

Religious Tolerance in Malaysia: A Comparative Study between the Different Religious Groups

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Abstract

This paper reports a study conducted on 2400 respondents in Malaysia on their tolerance and mutual respect to each other religion. The study is important in order to map the religious tolerance in Malaysia and the findings can be used to plan future action by related authorities. The respondents, males and females of different ethnics, from the age 18 to 45 years old were obtained randomly from all over the country. The respondents were given booklets of questionnaire containing statements provided with responses in the form of Likert type scale i.e. 1. Strongly agree, 2. Agree, 3. Not sure, 4. Disagree, and 5. Strongly disagree. The booklets were collected and the raw data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), to obtain the mean responses, the percentages of the responses. The mean responses were tested using the t-test to know if the difference of mean were significant or not. One data of the responses for the statements "I am prepared to do away with some of the teaching of my religion for the sake of national unity" was analyzed. The findings of the study indicate that the 61.7% of the respondents rejected the statement. On the basis of the religion of the respondents, the rejection of the statements were Muslim 72.1%, Buddhists 35.55, Hindu 33.3% and the Christian 43.2%. There were significant difference between the means response of the respondent base on the religion and the difference of mean were significant. T-test analysis shows that there were significant different between the mean response of the Muslim respondents with the other religious groups.

Keywords: tolerance, Malaysia, religion, ethnic, comparative

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multiracial, multi-religious and multi-cultural country. The population consist of the indigenous Malays who are mostly Muslim, The Chinese who are mostly Buddhists, Taoists, Traditionalist adherence and some are Christians, the Indian who are mostly Hindu and significant percentage who are Muslim, the Sabah indigenous people and the Sarawak indigenous people who are mostly Christian and pagan, and other religious minorities such as Sikhism and Baha'i (Mitsuo et al., 2001).

The country has been experiencing peace and stability since the independent from the British in 1957 with minor racial tension such as in May 1969 (Thompson, 2005). With the prevailing peace and stability Malaysia has been able to pursue economic development and the improvement of the living standard of the people. Racism and intolerance have been checked through various programs carried out by the government including the introduction of courses at the different levels of education such as the Ethnic Relation course which was introduced and taught at all the public institutes of higher education and also the Islamic and Asian Civilizations course. The objective of both courses is to inculcate the understanding and tolerance toward different races, religions and cultures. The study thus attempted to know the level of tolerance of the people toward each other especially religious tolerance. The findings of the study could be used by the government to improve further the effectiveness of various programs to inculcate tolerance among the Malaysian.

2. Literature Review

The ethnic and religious composition of Malaysia prompted the ruling government since the Independent from British colonial power to take steps to bolster the national unity. In the past the government introduced the concept of *Muhibbah* (the concept of mutual understanding) (Landis & Albert, 2012), and now the government is

promoting the One Malaysia concept which promotes the unity of the Malaysian of diverse ethnics and religions groups (Martines, 2014). The steps to forge the national unity which have been taken by the government since the Independent from the British colonial power in 1957 indicate the urgency of the national unity since without it progress in the economic development cannot be achieved. There are many hurdles which need to be address for example from the racial and religious aspects, which occasionally because of the jockeying for power by the political parties. Racial and religious issues occasionally being used by the politicians to garner supports from their for their political parties. Therefore the issue of national unity continues to take the central stage in the Malaysia society. The multi-ethnics and multi-religious country such as Malaysia faces greater challenges compared those countries in which the people are single race countries. One of the greatest challenges is on the religious tolerance, Religion is a sensitive issue, especially among the people who take their belief seriously (Bennet, 2008). Since most Muslim take their religion seriously compared to the other religious groups, the Muslims seem to take many things in term of religious views including politics, education, economy, legal system.

Islam as a religion indeed plays an important roles in the Muslim daily life, by regulating the do's and don'ts. Large segment of the Malay-Muslim society who are the majority of the people in Malaysia, are educated both in the Islamic tradition as well as the secular system. They learn the basic of the Islamic teaching formally in the private religious schools as well as the government schools. Among the subject thought is the Qur'an and the practices of the Prophet Muhammad (*sunnah*). The religious education received by them molds their view on the social relation including the relation with their fellow non-Muslim citizen. The Qur'an which is the ultimate source of the Islamic teaching emphasizes that there is no compulsion in religion (Zafar, 2014). The Qur'anic verse (2: 256) which says that there is no compulsion in religion has been explained by the Muslim scholar Maududi (1991) to mean do not force anyone to become Muslim, because Islam is plain and clear and its proofs and evidence are plain and clear. The Qur'an also commands the believer not to ridicule other religion objects of worship (Chaudhry, 1993).

3. The Research Methodology

The method of the study was the questionnaire method, in which the respondents were given a set of questions of various proposition statements with given five choices of responses. These responses were 1. Strongly agree, 2. Agree, 3. Not sure, 4. Disagree, and 5. Strongly disagree. The respondents have to choose only one response for each proposition statement. The proposition statements were focused toward tolerance to various social practices of the religious group i.e. Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism. The questionnaire was later collected and analyzed using the SPSS program. The respondents were selected randomly from various places of the country, involving male and female respondents from different ages, ranging from 18 to 40 years. The respondents were also from different race and religious background i.e. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christian and other smaller religious group. The respondents were give about 15 to 30 minutes to respond to the questionnaire, and at the end of the session, the booklets were collected. The raw data were analyzed to determine the mean of the responses of the whole respondents which will indicate the population general responses, the descriptive analysis to determine the percentage of each choice of response which will indicate the percentage of the respondents who accept or unsure or reject the proposition statements. T-test were also conducted to see whether the difference between the mean responses of the different religious groups were significant or not. The findings were discussed and conclusion was made.

3.1 The Respondents

The following tables show the background of the respondents.

Table 1. The percentages of the respondents based on the religion

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Islam | 1705 | 72.0 | 72.0 | 72.0 |
| Buddhism | 394 | 16.6 | 16.6 | 88.6 |
| Hinduism | 63 | 2.7 | 2.7 | 91.3 |
| Christianity | 190 | 8.0 | 8.0 | 99.3 |

Table 1 shows that the Muslim respondents make up 72.0% of the respondents, the Buddhists respondents make

up 16.6%, the Hindu respondents make up 2.7%, Christian 8.0%, no religious affiliation 0.7%. The other smaller religious group consists of only about 0.2% of the respondent. The percentage does not exactly reflect the demography of the Malaysian population due to certain problems encountered during the data collection.

Table 2. The gender distribution

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Male | 610 | 25.8 | 25.8 | 25.8 |
| Female | 1754 | 74.1 | 74.1 | 99.8 |

Table 2 shows that the male respondents make up 25.8% of the respondents while the female respondents make up of 74.1%. Female respondents were 3 times more than the male respondents. The percentage seemed to reflect the composition of gender in the various education institutions in Malaysia, such as the universities and colleges where the female are more dominant than the male.

Table 3. The age distribution

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|--------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| 18-20 years | 1744 | 73.6 | 73.6 | 73.6 |
| 21-25 years | 540 | 22.8 | 22.8 | 96.5 |
| 26-30 years | 36 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 98.0 |
| 31- 40 years | 43 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 99.8 |

Table 3 shows that the majority of the respondents were between the ages of 18 to 20 years old, which make up 70.8% of the respondents, the next age group was between 21 to 25 years old which make up 25.3%, 26 to 30 years make up 1.7% and 31 to 40 years make up 1.9%.

3.2 Data Analysis

The data was first analyzed to obtain the mean response for all the respondents, followed by the mean responses according to the religious group. The responses on the statement “I prepare to do away with some of the religious teaching of my religion for the sake of unity” were analyzed according to the percentages. The result of the analysis is shown in the following table.

Table 4. The percentages of the responses

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Strongly agree | 100 | 4.2 | 4.2 | 4.2 |
| Agree | 273 | 11.5 | 11.5 | 15.8 |
| Not sure | 521 | 22.0 | 22.0 | 37.8 |
| Disagree | 700 | 29.6 | 29.6 | 67.3 |
| Strongly disagree | 760 | 32.1 | 32.1 | 99.4 |

Table 4 shows that 4.2 % of the respondents strongly agree to the statement, 11.5 % agree, 22 % not sure, 29.6 % disagree and 32.1 % strongly disagree. Therefore analysis show that the more than half of the respondents 61.7% (combination of response 4 and 5) rejected the statement, 15.7% (combination of response 1 and 2) accepted the statement and 22.0% was not sure. The percentages of the responses are plotted into a line graph as shown in Figure 1.

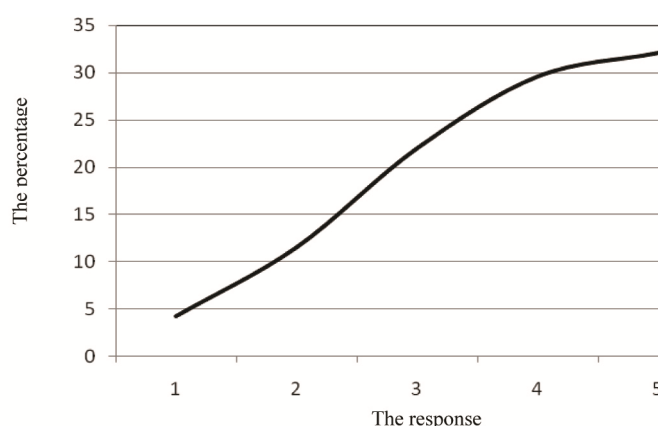


Figure 1. The line graph of the Percentages of response

Figure 1 shows that the percentages of the responses increase from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). This implies that the percentages of responses gradually increase from acceptance to rejection. The data was analyzed to obtain the general mean of the response. The result of the analysis is shown in Table 5.

Table 5. The mean of the response for all the respondents

| N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|------|---------|---------|--------|----------------|
| 2368 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.7555 | 1.16044 |
| 2368 | | | | |

Table 5 shows that the mean response to the statement “I prepare to do away with some of the religious teaching of my religion” is .7555. The mean lies between 3 and 4 which show that the rejection of the statement is not that strong. The next analysis was to obtain the percentages of the responses based on the religion of the respondents. The result of the analysis is shown in Table 6.

Table 6. The percentages of the responses based on the religion of the respondents

| | Islam | Buddhism | Hinduism | Christianity |
|-------------------|-------|----------|----------|--------------|
| Strongly agree | 44 | 32 | 3 | 16 |
| Agree | 125 | 80 | 17 | 48 |
| Not sure | 305 | 143 | 22 | 47 |
| Disagree | 528 | 106 | 12 | 52 |
| Strongly disagree | 689 | 33 | 9 | 27 |
| | 1691 | 394 | 63 | 190 |

Table 6 shows that the responses of the Muslim respondents were strongly agreed were 2.6%, agreed was 7.4%, not sure is 18.0%, disagreed were 31.4% and strongly disagreed were 40.6%. Therefore the Muslim respondents who accepted the statement is 10% (Combination of response 1 and 2), those who rejected it is 72.1% (Combination of response 4 and 5) and the percentage of the respondents who is not sure is 18%. The percentages of the Buddhists respondents who accepted the statement is 28.4% (combination of response 1 and 2), those who rejected the statement is 35.4% (combination of response 4 and 5) and those who were not sure is 22%. The percentages of the Hindu respondents who accepted the statement was 31.8% (combination of response 1 and 2), those who rejected the statement was 33.3% (combination of response 4 and 5) and those who were not sure was 35%. The percentages of the Christian respondents who accepted the statement was 32.7%, those who rejected the statement was 43.2% and those who were not sure were 24.1%.

The next analysis is to find the means of the responses base on the religion of the respondents. The result of the

analysis is shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Mean response different religious group

| Religion | Mean | N | Std. Deviation |
|-----------|--------|------|----------------|
| Islam | 3.8553 | 1341 | 1.25423 |
| Buddha | 2.8755 | 265 | .98644 |
| Hindu | 3.0000 | 47 | 1.26834 |
| Christian | 2.9747 | 158 | 1.13961 |

Table 7 shows that the mean response for Muslim respondent is 3.8553, the mean response of the Buddhist respondents is 2.8755, the mean response of the Hindu respondents is 3.000 and the mean response for the Christian respondents is 2.9747. 3.75, the Hindu 3.0000, Christian 2. The result indicates that the Muslim seem to be more reluctant to do away with some of the religious teaching, followed by the Hindus. The difference of mean between the religious groups is ascertain using the t-test as shown in Tables 8 and 9.

Table 8. T-test between the mean responses of Muslim and Buddhist

| F | Sig. | T | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--------|------|--------|---------|-----------------|
| 27.989 | .000 | 12.004 | 1604 | .000 |
| | | 14.077 | 450.562 | .000 |

Table 8 shows that the t-test between the mean response of the Muslim and the Buddhist is significant. The p value is of the test is 0.00 and the confident level of 95 % which is smaller than the critical value of 0.05.

While the difference of mean between the Muslim and the Hindu is also significant. The t-test result between both respondents is shown in Table 9.

Table 9. T-test between the mean response of Muslim and Hindu

| F | Sig. | T | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|------|------|-------|--------|-----------------|
| .021 | .885 | 4.594 | 1386 | .000 |
| | | 4.546 | 49.205 | .000 |

Table 9 shows that the difference of mean between the mean of the Muslim respondents and the mean response of the Hindu respondents is significant, The p value is 0.00 at the confidence limit of 95% and the value is smaller from the critical value of 0.05.

Moreover, the t-test of the mean between the mean of the Muslim respondents and the mean of the Christian respondents was also carried out and the result of the t-test is shown in Table 10.

Table 10. T-test between the mean response of Muslim and Christian

| F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|-------|------|-------|---------|-----------------|
| 6.786 | .009 | 8.425 | 1497 | .000 |
| | | 9.087 | 204.522 | .000 |

Table 10 shows that the difference of mean between the response of the Muslim respondents and the mean response of the Christian respondents is significant. The p value is 0.000 at the confident level of 95% and it is smaller than the critical value 0.05.

The next t-test is between the mean response of the Buddhists respondents and the mean response of the Hindu

respondents. The result of the test is shown in Table 11.

Table 11. T-test between the mean response of Buddhists and Hindu

| F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|-------|------|-------|--------|-----------------|
| 5.629 | .018 | -.762 | 310 | .447 |
| | | -.640 | 56.286 | .525 |

Table 11 shows that the difference of mean between the mean response of the Buddhists and the mean response of the Hindu respondents is not significant. The p value is at 95% confidence limit is less bigger than 0.05.

The next t-test was conducted between the mean response of the Buddhists respondents and the mean response of the Christian respondents. The result of the test is shown in Table 12.

Table 12. The t-test between the mean response of Buddhists and Christian

| F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|-------|------|-------|---------|-----------------|
| 1.945 | .164 | -.943 | 421 | .346 |
| | | -.910 | 293.742 | .364 |

Table 12 shows that the difference of mean between the mean response of the Buddhists and the mean response of the Christian respondents is not significant. The p value is at 95% confidence limit is less bigger than 0.05.

The next t test was conducted between the mean response of the Hindu respondents and the mean response of the Christian respondents. The result of the test is shown in Table 13.

Table 13. The t-test between the mean response of Hindu and Christian

| F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|-------|------|------|--------|-----------------|
| 1.355 | .246 | .130 | 203 | .897 |
| | | .123 | 69.571 | .903 |

Table 13 shows that the difference of mean between the mean response of the Hindu and the mean response of the Christian respondents is not significant. The p value is at 95% confidence limit is less bigger than 0.05. Hence, the significance of the mean difference between all the religions is shown in Table 14.

Table 14. The Significant difference between the religious groups

| Religion | Islam | Buddhism | Hindu | Christian |
|-----------|-------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Islam | | Significant | Significant | Significant |
| Buddhism | Significant | | Not Significant | Not Significant |
| Hindu | Significant | Not Significant | | Not Significant |
| Christian | Significant | Not significant | Not significant | |

Table 14 shows that the only significant different are only present between the mean of the Muslim respondents with the mean of the rest of the followers of other religions. The means differences between the other religions are not significant.

To know whether the attitude of the Muslim respondents has any effect on the religious tolerance in the country, an analysis of to obtain the mean response based on the religion of the respondents was made. The response to the statement range from 1. Strongly agree, 2. Agree, 3. Not sure, 4. Disagree and 5. Strongly disagree to the statement "The believer of religion should not disturb and threatened the other religion believers" was made. The

result of the analysis is shown in Table 15.

Table 15. Mean response according to religious group

| Religion | Mean | N | Std. Deviation |
|-----------|--------|------|----------------|
| Islam | 1.5183 | 1341 | .84677 |
| Buddhism | 1.6604 | 265 | .92408 |
| Hinduism | 1.1702 | 47 | .37988 |
| Christian | 1.5759 | 158 | .77619 |

Table 15 shows that the mean responses are smaller than 2 which show that all the religions accept the proposition statement “The believer of a religion should not disturb and threatened the believer of other religion” with the mean response of the Hindu respondents shows the smallest mean, followed by the Muslim, Christian and Buddhist. This indicates that all the religion respect each other belief including the Muslim who were seen to be more strict in their belief. The t-test show that there were no significant difference between the religious group except between Hinduism and the rest of the other religious group.

4. Discussion

The results of the analysis show that the Malaysia generally rejected the statement “I am prepared to do away with some of the teaching of my religion”. However the rejection is not strong since the mean is 3.6023 which lies between 3 and 4 as shown in table 5. The analysis for percentage show that only 56% of the whole respondents rejected the statement.

Further analysis shows that there are difference of mean responses between the respondents of different religion with the Muslim show the greatest rejection, followed by the mean response of the Hindu. The mean response of the Christian and the mean response of the Buddhists as shown by table 6. The t-test analysis shows that there is a significant different between the mean of the response of the Muslim respondents and the mean responses of the followers of other religions while there was no significant different between the responses of the follower of other religion, other than Islam. The findings show that the Muslim respondents are the most reluctant religious groups to forego some of the teaching of their religion compared to the other religions.

The study shows that the Malaysian of all religious group seem not to agree to discard the some of the religious teaching for the sake of solidarity. The government has so far pushes the Malaysian to share their festivals with the other religious group be it the celebration after the fasting month of Ramadan for the Muslim, or the Chinese New Year, or the Christmas and the Deepavali for the Hindus. The aim of the sharing of the festivals is according to Mahathir (2013) is to create inclusive national identity. The Muslim festival, known as *Eidul fitri* is a religious festival which is celebrated by the Muslim after one month long fasting. Holst (2012), quoting the *Malaysia kini* news portal claimed that the Muslim scholars in Malaysia wanted the *kongsi raya* (sharing religious festival) reviewed. The reported action by the Muslim scholars was the strongest indication that the Muslim are not prepared to forgo some of the religious teaching for the sake of solidarity. The followers of other religion, i.e. the Buddhists, the Christian and the Hindus seem to be less strict than the Muslim respondents. According to Tan (1988) most of the Buddhists in Malaysia of the Chinese descent do not take their religion seriously although they will throng the Buddhist temple during the *Wesak* celebration. The Hindu mean response of the Hindu respondents is second to the mean response of the Muslim respondents, meaning the Hindu rejection of the statement “I am prepare to forgo some of the teaching of my religion for the national unity”. Hinduism in Malaysia is experiencing revivalism and this increases the religious identity of the Hindu. Kent (2005) pointed out that religiosity give the Hindu the sense of inner strength in facing alienation of the modern society.

Despite the reluctance of the followers of the religion in Malaysia to forgo some of the religious teaching for the sake of the national unity, there seem to be mutual understanding that people should not disturb the practices of the other religion. Table 15 which shows the mean responses of the responses of various religious followers to the statement “The believer of religion should not disturb and threatened the other religion believers” are close to each other. The means responses are between 1 and 2, which show that the respondents accept the statement strongly. However the mean response of the Hindu respondents is the smallest i.e. 1.1702. The Hindu respondents are more sensitive to the issue because by the nature of the religion itself, they set up the temples in various places sometime without prior permission from the owner of the land when the temples are set up.

Therefore temples are demolished when the need for the other use of the land arise. The Hindu right group known as Hindraf known to be the most vocal opposition to the Hindu temple demolition and hence contribute to its popularity among the Hindu in Malaysia (Weiss, 2014). This is the main contribution factor why the response of the Hindu respondents is the strongest acceptance to the statement “The followers of religions should not disturb the other religion practices”.

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