

State “Salafism” in Malaysia: Development of the “Sunnah” reform ideology in Perlis, Malaysia

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Abstract: Since the arrival of Islam in Tanah Melayu or Malaya, traditionalist scholars have dominated the Islamic discourse through their close relation with the rulers (Sultans). Their domination over religious authorities and Islamic educational institutions has shaped the state-version of Islam in Malaysia. However, in Perlis, the northernmost state in Malaysia, Middle-Eastern graduate reformists, also known as Kaum Muda were preaching the earliest version of Salafism in the early 20th century. They found political patronage from the ruler of the state, hence imposing their version of Islamic teachings as the prevailing Islamic discourse of the state, which is also known until today as the “Sunnah Perlis” teachings. The widely presumptuous masses and researchers pointed that the dominating influence of the reform agenda or “Sunnah” in the state of Perlis was due to the state authority’s patronage based on historical facts that the “Sunnah” itself first emerged in Perlis in the early 20th century by the blessings of the then ruler.

Keywords: Islah, Kaum Muda, Malaya, religious reform, Sunnah Perlis, Salafism.

Introduction

For many centuries, Islamic discourse in pre-independence Malaysia or what was known as Tanah Melayu or Malaya was dominated by the traditionalist scholars through their domination on religious authority and both formal and informal Islamic education institutions, such as the mosques, surau, madrasahs and pondok (Gordon, 1999; Roff, 1962: 162-91, 1967) which was established due to their close relation with the rulers (Shellabear, 1978: 240; Thomaz, 1993: 82). However, the scenario shifted in the early 1920s mainly following the introduction

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of a modern madrasah system initiated by young ulama who were mostly graduates of the al-Azhar University in Egypt (Abdul Hamid, 2010). These al-Azhar graduates were influenced by the earlier version of Salafiyyah reform ideology of Jamal din Afghani and his disciple, Muhammad Abduh.¹ This earlier version of Salafiyyah thoughts, propagated among others, the ideal of Pan-Islamism, and other Afghani-Abduh reform doctrine that emphasized the importance of reviving the Muslim ummah globally through their progressive ideas of re-opening the gate of *ijtihād*, relinquishing innovation (*bid'ah*) and reconciling some elements of modernity into the Islamic culture of the people (Farish A Nor, 2004: 1/ 21).

The graduates, widely known as Kaum Muda (Young People), also voiced their resentment towards some of the cultural practices of the Malay community, which according to them were the means to *shirk* and *bid'ah* (Ustaz Abdul Razak Abdul Rahman, Personal Communication, 17 August 2012).² The large number of ideas propagated by Kaum Muda created an atmosphere of hostility towards the establishment, and caused considerable backlash from the country's religious authorities. Many incidents of debates and clashes are recorded as having occurred between the Kaum Muda and the establishment. These ended, in most cases, in endless polemics (Means, 2009: 23). Due to their controversial nature, the Kaum Muda were also labeled as "Wahabi" (Maszlee Malik, 2013: 52-6).³

Despite the continuous domination of the traditionalists in shaping the state-version of Islam in many states in Malaysia, however, in Perlis, a state located in the northern part of Malaysia, the Kaum Muda gained political patronage from the ruler of the state (Othman, 1996: 101). The state declared its inclination towards the reform ideas, and proudly established its own approach towards understanding Islam, which has been known as the "Sunnah" way of Islam or in some cases coined as "*ĪlĒh*" (Shukor Mat, 2000). They were known for their call to *ijtihād* by referring directly to the Qur'an and Sunnah, i.e. without referring to any specific *madhhab* (legalistic school of thought). Consequently, the state religious enactments and rulings are not bound to any *madhhab*, in contrast to other states in Malaysia (Ustaz Abdul Razak Abdul Rahman, Personal Communication, 17 August 2012). This legacy of the reform agenda of "Kaum Muda version of Salafism" also came to be known as the "Sunnah Perlis".⁴ They sometimes call themselves as "golongan sunnah" (Sunnah Group) as against "golongan madhhabi" (madhhabic group) of the mainstream Muslims (Md Sadik Md Ismail, Personal Communication, 25 August 2014).⁵

It was widely discussed that the dominating influence of "Sunnah" in the state of Perlis was due to the state authority's patronage to the reform agenda. It is assumed that the state patronage was due to many factors such as Rulers' patronage to "Sunnah" reformists agenda, Ruler's power represented by Majlis Agama Perlis (religious authority) which is directly under the Rulers' influence, state administration represented by the ruling government who's pre-dominantly occupied by the "Sunnah" followers and activists and relentless efforts by "Sunnah" preachers throughout mosques, schools and publications (Abdullah, 2007, Saadan Man, 2007: 141-56). However, the impact of these factors varied from one time to another.

This study aims at examining the historical development of "Sunnah Perlis" discourse as another earlier version of Salafism and analyzes its influence on the state of Perlis. To that end, this study employs a historical method in understanding some important milestones on the historical account of the Sunnah reform agenda in Perlis and its development in different periods through literatures, reports, interviews and focus-group discussions. The term "Sunnah" is used in this paper intertwined with "Islah" as widely used by other researchers, to maintain the level of objectivity by calling the idea according to what the proponents called it.

"Sunnah" in Perlis: Historical background and development

Perlis is the smallest state in Malaysia and situated at the northern part of the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The capital of Perlis is Kangar, while the royal capital is Arau, where the Rulers of Perlis reside. It is bordered by the state of Kedah to the south and Thailand to the north, and was initially part of Kedah under Siamese rule for centuries. However, in 1842, the Siamese made Perlis separated from Kedah and principality directly vassal to Bangkok. On 20 May 1843, the Siamese made Sayyid Hussain Jamalullail from Hadhrami Arab Sayyid decendent, who was also a maternal son of the Sultan of Kedah to become the first "Raja" of Perlis (Adil, 1981: 4-8). This has made Perlis a sovereign state. His descendents still rule Perlis, but as Rajas, instead of Sultan due to their non-Malay origin.

"Sunnah" in Perlis was rather a 20th century phenomenon as part of the global "Islah" or reform movement that was part of the Pan-Islamism agenda of Afghani-Abduh in Egypt. The development of "Sunnah" in Perlis throughout the two centuries (20th and 21st) can be divided into six phases or periods. The establishment period, the stagnation period, the re-enhancement period, the crisis period, the recovery-revival period and the golden period. The categorization of

the periods is mostly based on Abdul Rahman Abdullah's chapter entitled "Sejarah Islah di Perlis" (the History of Islah in Perlis) in his book, *Aliran Dakwah di Malaysia, Satu Titik Pertemuan* (Dakwah Trends in Malaysia: a Meeting Point) (Abdullah, 2007: 161-73). However, an additional period was inserted into this paper, which is the "Golden Period" of Sunnah, which occurred during the term of Shahidan Kassim as the Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) along with his Sunnah acquaintance, and also his reference, Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin as the Mufti of the State of Perlis. The "golden" period was not fully studied by Abdul Rahman, he only mentioned it briefly with the final stage of recovery-revival stage, which is not doing justice to the historical facts.

Establishment period (1920s – 1930s)

There are few theories on who was the first person responsible to bring the Sunnah reform ideas to Perlis. According to many researchers, it was Lebai Kechik who came to Perlis from Padang in the year 1925 (Ijtimak al-Sunnah Perlis: 90)⁶. However, Shukor Mat has refuted this theory. According to Mat, the first attempt to bring Sunnah idea was done instead by Syeikh Hassan Sarbani whose real name was Syeikh Hassan b. Ahmad, who came to Perlis from Surabaya in the year 1916. However, he was chased away by Raja Alwi due to the controversial nature of his thoughts, and migrated to Johore and Pulau Pinang accordingly (Shukor Mat, 2000: 7-8). Despite the failure of his first attempt, he made his return to Perlis in the year 1926, and managed to get full support from a local religious scholar, Haji Abdul Ghani b. Dato' Sakti, and a well-known community leader, Tuan Haji Abdullah b. Ahmad (Shukor Mat, 2000: 7-8).

Wan Ahmad, in his account on the emergence of Sunnah idea in Perlis suggests that a scholar from Hadramawt, Yemen, Syed Ibrahim, had his own contribution as well in spreading the reform idea in Perlis (Wan Daud, nd). However, according to historical record, it was Haji Ahmad bin Muhammad or known as Haji Ahmad Hakim was the first person responsible to propose a radical change to the conventional practice of zakat collection and distribution in Perlis as part of the reform proposal to Raja Alwi in the year 1927 (Abdullah, 2007: 177). This particular incident has been the turning point that led to the positive attitude of the palace towards the reform idea in religious matters, despite waves of rejection from traditionalist local scholars. It also opened a new chapter in the support of the palace to the struggle of reform idea later known as the Sunnah or Ahlu Sunnah wal-Jamaah method.

Haji Ahmad Hakim was then supported by his other two comrades, a political figure, Wan Ahmad bin Wan Daud, and a local scholar, Syeikh Ahmad bin Mohd Hashim to spread the reform idea (*iġġġġ*) in Perlis (Abdullah, 1997: 219). Amongst the three, Wan Ahmad was known of his pro-active role in promoting Sunnah or *Islah* amongst the authority, thus getting the support from the palace. He was reported to have established communication and relations with Kaum Muda's icon, Syed Syiekh al-Hadi in Penang and succeeded in getting Abdul Wahab Abdullah, who was the assistant editor of *Saudara* magazine belonging to al-Hadi of Penang.⁷ Abdul Wahab had a significant role in spreading Kaum Muda ideas in Perlis.

Wan Ahmad along with his two comrades was known in Perlis Sunnah history as Tiga Mat (the three Mats) (Abdullah, 1997: 219). They were identified as having been heavily influenced by the writings of Hassan Bandung from Persatuan Islam (PERSIS), Indonesia. Apart from the Tiga Mat, another noteworthy scholar who has contributed to establishing the Sunnah idea in Perlis was Abu Bakar al-Ashaari, an Azhar graduate (1925-1932), and a former active leader of student movement Jam'iyat al-Malayuwiyyah (Malays Association), which comprises of students from Malaya and Indonesia in Egypt along with the Indonesian prominent reformist leader, Abdul Kahar Muzakkir. Akin to other reformists of Kaum Muda during his time, al-Asha'ari contributed significantly to the *Saudara* magazine while teaching in Pulau Pinang. Tiga Mat invited al-Asha'ari to Perlis along with Abdul Wahab. He began his career in Perlis as a teacher at Alawiyah madrasah, but then given a more substantive role as the Imam of Alawi mosque in Kangar (Abdullah, 2007: 175-77).

It was the collective efforts of Tiga Mat, Abdul Wahab and al-Ashaari that managed to put a foundational pillar to the teaching of Sunnah or *iġġġġ* in Perlis in what is coined by Abdul Rahman as the "Establishment Period" (Abdullah, 2007: 175-77). It was during this "establishment period" that Alawiyah Madrasah and Alwi mosque have been the propagation bastion of the reformists, along with their writings, especially those of Abu Bakar al-Ashaari. Amongst the factor that paved the wave of Sunnah reform idea to spread all around Perlis, especially in Kangar and Arau, was the full support they received from the religious authority and the palace. Raja Syed Alwi, the king of Perlis was known for his open support for the reform idea along with the influence of Tiga Mat.

Stagnation period (1941-1945)

The honeymoon period of the Sunnah reformist did not last long. Japanese Occupation ended the privileges enjoyed by the Sunnah reformists. The Japanese

appointed a new ruler, Syed Hamzah, brother of Raja Alwi on 2 February 1943. The new ruler was known for his disagreements with the former king, Syed Alwi and his aides, the Sunnah reformists. He began to exclude all those who were associated with the former ruler and keeping them away from any administrative post in the state. Most of the Sunnah reformists, apart from Syeikh Ahmad, have gone through their tough time and were pushed to abandon their reformation agenda during the occupation period. Syed Hamzah also appointed those without inclination towards Sunnah reform idea to lead the Religious authority administration and consistently expressed his resentment towards the Sunnah reform idea, which he called a deviant teaching (Abdullah, 2007: 178-81).

An interesting fact to ponder about this period is the situation of other Kaum Muda or pro-Kaum Muda activists outside Perlis. The Japanese organized the Pan-Malayan Religious Council to put Muslim scholars, mainly from the religious authority (which mainly dominated by the traditionalists or Kaum Tua) in Malay states under their patronage. Most of them were made use of by the Japanese to spread Japanese propaganda in the mosques to Muslim community all over the pre-independent Malaya (Ahmad, 2003: 25). The Japanese managed to get the support from Muslim scholars by using “anti-colonial” discourse and promised them “independence” from Western colonisation. The Kaum Muda scholars outside Perlis, in the mean time, became the staunchest supporters of the Japanese through their political idea. Although they were not used by the Japanese to be part of religious propaganda machine like the Kaum Tua, the Kaum Muda scholars, thinkers and political activists formed the Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM) to express their anti-British propaganda and propagated the idea of a bigger Malay state comprising Malaya and Indonesia, or what was known then as “Melayu Raya” (Abdullah, 2003: 43). Unfortunately, unlike the other Kaum Muda scholars who were not affected by Japanese policies, the Sunnah scholars were having their eclipse for an internal palace-political power struggle in Perlis.

Re-enhancement period (1945-1960s)

The predicament experienced by the “Sunnah” reformists however ended with the end of Japanese occupation. British colonialists who came back to the Malaya after the defeat of the Japanese in the Second World War, appointed Syed Putra as the new king of Perlis on 4th December 1945. Syed Putra took a different approach towards the Sunnah reform idea. His openness and positive attitude towards the Sunnah reformists allowed them to stage a come-back to finish their unfinished business in the state. Furthermore, the Sunnah reform agenda was fully supported by United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) as the leading Malay party after

the Japanese occupation and the rejection of Malays towards "Malayan Union" proposal by the British to unify all Malay states under a single government to simplify administration. The proposal was perceived as an attempt to abolish monarchy, thus endangering the domination of Malays on their motherland (Abdullah, 2007: 183).

The golden opportunity given to the Sunnah reformists at this period has been fully capitalized by Tiga Mat and their acquaintances to regroup and pursue their reform agenda in a more aggressive manner. They managed to strengthen the Sunnah reform agenda by employing only those with Sunnah tendency to positions in state religious authority offices, Imams for the mosques and teachers in the madrasahs all around Perlis. The religious authority also emphasized the enforcement and monitoring issues to ensure the Sunnah practice to be substantively instilled and implemented by the people of Perlis and all religious institutions that exist in the state of Perlis (Md Sadik Md Ismail, Personal Communication, 25 August 2014).

Apart from the authority's enforcement and the support given by the palace, education and propagation also played an essential role in spreading the Sunnah reform idea in the state of Perlis. At this stage, considerable effort at propagating Sunnah idea was attributed to Abu Bakar al-Ashaari, who was brought back by Haji Ahmad Hakim after his exile outside Perlis during the Japanese occupation. He was appointed initially as an Imam of Masjid Alwi (Alwi mosque), which was pivotal to the proliferation of Sunnah reform idea in Kangar and Perlis in general. Being a prolific writer himself, and considered as the most learned scholar in Perlis, he became the reference of Sunnah idea by both authority and the people all over Perlis (Roff, 1975: 112). His books were used by many to understand the "Sunnah" ideals.⁸ However, many of the books, especially his *Ibadat Rasulullah*, were prohibited and banned in other states due to its non-conventional madhhabic-approach, controversial fatwas, and ideas contradicting the mainstream Shafi'i madhhab all over Persekutuan Tanah Melayu (Abdullah, 2007: 186).

At this stage, Perlis was already known for its "Sunnah" inclination and for its controversial scholars. Abu Bakar al-Ashaari was invited to many Malay states by their religious authorities, muftis and scholars to engage in debate on many of his fatwas, mainly from his *Ibadat Rasulullah* (Abdullah, 2007: 186). In most cases, Abu Bakar refused to take part in the debate, since he believed that the result will be fruitless. He argued that everybody is entitled to their own *ijtihad* (reasoning) since his fatwas mainly dealt with elementary issues and not those of the fundamentals of Islam (Haron Din, 1976: 55). Surprisingly, some of his controversial fatwas then became famous and acceptable in the later period, such

as his fatwa on the permissibility of organ (he was talking about eyes) donation from a death person to other living person (Abdullah, 2007: 188). He backed his fatwa with the argument of *maslahah* (public interest) that always been protected and prioritized by Islam as part of Islamic teachings that is a mercy to humankind. Similarly, his fatwa on the permissibility for Muslims to pay their *zakĒt* (alms) with money instead of crops and fruits, which was heavily refuted and led him to be labeled as heretic but this fatwa has subsequently been accepted and practiced by Muslims all over Malaysia (Abdullah, 2007: 193-4).

Crisis period (1960s)

Having Abu Bakr al-Ashaari as the icon of “Sunnah” in Perlis brought both fortune and calamity for the reform agenda. As mentioned earlier, most of Sunnah reformists in Perlis came from UMNO supporters. Since the pre-independent year until the post-independent period, “Sunnah” reform agenda has been wholeheartedly propagated and defended by those who were within or related to UMNO unlike in other states in Malaya. The establishment of Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), the offshoot of first Islamic party in Malaya Hizbul Muslimun, in the year 1955 became a turning point of the status quo. Initially, PAS has managed to attract most of scholars from both Kaum Muda-influenced intellectuals and Kaum Tua traditionalist scholars from all over Malaya. PAS differed itself from UMNO through its goal to establish an Islamic State based on Islamic ideology instead of a secular-nationalistic one as propagated by UMNO.

Furthermore, in the year 1956, Dr Burhanuddin al-Helmy, the prominent Kaum Muda and reform intellect was appointed as PAS new president due to the internal leadership crisis within the party (Farish A Nor, 2004: I, 127-31). Dr Burhanuddin’s presidency has pushed the party to be more dynamic thus becoming more attractive to other Kaum Muda and reform-minded scholars. Abu Bakar al-Ashaari was amongst those who were convinced by Dr Burhanuddin. A year after Burhanuddin became the president of PAS, Abu Bakar left UMNO for PAS, and eventually became Ketua Dewan Ulama (Leader of Scholars Council) of PAS in Perlis. His migration to PAS has led to the diversion amongst the Sunnah supporters in Perlis (Abdullah, 2007: 193-4). Abu Bakar since then has not been known for his Sunnah ideal, and has been accused of being apologetic of his position to compromise with other Kaum Tua traditionalists within PAS in Perlis (Md Sadik Md Ismail, Personal Communication, 25 August 2014).

Unlike Abu Bakar, most of the Sunnah leaders and activists in Perlis remained loyal to UMNO, thus enjoying their administrative and political status in

the state administration (Othman & Rahmat, 1996: 124). Haji Ahmad Hakim continued his job as the Yang Dipertua Majlis Agama Islam and Adat Istiadat Melayu Perlis (the head of Religious Council and Malay Culture and Heritage of the state of Perlis), while both Wan Ahmad and Syeikh Ahmad contested from UMNO platform in Malaya 1959 General Election, and both won the seats in the state assembly. Due to their victory, Wan Ahmad was appointed as the assembly hall's speaker, while Syeikh Ahmad was appointed as the Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) of Perlis, thus becoming the first elected Menteri Besar. Despite special treatment meted out to Sunnah propagation in Perlis, however not much essential changes have been achieved during the tenure of Syeikh Ahmad as the Menteri Besar.

The most significant achievement for the Sunnah Perlis, however, occurred before the reign of Syeikh Ahmad's predecessor as the Menteri Besar, Dato Laksamana Haji Mohd Razali. On the 26 March 1959, Sunnah ideology was duly enacted in the state constitution (Undang-Undang Tubuh Kerajaan Perlis) with the endorsement of various parties involved (which includes the Tiga Mat, the Menteri Besar himself and the King's representative). Article 17 of the state constitution stated clearly that "the Ruler of Perlis must be a Muslim man who adheres to the Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah thoughts". While in article 3:1 it was stated that any regent to the throne and the council of the regent must "adhere to the teaching of Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah". Concurrently, article 27 of the state constitution also stated that "the heir to the throne must also adhere to Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah."⁹ The enactments had been acknowledged ever since as the cornerstone and the triumph of the struggle of "Sunnah" ideology in Perlis.

During the reign of Syeikh Ahmad as the Menteri Besar, more substantive achievements to strengthen the domination of "Sunnah" in Perlis had been achieved. In the year 1963, as an example, the Islamic Administrative Laws (Undang-Undang Pentadbiran Agama Islam) indicates in article four (4) that: "The Majlis (Religious Council of the state) in issuing a Fatwa and the Shari'ah (Fatwa) Committee when giving its opinion under sub-section (2) shall follow al-Quran and/or Sunnah". Consequently, in the year 1964, an amendment was made to the article 5(1) of the Perlis state constitution (Undang-Undang Tubuh Kerajaan Perlis) stating that: "The official religion of the state of Perlis is Islam according to the teaching of Ahli Sunnah Wal-Jamaah as being practiced in the state". Similarly, in the same year, a significant amendment was done to the state Islamic Administrative Laws (Undang-Undang Pentadbiran Agama Islam), in article 2, para 7 (4) stating that any fatwa or decision by the Shari'ah council of the state

that follows al-Quran and Sunnah must not contradict the public interest. In case of any contradictions, the decision must be referred to the King to decide according to the convention practiced in Perlis.

Despite the enactments of these laws, the late 60's and early 70's witnessed the demise of many "Sunnah" icons in Perlis. This situation has left the "Sunnah" reform agenda in a relative state of loss. Haji Ahmad Hakim died in circa 1964, Abu Bakar al-Ashaari died in the year 1970 along with Wan Ahmad. The last 'Mat' from the 'Tiga Mat', Syeikh Ahmad died years later, in the year 1980, however without any significant contribution during his final years compared to his achievements during the 50's (Abdullah, 2007: 199). Furthermore, beginning from 1967, the government of Malaysia, through the Ministry of Education, started to take control of some madrasahs in Malaysia, including Madrasah Alawiyah in Perlis, which was once the bastion of the "Sunnah" activists to educate the younger generation of scholars. After the take over, Madrasah Alawiyah ceased to use the "Sunnah" curriculum and instead had to resort to the ministry's religious syllabus, which is mainly based on Shafi'i madhhab (Othman & Rahmat, 1996: 118-19).

Additionally, the condition for the "Sunnah" reform agenda in Perlis became worst when the federal government took direct responsibility for the appointment of main positions of religious authority. Most of those who were deployed to Perlis from outside the state were not really friendly to the "Sunnah" approach, and in some cases appeared as the opponents of the state religious ideology such as Salleh Othman who was appointed as the Yang Dipertua Majlis Agama Islam Perlis (Head of Higher Islamic Council of the state of Perlis) on 1 January 1971, Mohd Said Pilus who succeeded him, and finally, Ghazali Haji Ismail who came after Mohd Said in the year 1976. "Sunnah" followers in Perlis saw the aforementioned three Yang Dipertuas as agents sent by the federal authority to change the "Sunnah" reform agenda in Perlis and replace it with the mainstream Shafi'i madhhab approach (Abdullah, 2007: 200-1). The suspicion was strengthened when during those years, the federal Islamic authority aggressively banned some of the literatures related to "Sunnah" such as the writings of Hasan Bandung, Abu Bakar al-Ashaari's and others (Md Sadik Md Ismail, Personal Communication, 25 August 2014).

The recovery - revival period (1980s)

Despite the eclipse that happened to "Sunnah" in Perlis in the late 60s and early 70s, a new wave of "Sunnah" awakening emerged in the mid 70s and 80s. New

icons with a new approach for enhancing the "Sunnah" agenda was initiated by a group of religious teachers and preachers who established a niche NGO called 'al-Islah Perlis'. This NGO was led by Tuan Haji Ismail bin Haji Mahmud, widely known in Perlis as Syeikh Noor al-Surur. Syeikh Noor, a Hadramawt origin religious teacher, was a judge in the High Court of Makkah for eight years before he came to Malaysia. He moved to Perlis with the sole purpose of becoming a part of the "Sunnah" reform activists in the state during the 50s (Abdul Razak Abdul Rahman, Personal Communication, 17 August 2012). Nevertheless, he maintained a low profile as a religious teacher teaching in various religious schools around Perlis. However, the demise of the "Sunnah" icons has pushed him to play his role as a reference for "Sunnah" thoughts, and was widely accepted by the "Sunnah" followers (Abdul Razak Abdul Rahman, Personal Communication, 17 August 2012).

Along with Abu Bakar Mahmud and Haji Abdullah Ali, Syeikh Noor founded "al-Islah Perlis" on 18th March, 1971. Syeikh Noor's disciples who were later known as al-Islah leaders and preachers, such as Ustaz Abdul Razak bin Abd Rahman, dato Wan Ahmad Wan Abdullah, Hj Abd Rashid Jasin, Ahmad Yusuf Amin (Mat Libya) and others came to lend their hands to uphold the "Sunnah" agenda through al-Islah (Md Sadik Md Ismail, Personal Communication, 25 August 2014). Al-Islah also managed to attract a former Mufti of Perlis, Abdul Rahman Haji Ismail, who was then a teacher at Madrasah Alawiyah Arau and eventually became the Imam of Masjid Alwi (Alwi mosque) in Kangar as part of his effort to maintain the "Sunnah" practice in the mosque (Abdul Rahman Abdullah, 2007: 203-4). Apart from the enormous efforts of the "Sunnah" activists through al-Islah in spreading the "Sunnah" practice, the state government also contributed significantly towards al-Islah's activities. The then Perlis Menteri Besar, Datuk Ali Haji Ahmad, came as part of al-Islah's leadership and strengthened the ties between al-Islah and the state administration (Shahidan Kassim, Personal communication, 26 July 2014).¹⁰

Furthermore, the palace had also given its recognition to al-Islah and occasionally officiated al-Islah's activities, especially its landmark events, the first Ijtimak Sunnah in the year 1986 and the second Ijtimak Sunnah, in the year 1988.¹¹ The palace, through the King, Raja Syed Sirajudin who was also the Yang Dipertua Majlis Agama Islam Perlis, himself supported and came to defend many of the state's religious authority. Shari'ah council's decision was made according to "Sunnah" method, which was considered controversial by others and often received criticism from outside Perlis. Due to the role played by the King towards

the “Sunnah” enforcement, al-Islah maintained its support to the palace and valued its position in enhancing the survival of “Sunnah” in the state. Despite its existence as an NGO, al-Islah also has been actively involved in strengthening the position of state religious authority in issuing fatwahas, enforcing certain “Sunnah” practices and spreading the teaching of “Sunnah” through any state institutions (Md Sadik Md Ismail, Personal Communication, 25 August 2014).

Similarly, Perlis Menteri Besar Hamid Pawanteh who came after Datuk Ali Haji Ahmad also promised his commitment to adhere to “Sunnah” and to lend his support to any causes related to “Sunnah” in his speech given during the second Ijtimak Sunnah (Abdul Rahman Abdullah, 2007: 205). Hamid was also proud of being a “Sunnah” follower and being a Menteri Besar of a “Sunnah” state. Furthermore, Hamid Pawanteh also believed that “Sunnah” in Perlis is depending on UMNO. For him, as long as UMNO is ruling the state government of Perlis, “Sunnah” will continue to be the state religious ideology (Othman, Mohd Radzi & Rahmat, O.K. (1996: 123-4.). However, according to Shahidan Kassim, the Menteri Besar who succeeded him, Hamid Pawan indeed has done something for Sunnah during his period as Menteri Besar, but it was not enough compared to the state administrative power he possessed during his reign (Shahidan Kassim, Personal communication, 26 July 2014). Shahidan’s claim is relatively true if one compares the achievements of “Sunnah” propagation and enforcement done during Shahidan’s reign as Menteri Besar and those that happened during Hamid Pawanteh’s reign. This will be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs on the ‘Golden Years of “Sunnah” Perlis.

It was during the years 1992 to 1994 that the state of Perlis started to initiate its official relationship with the Saudi Arabian embassy and its cultural office in Kuala Lumpur through its Pengarah Majlis Agama Islam Perlis, Md Sadik Md Ismail. It was through this official communication that the state managed to get its students to secure scholarship to study in Saudi Arabian universities, mainly in the Islamic University of Madina. It was through this relation too that many Saudi preachers were given opportunity to deliver their lessons and talks in Perlis. However, according to Md Sadik, his personal relation with the embassy started since 1986-7 through the Islamic councilor of the Saudi Arabia Cultural Office in Jalan U-Thant, Dr Abdul Rahman Ghannam, who was invited on a monthly basis to Perlis to deliver talks organized by al-Islah (Md Sadik Md Ismail, Personal Communication, 25 August 2014). Other local preachers who worked with the Islamic Councilor of Saudi Arabia in Kuala Lumpur also frequently reported coming to Perlis to give lessons and talks such as Dr Abdullah Yassin and Ustaz

Sofwan Badri, former preachers of Islamic Council of Saudi Arabia in Kuala Lumpur (Abdullah Yasin & Safwan Badri, Personal Communication, 17 March 2014.).

The golden period: "Sunnah" Perlis under Shahidan Kassim

According to many veterans of "Sunnah" in Perlis, as quoted by Md Sadik Md Ismail, former Pengarah Majlis Agama Islam Perlis (Director of Islamic Council of the state of Perlis) (1992-94) and former al-Islah activist, the most intensive and lively period of "Sunnah" in Perlis since the 50's was during the reign of Shahidan Kassim as the Menteri Besar, in specific when he was in the close friendship with Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, an academic from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) or Malaysia Science University. The pinnacle of the golden period was seen by many was during Mohd Asri's period in office as the Mufti of the state of Perlis. The Ruler of Perlis, King Syed Sirajudin with the recommendation from Shahidan on 1 November 2006, appointed Mohd Asri as the state Mufti. Since then the symbiosis of Shahidan-Mohd Asri managed to put "Sunnah" again as the jewel of the Perlis state's crown and once again became the trademark of the state itself.

In adding more substantive "Sunnah" legacy to the state, Shahidan has gone a step further by changing the name of Perlis state from Perlis "Indera Kayangan" to Perlis "Darul Sunnah" (Utusan Malaysia, 2006). However, the term "Darul Sunnah" has never been promulgated to be the official name for Perlis. Similarly, in defending the "Sunnah" of Perlis, Shahidan often appeared in the media talking about "Sunnah", *ĪlĒh* and the need to return to the true practice of Islam according to al-Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (Shahidan Kassim, Personal communication, 26 July 2014). Furthermore, in reviving the "Sunnah" practice, Shahidan Kassim himself was involved in implementing them congregationally with the people especially during the month of Ramadhan throughout Perlis (Md Sadik Md Ismail, Personal Communication, 25 August 2014). He was known for his generosity and his habit of distributing donation to all those who attended events and programs thus organized (Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, Personal Communication, 29 July 2014). In term of the continuity of education for the people of Perlis on "Sunnah", Shahidan established Institut Sunnah Negeri Perlis (Perlis Sunnah Institute) with the aim to introduce the true teaching of Islam following the "Sunnah" approach to all Perlis residents, both Muslims and Non-Muslims. Associate Professor Zulkifli Abidin, a former academic, was given the responsibility to lead the institute (Cermin, 2007).

The period of Shahidan-Mohd Asri is comparatively unique and it is for several factors. The development of "Sunnah" in Perlis during the period was

followed and supported by mainly young people, not only inside Perlis but also outside. The media coverage of sensational news and events too has its own impacts in getting information about “Sunnah” known to people all around Malaysia. The media on many issues on religious matters often published Shahidan and Mohd Asri’s statements. This alone made them very visible. The media, thus, propagated whatever issues regarding “Sunnah” that they were trying to promote. Furthermore, the social media revolution during mid-2000, especially the blogs, web forums and advance version of email groups have made any discussion on religious issues a public matter. The “Sunnah” issue also became amongst the hot topics of discussions especially with the emergence of the influence of Global Salafism through the internet.

This influence of the Global Salafism through internet has contributed significantly to the younger generation to have more information from all sides on certain issues.¹² Despite some differences between the current Global Salafism thoughts with the Perlis “Sunnah”, the foundations, and the method in understanding Islam have many similarities. This made some conventional Salafists to accept Perlis “Sunnah” as part of Salafism. Another factor would be the frequent open polemics and direct attacks by the opponent of Salafism on “Sunnah” practices in Perlis that they often equated it with Salafism and Wahabism (Abdullah, 2007: 208). This has given a kind of promotion and publicity to those who might never have heard or known about it. The convincing academic style of refutation by Mohd Asri to the “Sunnah” opponents appeared more appealing to mainly middle class and educated Muslims.

Amongst the triumph of “Sunnah” reform agenda during this period is its ability to expand itself beyond the Perlis border. The support given and attendance to “Sunnah” events in Perlis was not confined to the people of Perlis. Due to the popularity and controversial nature of Mohd Asri on the mainstream and social media, most of the events involving him as a speaker were often attended by outsiders even from as far as Singapore. Mohd Asri was also able to invite his scholar like-minded friends from all over Malaysia and from overseas to help him in educating the people of Perlis about “Sunnah”. Amongst the landmark events during Mohd Asri’s period as the Mufti of the state were “Seminar Antarabangsa Syeikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab” (International Seminar on Syeikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab) on the 16 & 17 March 2006, Minggu Sunnah Kebangsaan (National Sunnah Week) on the 11-16 March 2007, and Ijtimak Sunnah (a continuation of the previous al-Islah’s legacy) on the 28 & 29 November 2008 (Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, Personal Communication, 29 July

2014). In term of enforcement, Mohd Asri himself regularly visited mosques all around Perlis to ensure that all of them are abiding by the regulations promulgated by the Majlis Agama as part of his enforcement "approach" (Mohd Khairil Anwar Abdul Latif, Personal Communication, 17 March 2014).¹³ In addition, the office of Mufti was also involved in organizing the "Ihya Masjid" (Reviving the Mosques), where selected mosques will be chosen to organize a fast-breaking feast on Mondays and Thursdays, followed by religious talks given by Mohd Asri himself or any religious officers in duty (Mohd Khairil Anwar Abdul Latif, Personal Communication, 17 March 2014).

Mohd Asri and Shahidan Kassim also continued the strong ties established between the state of Perlis with the Saudi Arabia Islamic Councilor in Kuala Lumpur. Mohd Asri himself has been considered as an authority in giving recommendation to any applicants from all over Malaysia to pursue their studies in Saudi Arabian universities under the funding of the Saudi government (Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, Personal Communication, 29 July 2014). Perlis too, has always been a favorite destination for Saudi Arabian preachers to come to deliver talks, organize seminars and trainings due to the relationship established during Mohd Asri's period. Perlis representatives will always be given special attention and treatment by the Saudi government in any official invitation visit involving Malaysian official delegations to the Kingdom according to Mohd Asri (Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, Personal Communication, 29 July 2014).

It was believed that the short period of Shahidan-Mohd Asri golden period has been a reawakening of "Sunnah" to many people in Perlis. However, Akram Dahaman in his dissertation argues that the Sunnah Perlis idea only has its significant role in the formulation of fatwa but has no real effect on enforcement and promulgation (Dahlan, 2005: 98-119). This is due to the strong mainstream Shafii madhhab's influence amongst Muslims in Malaysia in general, which includes Muslim in Perlis. However, Akram's dissertation was completed before Dr Asri Zainul Abidin became the mufti of the state who brought a new chapter to the practice of Sunnah Perlis in the life of Perlis people in general. Although no serious study has yet been carried out to determine the acceptance of the people of Perlis on Sunnah Perlis after the reign of Mohd Asri as Mufti. Nevertheless, the wide and all encompassing programs and enforcement done during his period as Mufti has significantly changed in the way "Sunnah Perlis" been practiced beyond the fatwa formulation.¹⁴

Some of Mohd Asri's legacy and approach were later continued by his successor, Dr Juanda Jaya (Juanda Jaya, Personal communication, 28 July 2014)

who claimed on the first day he assumed office that his approach will be different from that of Mohd Asri's. Mohd Asri's absence was felt not only by the "Sunnah" followers, but also by the people of Perlis (Md Sadik Md Ismail, Personal Communication, 25 August 2014). Things became difficult after Shahidan Kassim failed to secure his Menteri Besar of Perlis post after the Malaysian 12th General election. Despite his victory in his constituency, and his personal victory to secure Perlis from falling to the opposition due to the political tsunami in the 2008 general election, the King of Perlis did not give his consent for Shahidan to become the Menteri Besar. The King instead, appointed his successor, Dr Md Isa Sabu, an UMNO stalwart, as the new Menteri Besar of Perlis.¹⁵ Unlike Shahidan, Md Isa failed to continue the aggressive struggle to uphold "Sunnah" agenda in the state. He was never been reported to voice any concern or having any substantial contribution towards the propagation of "Sunnah" in Perlis. However, according to Juanda, he was not left alone to continue the "Sunnah" agenda with all the limitation as Mufti, Md Isa did indirectly assisting him in his administration and never went against any decision made by the mufti in any issues related to "Sunnah" matters (Juanda Jaya, (Mufti of Perlis), Personal Communication, 28 July 2014). However, the absence of any significant and aggressive effort from the Menteri Besar after Shahidan has led "Sunnah" Perlis once again into another phase of stagnation after the golden period it has gone through.

Conclusion

Unlike the pre-supposition and prevailing perception of public about the spread of "Sunnah" teaching in Perlis, the widespread dissemination of "Sunnah" in Perlis is not about the advancement of the state religious authority with the support from its monarch regency. It is undeniable that initially, the rulers have been playing a very pertinent role in keeping the "Sunnah" teaching to be strongly instilled in the practice of Perlis Muslim community, however, historical evidence proves that both propaganda and education played relatively significant role in maintaining the adherence of the people to "Sunnah". Moreover, the preaching of "Sunnah" teaching alone was not substantively sufficient in defending the "Sunnah" practice amongst Perlis Muslims. Historical events recorded that few other legal, political and administrative measurements had been taken by "Sunnah" guardians throughout the 20th century in maintaining the feasibility of the "Sunnah" teaching.

Furthermore, it was during the "Tiga Mat" and Shahidan Kasim-Mohd Asri periods that they had predicted intrusion of the non-"Sunnah" practice of Islam, or

what was coined widely by the Perlis Sunnah guardians as the 'maddhabic' teachings. They made countless efforts to secure "Sunnah" teachings. The most significant of such effort is the establishing enactment that allows the "Sunnah" to be implemented, referred and adhered by religious authority and the monarch system. This form of enactment does not just limit itself onto the two institutions: it had also made use in determining fatwas in Perlis. The domination of "Sunnah" teachings is then completed when the religious authority and scholars such as Mohd. Asri would go around all mosques in Perlis to enforce the enactment and regulations of the enactment in Perlis. This effort is to ensure this precious historical movement to be passed down to the future. Protecting and securing faith of Muslims in Perlis, as well as being critical towards religious information received and producing effective propagations of Islam in the state.

The historical events also prove that political influence will play another prudent role in ensuring the survival of "Sunnah" in Perlis. During the pre-independent Malaya, the monarch's influence played a significantly pertinent role in instilling the "Sunnah" teaching, and guarding it. While during the post-independent Malaysia, it was the politicians, and mainly UMNO politicians that fought for the "Sunnah" teaching to remain as the prevailing and dominant Islamic discourse in Perlis. Similarly, in the 21st century, the political will was not left alone as the sole factor for the enforcement and spread of "Sunnah" in Perlis; it was accompanied with the globalization and media coverage to gain more substantive existence in Perlis. Unlike the 20th century, "Sunnah" survival in Perlis remained a local struggle of those reformists in Perlis, the 21st century has witnessed that the "Sunnah" teaching has become a nation-wide reform movement, especially during Mohd Asri-Shahidan period, which is again mainly due to the media coverage and globalization movement.

Notes

- ¹ *Salaf* is an Arabic noun which translates to "predecessor", or "forefather". In Islam it refers to the first three generations of Muslims, the so-called "Pious Predecessors" (Bazmul, 2010).
- ² Ustaz Abdul Razak Abdul Rahman is a former official Preacher (Muballigh) of Majlis Agama Islam Perlis and Sunnah activist of Perlis.
- ³ Interestingly, even amongst the Sunnah Perlis scholars and activists, they heavily rejected the labeling of Wahabi or any association with the Wahabi movement in Saudi Arabia. They always preferred to be known as '*Ahli Sunnah wal jamaah*' or "Sunnah" or '*ĀlĪh*' rather than *Wahabi*. (Othman, 1996: 101).

- ⁴ Saadan Man and Abdul Karim Ali insisted to use the ‘*Salafi*’ label to the ‘*Sunnah Perlis*’ thoughts and reform agenda due to its reform nature (*iġlġh* and *tajdġd*) and also its call for the pure version of Islam by referring directly to al-Quran and Sunnah by superceeding the madhhabic interpretation. (Saadan Man & Abdul Karim Ali, 2005: 75).
- ⁵ Md Sadik Md Ismail is former Pengarah Majlis Agama Islam Perlis (1992-94) and former al-Islah activist.
- ⁶ Saadan Man argued that this wide-spread theory must has been taken from personal notes called ‘*Agama dan Zakat di Perlis*’, which was widely quoted by researchers, belongs to Dato’ Wan Ahmad b. Wan Daud, a prominent “Sunnah” figure in Perlis. (Saadan Man, 2007:148).
- ⁷ In disseminating their ideas, *Kaum Muda* managed to vary their approach. They both published literature and were also aggressively involved in publishing their own periodical newspaper – akin to their ideologue in Egypt. *Saudara*, *Pengasuh*, ‘*al-Urwat al-Wuthqa*’, *al-Ikhwān*, *al-Imam*, and *al-Munir* are amongst the periodicals produced by these reformists (Othman & Rahmat, 1996: 28-30; 81.)
- ⁸ Amongst his books published, some still being kept at Perlis state library and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia’s library are: *Ibadat Rasulullah* (Prophet’s worships), *Sejarah Nabi-Nabi* (Stories of the Prophets), *Pergerakan Kaum Wanita Islam* (Muslim Women Movement), *Jawaher al-Bukhari* (The Jewel of al-Bukhari), *Kemerdekaan Berfikir Dalam Islam*, *Membasmi Taqlid* (Freedom of Reasoning in Islam, Abolishing Blindfollowing), *Punca Penerangan Akal* (Road to Mind Enlightenment), *Puasa Rasulullah* (Prophet’s Fasting), *Panduan Puasa* (Guide for Fasting), *Tafsir Juz ‘Amma* (Exegesis of the 30th Supra of al-Quran), *Soal Jawab Agama* (QnA on Religious Issues) and *Khutbah Jumaat* (Friday Sermons).
- ⁹ *Undang-Undang Tubuh Kerajaan Perlis* (Perlis State Constitution), 1381/1962.
- ¹⁰ Shahidan Kassim is the ex- Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) of Perlis.
- ¹¹ Reports from newspapers for the reports on the first *Ijtimak Sunnah*: Berita Harian, 18 January 1986 & 12 February 1986; Utusan Malaysia, 11 February 1986; Watan, 18-21 February 1986; as for the second *Ijtimak Sunnah*, see: Utusan Malaysia, 19 February 1988.
- ¹² On the role of internet in spreading the global Salafism influence in Malaysia, please see: Maszlee Malik, 2013: 52-56).
- ¹³ Mohd Khairil Anwar Abdul Latif is a former researcher in the office of Perlis Mufti during Dr Mohd Asri’s time.
- ¹⁴ Mohd Radzi Othman *et.al.* however, had conducted a research on the topic of acceptance of the people of perlis of ‘*Sunnah Perlis*’ in the year 1991 found that

76.5% respondent agreed with *Sunnah* Perlis, while 23.5% disagreed. (See: Othman & Rahmat, 1991: 402). Saadan Man, however, according to his observation on 30 mosques all over Perlis in his report '*Laporan kajian bertajuk Konflik Antara Salafiyyah dan Syafi'iyah di Perlis: Kesan Terhadap Pemikiran Hukum, Perundangan Islam dan Hubungan Masyarakat, 2006/2006*', suggested that a third of the mosques still adhere to Shafii madhhab and do not practice the 'Sunnah Perlis' way in conducting their congregational rituals and worships. (Saadan Man, 2007: 154). Still, there is yet any thorough academic exercise done on the impact of Shahidan-Mohd Asri's "Sunnah" legacy on the practice of Islam amongst the Muslim community in Perlis.

¹⁵ Report by *Bernamea* news agency, 15 March 2008.

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