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### **A Brief Commentary on the Article ‘The Ulama in Singapore and their Contemporary Challenges’**

by Ustaz Firdaus bin Yahya

#### **Synopsis**

*This brief commentary of Dr Khairudin’s article on Singapore’s ulama and their challenges starts with a critical analysis on the definition of the term ulama itself. It then proceeds with discussions on the validity of the challenges facing them as outlined in Dr Khairudin’s paper. It argues that the more appropriate term to be used is *asatizah* and that those challenges are real to a certain extent. But far from being negative factors, they can be taken positively for the betterment of the *asatizah* themselves and the *ummah* in general.*

Dr Khairudin Aljunied’s article ‘The Ulama In Singapore and Their Contemporary Challenges’, as the title succinctly puts it, revolves around contemporary local ulama and the challenges facing them that ultimately affect their acceptance and standing in Singapore Malay Muslim community.

But who are the ulama referred to in the article? Dr Khairudin defined them loosely as “...scholarly and knowledgeable class (the ulama, *syaiyks*, *muftis* and *asatizahs*...”. I think the definition needs a more precise treatment since the term *ulama* is used in the article’s title and is its main theme. So who are the *ulama*?

Ibn ‘Abd al-Bār in his book *Jāmi‘ Bayān al-‘Ilm wa Faḍlih* quoted a saying attributed to Ibn Mas‘ūd:

إنكم في زمان كثير علماؤه قليل خطباؤه، وسيأتي بعدكم زمان قليل علماؤه كثير خطباؤه، فمن كثر علمه وقل قوله فهو الممدوح، ومن كان بالعكس فهو مذموم.

You are living in a time when there are many *ulama* and few orators. And it will come a time when the *ulama* will be few and the orators many. Thus, praiseworthy will be those who have much knowledge and few words. And contemptible will be those who are the opposite.

Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī in his book *Naṣīḥah Ahl al-Ḥadīth*, mentioned several characteristics of *ulama*:

1. They are people who do not see themselves as having any position or influence in society. They despise with all their hearts any form of praise and compliment. They are not arrogant. Their humbleness and fear to Allah increases along with their knowledge.

2. They run away from the trappings of this world. Most importantly, they run away from any worldly position, fame and praise. They will strive earnestly in avoiding those things. But if any of those things befall on them without they seeking it and without their choice, they will be very fearful of its implications and the risk of it becoming an *istidraj*.
3. They never claim that they are knowledgeable. They do not pride themselves over others. And they never call other people as *jahl* (ignorant) except those who are against the Sunnah, for then they will speak against them not because they are angry for themselves but angry for the sake of Allah. However, they never show their superiority over anyone.

We can no doubt unearth many other definitions of ulama, both from past and contemporary scholars. But greater weightage should be given to the opinions of the companions of the Prophet s.a.w. and the heavyweights of Islamic scholastic traditions such as al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī.

Since I have no intention to discuss at length the various interpretations and definitions of ulama by scholars past and present, let us limit to the above two quotations and say that the ulama must possess the following characteristics:

1. They are knowledgeable but not keen in giving comments on everything.
2. They are humble and shy away from fame and worldly positions (i.e. not holding any official position in society, be it governmental or otherwise)
3. They despise praise.
4. They do not seek unnecessary debate.

Going by these characteristics, the ulama belongs to that rarified and special class of Muslim scholars. They are not defined by how many books they wrote, articles contributed, speeches given, number of followers and other trappings of the famous. Nevertheless, their words, when spoken, will be heard and headed; their voice, however soft, will be vociferous; their leadership when needed will change history because they are the spiritual giants of the ummah.

Surely Singapore does not lack these special scholars. But to generalize all religious figures, from the mufti to a fresh graduate of Islamic studies, as ulama, is, to put it, confusing. A better and more proper term would be 'Islamic teachers' or 'asatizah'.

Dr Khairudin outlined four challenges facing the local asatizah:

1. The Rise of Dynamic Global Muslim Intellectuals
2. Access to Digital Information
3. Divisions within the Ulama Class
4. Relationship between the State and the Ulama

I do not represent the ulama nor am I a member of that exclusive club. But I strongly believe that the ulama will be the least affected with those challenges. The *asatizah*, however, is of a different story. I believe the four challenges above are real, relevant and affect *asatizah*, albeit in varying degrees.

### 1. The Rise of Dynamic Global Muslim Intellectuals (DGMI)

Dr Khairudin painted a picture of DGMI as degrading the influence of the local *asatizah*. With their star appeal and celebrity status, they left the local *asatizah* far behind in their dust trail. While command of English is a factor to reckon with in attributing their success, it is by no means a major cause for their celebrity appeal. There are DGMI's from the Middle East who spoke entirely in Arabic and yet commanded huge followings.

Add to that, some DGMI are no better than the local *asatizah*. Yet, people flock to hear their speeches. What is the reason behind this trend? It all boils down to the herd mentality and curiosity factor. When critical popularity point has been reached, people will come in droves to their talk, more to be with the crowd rather than to learn anything new. The famous nature of the DGMI also pricks on the curious souls to see the person in live rather than through pictures and videos thus far.

Should local *asatizah* be worried with this challenge? What should be *asatizah*'s response to this phenomenon?

Let me start by stating that DGMI is not a new thing. Even as early as 1960s and 1970s, there have been DGMI, or to be precise, more DRMI than DGMI. 'R' being regional, rather than global.

So in reality, it is not a new challenge. But is it really a negative challenge?

If we view it as a competition for the local *asatizah*, hence it will become a negative challenge. Or we can take it positively and view these DGMI as complementary to local *asatizah*. They assist in the *dakwah*, the *amr ma'ruf wa nahi munkar*, subsequently relieving the burden and some responsibilities from the shoulders of our local *asatizah*. Ultimately, in the day to day local issues and problems, the community still needs the guidance and assistance from the local *asatizah*. So, from this point of view, there is not much to be worried about.

But that does not mean that local *asatizah* can just rest on their laurels and let these DGMI do their job for it illustrates that they are irresponsible. Instead, the local *asatizah* should first and foremost avoid the green-eyed monster and view these DGMI as assistance to their role in *dakwah*. Study and learn their success factors and where possible and implementable, try to include those factors in their *dakwah*.

## 2. Access to Digital Information

This is a recent phenomenon. But does it really challenge and degrade the local *asatizah*'s religious authority?

Again, instead of taking it negatively, *asatizah* are in the better position to harness the power of ITC for three things. First, utilize the digital world as a tool to rapidly increase their knowledge. They are more equipped to distinguish between the glass and the diamond from the heaps of information in the internet. Second, to be more careful of the advices and opinions they give to local people for those opinions and advices can be easily counterchecked. Finally, to be more prudent and careful when voicing out their opinions for everything is recorded unless deleted.

Dr Khairudin raised another important issue with regard to this digital age. He noted that there is a marked absence of local *asatizah* in the "...internet world, especially on Facebook and the blog sphere." And he took it as something to worry about since the vacuum is filled with foreign scholars and "...persons who may not be religiously educated but are active in the digital worlds..."

On this point, I have to agree. Though there are a number of local *asatizah* who already owned an FB accounts and even blogs, ownership is one thing. Being active is another. It might be that many local *asatizah* do not have the luxury of time to constantly update their FB status and blogs. But how did some DGMI maintained their presence in the virtual world? Some have students who help update their social accounts on their behalf, sharing snippets of their lectures and classes on-line. Some also have the whole video of their lectures posted on YouTube. Maybe *asatizah* who have large number of students can explore this.

## 3. Divisions within the Asatizah Class

This is something to worry about. But what is more worrisome is that the division is intensifying, deepening and widening the already yawning chasm between *asatizah* of different ideologies. It might come a time, even if it is not already here, that the gap will be too wide to build a bridge across both sides.

I subscribe to Dr Khairudin's contention that "...a sense of disillusionment among the informed Muslims in Singapore towards the local scholars..." is happening, and that they find "...petty squabbles over the validity of the *maulid*, over the sanctity of mass *zikir* and other jurisprudential debates as petty, if not, a testimony of how divorced the *ulamas* are from the real problems of the day."

Local *asatizah* should abstain from continuing the age-old arguments on issues that can never be resolved. Their energy instead should be directed to current issues affecting our lives such as "...environmental degradation, gender rights, basic liberties such as hijab and the LGBT movement" without disregarding the traditional role of giving religious advices and guidance to others.

Asatizah should avoid attacking religious rituals that are so ingrained in the community for eons and were already accepted by many past scholars. They should instead direct their focus to things that can bring about actual positive change on the ground.

#### 4. Relationship between the State and the Asatizah

This is perhaps the most sensitive of all the four challenges. Dr Khairudin argued that "...many Muslims today expect the ulama to maintain an independent or even critical stand against the state as and when the ideals of Islam are breached."

From a certain viewpoint, the statement is fair. But how realistic can it be?

The ulama have been involved, and even worked for, the ruling elites since the dawn of Islamic caliphates. For example, the esteemed mujtahid (some even say the co-founder) of Hanafi Mazhab, Imam Abu Yusuf, who was a very close student of Imam Nu'man bin Thabit, also known as Abu Hanifah, accepted the position of Qadi Al-Qudat (Chief Judge of the State).

Many scholarly outputs came from scholars who were very close to the ruler, vizier, et al. Without the backing of these elites, their writings most probably would not see the light of publishing. With such patronage, their books were copied and distributed en masse. al-Biruni is an example.

Moving forward to our time, there is no doubt that asatizah are needed to fill in critical positions like President of the Syariah Court, Kadi at ROMM, Mufti at Muis and their auxiliaries. I do not think Dr Khairudin disputes this fact.

So the point of contention is this: should these asatizah who are working for the government toed the line when faced with government policies that are clearly working against the Muslim community and Islamic principles? Should they remain silent and think about their rice bowls only?

Personally, I do not think so. Asatizah who remain true to Islamic teachings are fully aware of their responsibilities to Allah and the ummah, responsibilities that are far greater and carry much more weight than their roles as civil servants.

Thus when faced with such contradictory situations, I believe the asatizah working for the government do take an independent stand, voice out their concerns and give their advices to the government appropriately, albeit behind the scene. It is of no use to emerge as popular vociferous 'hero' of the community but without achieving positive results from the government.

## Conclusion

The whole contention of the article, I think, is to discuss the causes for the perceived eroding leadership of the ulama or asatizah class, both in religious and civil spheres. I believe the issues and challenges raised in the article should be reflected upon and discussed by both the asatizah and the community without any set prejudices against asatizah and the government. At the same time, I think the contention of the article on the perceived eroding leadership of the asatizah is confined to Muslims whose profile includes tertiary education, more conversant in English rather than Malay and who are more critical of current situation. The arguments in the article probably would not apply much to majority of the Muslim community who still accept the religious leadership of the local asatizah.

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