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**EXPLORING THE CONCEPT OF WASATIYYAH AND
PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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Abstract

Personal development entails physical and spiritual developments which generally complement each other. Current scenario, however, has seen more and more people who are inclined towards establishing world matters rather than spending time to worship Allah SWT. This contradicts significantly with the words of Allah SWT in the Quran (2:143) that describe an excellence ummah (*ummatan wasatan*) as an ummah that is unbiased neither towards current life nor the life hereafter. Underpinning this matter is the principle of *wasatiyyah* which has been incorporated in most of the Malaysian government's plans and actions to lead the nation to become a successful Islamic country. This paper aims to explore how the principle of *wasatiyyah* is applied in human personal development by reviewing pertinent empirical literature and government documents, such as budget, germane to this concept and its implementation within the Malaysian landscape. The findings disclose several initiatives executed by the government which include programs conducted at schools, policy design in producing balanced human capital as well as allocating the 2017 budget on the implementation of *wasatiyyah* principle in various government related plans and programs. The application of *wasatiyyah* principle is deemed essential so as to ensure a balanced life. It is hoped that this paper could provide some insights to the authorities or relevant parties involved in designing appropriate program for human development to include both, physical and spiritual responsibilities.

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Keywords: *Wasatiyyah*, personal development, physical development, spiritual development, human responsibilities.



1. Introduction

This paper deliberates on the principle of *wasatiyyah*, an approach that incorporates simplicity, balance of justice and excellence as a way of life, and its relation to the concept of personal development. The point of investigation begins with the belief that the principle of *wasatiyyah* resembles the true notion of Islam in every aspect of human life. Generally, in Malaysia the principle of *wasatiyyah* has taken a central role particularly in the government's plan in leading the community (ummah) and the nation to overcome the challenges of the modern world. With the aspiration to cultivate a harmonious Malaysian society, the *wasatiyyah* approach has been established to reach all walks of life involving various groups such as professionals, intellectuals, community leaders, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), students as well as the general community to work on this approach as the pillar for the nation's unity. This is done through the application of thought and implementation of harmonious actions based on the principles of simplicity, balance of justice and excellence.

To elucidate the above matters, the paper begins by describing the concepts that frame this study which is the principle of *wasatiyyah*. This is followed by locating various literature to situate the present study. In seeking to understand clearly the application of *wasatiyyah* principle in human personal development, the documents on government's programs and policy related to human capital development were also analysed. The discussions highlight on the application of *wasatiyyah* principle in everyday life and some of the key issues confronting human responsibilities. Finally, the paper ends with a brief consideration of the sociological implications of the findings of the study.

1.1. The Principle of *Wasatiyyah*

Islam is a true religion which consistently corresponds with the principle of *wasatiyyah* in every aspects of human life. The word '*wasatiyyah*' is stated clearly by Allah SWT in Quran "And thus we have made you a just community that you will be witnessed over the people and the Messenger will be a witness over you" (Quran, 2:143). The word 'just' in this verse is equivalent to "wasatan". Zin (2013) further explicates that underpinning the principle of *wasatiyyah* is the verse in the Quran (2:143) that explicitly designates an excellent ummah as an ummatan wasatan which means an ummah that is just, unbiased neither towards the life now nor the life hereafter, but there must be a balance between the two as stated in the words of Allah SWT. This is evidenced in Rasulullah pbuh practice in teaching Islamic way of living where he clearly demonstrated the best moderate model between two extreme choices (Kamal, 2017). For example, the application of *wasatiyyah* in syariah (law) must be neither like the extreme of Jews, who do have knowledge but refused to follow, nor the moderate of Nasrani, who do not have knowledge but refused to learn.

When Quran was initially revealed to Prophet pbuh long time ago, there was an argument that claimed the Quran as relevant only for that particular period of time, however the reality has proven the contrary. This is because faith is not the only issue deliberated in the Quran. Other notions in the Quran include the history related to human characteristics and community attitudes as evidenced in the case of the people of Ad and Thamud. On this particular note, the Quran clearly explains the essential philosophy and approach to be acquired in order to achieve happiness here and hereafter (Omer, 2015).

Indeed, there has never been any conflict that exists between Islam and the modern years due to the fact that the words of Quran originate from Allah SWT and that they are eternally relevant. Therefore, the principle of *wasatiyyah* clearly signifies the contemporary Muslim society as indicated by Hassan (2015) that *wasatiyyah* in this context is a balance between the permanent Islamic law and the changing conditions of time in fulfilling religious and social responsibilities and in accepting differences in others that further leads to the unification of the ummah. In view of the explanation above, it can be concluded that the meaning of *wasatiyyah* denotes equal, just, excellent that situates in between extreme and moderate and it is applicable in all aspects of our religion encompassing *akidah* (faith/belief), *syariah* and *akhlak* (moral). In regards to *akidah*, there are atheist and communist who do not believe in God, while there are other groups who believe in more than one God. At this point, Islam arises with the principle of *wasatiyyah* and positions its *akidah* in between both, the existence of God which is the only one.

A clear example of *syariah* is observed in the context of food from Islamic point of view. There are certain foods that are halal (permitted) in Islam whilst some are considered *haram* (forbidden) because of valid reasons as clearly outlined in the rules of Islamic law. Several contradicting cases of *syariah* in Islam are seen in relation to the choices of food intake whereby there is no limitation for some people who eat everything even frog or insects while some restrain to eating solely selected food such as vegetables and fish. In terms of *akhlak*, Islam lays strong emphasis on the finest behaviour amongst Muslims and Prophet pbuh is the best role model for Muslims because of his excellent *akhlak* which is clearly evidenced in the Quran - “And surely you conform (yourself) to sublime morality” (68:4).

It is apparent that the principle of *wasatiyyah* accentuates the concept of balance in every aspects of life. Omer (2015) describes *wasatiyyah* as a comprehensive notion that “integrates and balances the requisites and delights of this world and the hereafter, as well as of the physical and spiritual domains of existence” (p. 997). It is a significant essence that every Muslim must possess in order to achieve excellence in his life and to fulfil his responsibilities as a servant of Allah and caliph of the universe as well as to develop unity generally amongst ummah.

1.2. Personal Development

Human beings are created by Allah SWT for two main reasons. First, the ultimate goal of the creation is to worship Allah SWT (Quran, 51:56). Worship is commonly defined as a servant or slave of Allah. However, the essential definition of worship as narrated by Imam Hussain a.s. is that “Allah has created Man in order to know him. When he knows God, he will worship him. When he worships God (properly and with knowledge), he will not worship anyone else other than God”. In other words, Allah has created humans to make them search and understand Allah SWT and that the closer they get to Allah SWT, the more positive personal development will be inevitably developed. The second reason for creating human beings is because Allah wants to place us as caliphs on earth (Quran, 2:30). The term caliph here is interpreted as the position of a man in the universe as a person who exercises the responsibility delegated to him to carry out the will of his master and limited by his principles (Muhammad, 2008).

The principles held by an individual are reflected in his personal development which progresses from early childhood until adulthood. Personal development as defined by Maslow (1970) is similar to self-actualisation that refers to self-fulfilment and the needs to reach full potential as a unique human

being involving life experiences, either formally or informally, as well as feelings. It includes the activities in developing talents and potential, human capital and enhancing the quality of life to achieve the aims and goals in life.

Considering these elements, it can be concluded that our tasks in this world are; first to be servants of God and second to be humans. Being a servant of God relates to spirituality and the day of judgement. In contrast, being a human relates to physicality and the world. Therefore, the main tasks of humans are to fulfil the requirements of both. Neither spirituality nor physicality would be neglected. Allah SWT has mentioned: "But seek, through that which Allah has given you, the home of the hereafter; and [yet], do not forget your share of the world. And do good as Allah has done good to you. And desire not corruption in the land. Indeed, Allah does not like corrupters" (Quran, 28:77). Obviously, this verse underlines that human beings need to fulfil their responsibilities not only for the hereafter but also for their lives here in the world. It is also explicit in the verse that the focus of human beings should be substantially inclined towards the preparation for the hereafter. Indeed, Islam strongly emphasizes on the practice of the principle of *wasatiyyah* in the Muslim's daily life even in performing good deeds (Syihab & Muhammad, 2016). For example, Muslims are advised not to burden themselves in practicing their duties as servants of Allah as is illustrated in the words of Allah SWT in Quran (4:28) "to lighten your burdens" and Quran (4:185) "make things easy for you" (Kamali, 2016).

2. Problem Statement

In reality, current scenario has shown that most people are prone towards establishing world matters and substantial time are spent merely to focus on their job, wealth and personal interest rather than spending time to worship Allah SWT. The time they spent to worship Allah SWT is sometimes minimal and momentary only for the sake of fulfilling obligatory requirements such as the five compulsory daily prayers and fasting during the month of Ramadhan. These also include some occasional requirements which are not obligatory yet strongly advocated by Allah SWT such as tarawikh prayers that are performed every night throughout Ramadhan. It has become a common scenario specifically during the month of Ramadhan whereby most mosques are filled up by Muslims to perform their tarawikh prayers at the beginning of the month and their population reduces slowly towards the end of Ramadhan. This occurs probably because tarawikh prayers are not obligatory and that worldly matters are deemed more important. In this case, the awareness of becoming servants of God is seen as negligible.

The concept of *wasatiyyah* plays a major role in ensuring a balanced focus. For example, humans who are always occupied with their work must stop the work for a while to allow some time to worship Allah SWT while those who spend most of their time to worship Allah must also give privileges to their rights. Abu Juhaifah (May Allah be pleased upon him) reported: The Prophet pbuh created a bond of brotherhood between Salman and Abud-Darda'. Salman paid a visit to Abud-Darda' and found Umm Darda', his wife, dressed in shabby clothes and he asked her why she was in that state. She replied: "Your brother Abud-Darda' is not interested in the luxuries of this world. Subsequently, Abud-Darda' came in and prepared a meal for Salman. Salman then requested Abud-Darda' to eat with him but Abud-Darda' said: "I am fasting." Then Salman said: "I am not going to eat unless you eat." So, Abud-Darda' ate together with Salman. When it was night and almost part of the night had passed, Abud-Darda' got up to

perform the night prayer but Salman asked him to sleep and Abud-Darda' obeyed him. After some time Abud-Darda' got up again but Salman asked him to sleep again. When it was the last hours of the night, Salman asked him to get up and both of them performed (Tahajjud) prayer together. Then Salman told Abud-Darda': "You owe a duty to your Rabb, you owe a duty to your body; you owe a duty to your family; so you should give everyone his due. Abud-Darda' went to the Prophet pbuh and reported the whole story. Prophet pbuh said, "Salman is right" (Al-Bukhari, 1987). To sum up, the abovementioned scenarios point to the issue of misunderstandings of the concept of *wasatiyyah*.

3. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following question:

1. How is the principle of *wasatiyyah* applied in human personal development?

4. Purpose of the Study

This paper aims to explore the application of the principle of *wasatiyyah* in human personal development by reviewing pertinent literature and government documents within the Malaysian landscape.

5. Research Methods

In view of the concepts presented above, this section further discusses several empirical literature and government documents such as budget germane to these concepts and their implementation within the Malaysian context.

6. Findings

It is explicit that the personal development of an individual essentially encompasses the process of educating his physical and spiritual attributes. Given its holistic approach that integrates physical, spiritual, intellectual and emotional aspects in the development of human beings (Suhid, 2007), Islamic education is considered as the best approach that balances the happiness of human beings here and hereafter. With strong *iman* (belief), *taqwa* (piousness) to Allah SWT and great *akhlak* (moral), every individual is deemed capable to help the country realizes its aim to produce "human capital with first class mentality" as clearly laid out in the Action Plan of the National Higher Education Strategy (Suhid, 2007). The moderate (*wasatiyyah*) Islamic values should also be adopted in students' knowledge and skills as part of the 21st century education strategies given that living in an increasingly globalised society nowadays offers both opportunities and challenges (Ali, 2018). Therefore, it will improve their worship to Allah SWT as a servant of Allah and eventually will develop their personality positively.

This gives the indication that it is important to look at the programs that are carried out by the Malaysian government in order to build personal development as a whole. To achieve this, several documents on government programs and policy that are related to human capital development were analysed to gain an insight on the government's initiatives to help Malaysians in their personal development. Hamat & Nordin (2012) contend that most human capital development programs that are designed by the government, as one of the national missions, were only inclined towards the progress of

skills and knowledge of human capital while the development of human spiritual such as enhancing positive moral values was seriously abandoned.

This argument was based on the allocation for human capital development as proposed in the 2009 and 2010 budgets. In 2009 budget, the allocation for human capital development specifically for training and education was approximately 23% of the total budget whilst the budget in 2010 for human capital development gave special attention to enhancing human capital skills in science and technology. On the whole, a total of RM30 billion was allocated by the government for the primary and secondary schools to achieve its aim to enhance human capital skills. However, it is undeniable that some allocations for human spiritual development in both years were also provided by the government, yet the portion was uneven as compared to the allocations for physical development.

Interestingly, the Malaysian government has started the effort to introduce a balanced education to its citizen since 1977. This is based on the suggestion made at the Islamic Education Conference in Mecca to combine the knowledge originated from Quran and As-Sunnah with the knowledge derived from human's thinking in the education curriculum (Baba, 2016). Religious secondary schools were introduced since then and the applications to enrol in these schools outnumbered the already existed schools. This shows that Islamic education has become significant to many parents and that priority has been given to ensure balanced personal development amongst their children.

Even though it is evidenced that the government has carried out various initiatives incorporating physical and spiritual elements in the development of human capital, the application of the concept of *wasatiyyah* as stimulated by the government to encourage balanced physical and spiritual responsibilities is still debatable. This is confirmed by the findings of Azmi, Ismail, Basir, Norman, & Yusof (2015) which looked at the government's approach when evaluating the performance of public servants. It is discovered that the conventional performance appraisal system deployed by the government rates highly on the employees' tasks performance but scarcely on other equally important values namely their personal development such as ethics and good moral values. In another study conducted by Ismail, Azmi, al-Haddad, S. L, Basir, & Nayan (2017), it is found that the principle of *wasatiyyah* has been implicitly embedded in Malaysian civil service practices. However, should this principle be fully enforced by the government, it can further enhance human sustainability which consequently leads to better performance by the government servants. This seems to suggest that the principle of *wasatiyyah* is not clearly evidenced in the government policies or programs.

Therefore, to gain more insights on the role of the government in ensuring a balanced personal development amongst Malaysians and to find out whether the *wasatiyyah* approach is embedded in most government programs, the recent budgets for the last two years, 2016 and 2017 were examined. This is because a budget is considered a valid document that provides input on a yearly planning basis prepared for the country and the principal areas that the government plans to improve. The focus on empowering human capital remained dominant in the 2016 budget as it was listed as the third priority for the country with the allocation of RM41.3 billion (Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 2015). To enhance the quality of education, a total amount of RM500 million was allocated to improve the educational facilities nationwide. This witnesses the effort by the government in spiritual development particularly in regards to the improvement of religious schools, national religious assisted schools, registered sekolah pondok and Mara Junior Science Colleges including those which implemented Ulul-Albab module to produce

professional huffaz. The rest of the budget in empowering human capital was allocated for a wide range of educational purposes to include early childhood up to higher education, technical and vocational education as well as for trainings to produce high quality workforces such as SLIM programs. It is indistinct whether spiritual development elements are incorporated in such programs, however, it might be argued that these elements are implicitly embedded in the programs taking into consideration the *wasatiyyah* approach as maintained by the government.

In light of the 2017 budget, it is mainly anchored in five philosophies and principles. One of them is to uphold the universal Islamic philosophy and principle of *wasatiyyah* comprising the elements of moderation, social, justice, fairness and excellence (Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 2016). The government has allocated RM800 million to implement people-friendly projects that include upgrading and building surau and public needs such as drainage, community halls and markets. Similar to the 2016 budget, human capital development remains central in 2017 as an increment of RM100 million is allocated for improving school facilities nationwide, including the religious schools. Likewise, the allocation for educational improvement in 2016 stays significant in the 2017 budget. Arguably, the government's philosophy and principle as manifested in the 2017 budget signify that almost all intended programs in the year 2017 provide avenues for the Malaysian communities to boost their personal physical development through the acquisition of knowledge and skills while enhancing their spiritual development that encompasses building stronger relationship with Allah and strengthening individual responsibilities as His servant. Hence, it is likely that a balanced (between physical and spiritual) personal development, among every individual will be achieved slowly given the existing practices and strong support by the government. On the whole, all things considered above point to an important fact that every individual is still held responsible in deciding whether he wants to live a balanced life in this world and in fulfilling his responsibilities to Allah SWT as well as to himself, his family and society at large.

7. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to explore the way the *wasatiyyah* concept is integrated in the human personal development in Malaysia by reviewing relevant literature including government documents. A review of literature including the government's documents for the purpose of this study has revealed that some initiatives were executed by the government to ensure the environment supports the development of human personal with the integration of *wasatiyyah* concept in the Malaysian setting. These are evidenced in various programs conducted at schools, policy designed in producing balanced human capital and also the allocation of the 2017 budget for the implementation of *wasatiyyah* principle in most government related plans and programs.

Despite considerable efforts by the government to create a balanced community throughout the country, it is important to highlight that human personal development rely entirely on individual's effort and responsibility. The discussion on personal development as presented in this paper has indicated its strong link with the human capital programs that are conducted by the government. This has ideological implications as it affirms the influence of political factors in the design of programs for general human development. It is also important to note that a review of related literature has revealed that research specifically looks into these concepts in general is still scant. This points to the need to conduct more

studies particularly those that explore the principle of wasatiyyah to generate better understanding of its significance in developing human capital. In conclusion, this paper suggests that it is essential to integrate the *wasatiyyah* principle in its true sense in all programs for human capital development so as to ensure a balanced life. It is highly important particularly for the policy makers and relevant authorities to review the existing programs and make necessary changes to include a comprehensive approach of wasatiyyah to ensure humans' balanced life and success here and hereafter.

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