 to 2010. The focus of this study is to concentrate on K7 category namely issues pertaining Inter-faith relations, unity, conflict and cooperation.

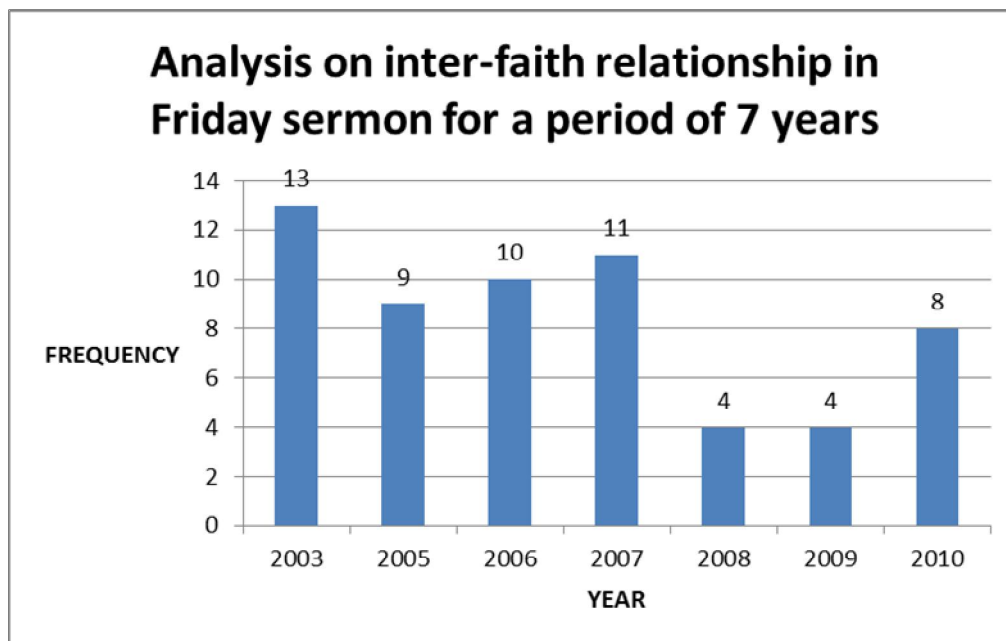
From the study, it was found that K4 category recorded the highest frequency in Friday sermons with 75 times (21%), followed by K7 category sharing the same frequency with K5 approximately 59 times (17%). K3 category falls in the third place with 55 times (16%), followed

by K6 category sharing the same position as K1 with 41 times (12%). K2 category recorded the least frequency and positioned at the last with the frequency of 19 times (5%).

Overall, findings of this observation give clear picture and evidence that throughout these years, the focus towards Inter-faith relations, unity, conflict and cooperation was the second most discussed topic in Friday sermons. This shows that the Pahang Mufti Department prioritizes topics as these to be delivered during Friday sermon. It also serves as a clear indication that the Pahang Mufti Department was very thoughtful with developments occurred at national level, particularly matters pertaining to Inter-faith relations, unity, conflict and cooperation as well as the importance of these topic until it was selected as topics for Friday sermons. Heavy emphasis on the aspect of unity and tolerance in Inter-faith relations in this country has always been a smart move to nurture mutual respect among diversified religions.

(c) The Highest Frequency of Inter-faith relation Issues recorded in Friday Sermon for a Period of 7 Years and its Contributing Factors.

Graph 1 below shows that issues on Inter-faith relations were discussed the most in 2003, with the frequency of 13 times or 27 % and in 2007 with the frequency of 11 times or 26 %.



The graph shows that issues surrounding inter-faith relations are the second highest in the period of 7 years, or specifically 59 times (of frequency) or 17 %. The authors assume that this is contributed by a strategic plan developed by the authorities specifically Pahang State Mufti Department. Upon the completion of this study, it is found that the strategic plan is still in progress; thus, there are several factors contributing to its outcome. Among the identified factors are:

(1) The awareness of JMNP towards inter-faith relations understanding.

According to Ahmad bin Man (2013), although this has not been discussed in the Pahang Mufti Department's strategic plan, the grand Mufti himself were aware about how crucial this issues of inter-faith and that sermon serves as important tool to enhance Muslims understanding to issues at hand.

(2) The Introduction of Islam Hadhari (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, 2007; Jawiah Dakir, 2007; Mahmood Zuhdi Ab. Majid et al, 2008)

The appointment of the 5th Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has more or less influenced the national unity policy. Additional to this, was the introduction of the Islam Hadhari concept that he pioneered back in 2004. This concept serves as an approach that put emphasis on development, concentrating in the construction of civilization immersed with Islamic principles, enhance life quality through mastery of knowledge, and development in human, health and physical.

In Malaysia, everyone has the right to equal position and rights. This does not exclude the minority and the non-Muslims. Their position continues to be uplifted based on the prescribed fundamental rights and responsibilities. The Islam Hadhari approach also seeks to ensure that there is no neglect in terms of welfare, and the rights of the minority in the society were protected, irrespective of race or ethnicity in order to stand together as prosperous and successful members of the community. Championing the cause for this group has been emphasized in seven tenets of Islam Hadhari. Among the values that are to be developed is to be more attentive towards the ethnic groups and the minority. (Jawiah Dakir, 2007)

(3) The Lina Joy. issue (Nathaniel Tan and John Lee, 2008; Anwar Ibrahim, 2007; Lim Kit Siang, 2007; Syariah Lawyer Association, 2007; PEMBELA, 2007; World Muslim Congress, 2007; Christian Federation of Malaysia, 2007, Council of Churches of Malaysia, 2007; Aliran, 2007; Hindu Sangam, 2007; Bar Council, 2007)

The Lina Joy case was once the subject of global attention when she challenged the Muslim authority through her demand in removing the identification of “Islam” in her identity card. The apostasy issue began to take its toll due to Lina Joy vs. The Federal Territory Islamic Council & Ors case ([2005] 6 MLJ 193).

It was truly an eye-opener so much so that it raised the polemics and received various reactions from the non-Muslims, Muslim scholars and even the government itself. Societies are urged to look into the apostasy issue in an honest and seriousness and to combat it enthusiastically.

(4) JAIP’s initiatives towards new Muslims.

The Pahang Islamic Department has on its website, announced the creation of special unit known as *Ukhuwwah* or Solidarity Unit, responsible to conduct da’wah to non-Muslims, held program to enhance understanding of Islam and aid women and disable people. It is assumed that this has been one of the initiatives by the JAIP to strengthen the inter-faith relations that have become the mainstay of JMNP in spreading Islamic teachings. (<http://jaip.pahang.gov.my/>)

6. Conclusion

Conclusion that can be drawn from this study is (1) there are seven categories of sermons in the process of preparing sermon texts in Pahang, and they are K1: Muslim festivities and religious events, K2: Public Holidays, K3: Belief, K4: Shari’a and Acts of Worship, K5: Morality, K6: Current issues abroad and K7: Inter-faith relations. (2) Study shows that the main focus of the sermon category is K7 namely the fact that inter-faith religion is ranked the second highest or 59 times (17%) being discussed in the Friday sermon in the period of 10 years. (3) The factors behind the high frequency of the inter-faith issues being discussed are; (a) JMNP awareness towards issues surrounding inter-faith relations, (b) The introduction of Islam Hadhari, (c) Freedom of Religion involving Lina Joy Case, (d) JAIP’s initiatives on new Muslims convert.

All in all, the finding from this observation has given us clear picture that within these seven years, the focus on inter-faith relations, unity, conflicts and cooperation have been the second most selected topics discussed in Friday sermons. This goes to show that Pahang State Mufti

Department prioritises topics as these to be made as Friday sermons. It also proves that the Pahang State Mufti Department is aware of the development of inter-faith relations, unity, conflict and cooperation inside or outside Malaysia, and its importance so much so be included as sermon on Friday. A serious emphasis over these matters are seen as wise move due to its ability to inculcate respect amongst religions especially in a pluralistic society as Malaysia. In an initial recommendation, the authors suggests that an intra-dialogue model be developed focusing on Friday sermon as the platform.

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