People’s Islamic Religious School (SAR) in Northern Malaysia: Administrative Model for Notable Achievements

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Abstract: People’s Islamic Religious School (PIRS) or Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR) in Malaysia is a non-sponsored religious school that needs a paradigm shift to become more visible and luminous in the national education system. The management of school that is not guided by an effective administrative model will affect on the school excellence. The continuity of the schools excellent performance depend heavily on the efficiency and effectiveness of the SAR administration. Generally, most of the SAR administration are based on each administrators discretion without relying on one common acceptable model for all SAR. Therefore, only a handful of SAR manage to excel in their operations. This study is done in order to identify the administrative practice and the challenges faced by SAR administrators in managing the SAR, based on these scenario. Eight SAR administrator in three northern state of Peninsular Malaysia (namely Kedah, Penang, and Perlis) were interviewed individually using a semi structured questions in this qualitative research. Data collected from the interview were then analyse with Atlas.ti version 8 (AV8) content analysis software. Findings indicated six administrative practice commonly adopted by selected SAR’s administrators that makes them the finest and most outstanding SAR administrators of their respective states. The findings also suggested one administrative model that could be used by all SAR as a guide to ensure smoothness and excellence of each SAR in order to produce and develop great leaders of the future with Islamic teachings as its root

Keywords: administrative model, education, Islamic religious school, people islamic religious school, waqf

1. Introduction

A competent and efficient waqf property administration is a priority or essential in managing waqf matters including educational waqf. It’s a requirement in ensuring educational waqf is developed and expand for it to
produce continuous benefits. For example, during the Abbasiyyah Empire between 750 to 1258 AD, an institution of higher learning called Madrasah Nizamiyat was built using waqf fund. The educational waqf implementation also caught the interest of other Islamic nations ruler, for example there were 142 universities in Turkey that was established and funded by the waqf fund. University of Cordoba, Spain that was developed in 1972 was another example of an institution of higher learning built using the waqf fund. Other examples of universities receiving benefit of waqf fund are University of Al-Muntasirriyah, Iraq and King Abdul Aziz University in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Educational waqf is also beginning to receive more attention in Malaysia. This is evident with the existence of educational institution such as Universiti Kolej Bestari (UKB) in Terengganu, Maktab Mahmud and Albukhary International University (AIU), both in the state of Kedah, apart from SARs and religious teaching huts or “pondok” that have been in existence since the early years of education institution inception in Malaya using the waqf fund. The educational waqf in Malaysia has been in existence in various forms, such as scholarship, financing, building of student hostels, and also furniture and utensils like tables, books, and others learning assistance. The waqf fund financing has helped reduce the problems of school dropout among the local children due to poverty.

Religious schools in Malaysia comprise of Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR) or People's Religious School, Sekolah Agama Negeri (SAN) or State Religious School, Madrasah and Pondok. SAR is a school built and administered by the people through an administrative board or teachers. Madrasah on the other hand are focused in cities or small towns, offered to whoever wants to learn, regardless of age. Pondok refers to learning center set-up in houses or huts. They also function as student’s accommodation. The Pondok institution focuses on kampong or village activities and do not impose any entry conditions to students who wants to pursue religious education at the pondok.

However, to date the educational waqf in Malaysia religious school are unable to function as expected to produce continuous benefits. These existed due to constraint especially in the administration system of certain schools educational waqf. This is an indication that the evolving educational waqf fund administration need for a transparent and systematic administrative system. Shortage of staff and of trained staff contributed to the weakness of the management of the educational waqf.

According to the Malaysia Education Development Plan 2013-2025, the cost of national education development increases every year. Government has increased the development budget for national education sector development. In the meantime, satisfactory educational facility is an essential asset for ensuring educational quality. Therefore, Malaysia Qualification Agency (MQA) give serious attention towards that matter. In this case, without consistent and adequate fund, an educational institution cannot operate desirably.
Based on the previously mentioned issues, certain initiatives need to be implemented so that schools and educational institutions to continue to play their role in developing intellectuals of students and the general community. Although there were studies done on educational fund waqf in modern and traditional institution in Malaysia, specific studies about educational waqf administration and its sustainability in SAR in Malaysia is still lacking and need to be given appropriate attention.

2. Literature Review

Waqf is a voluntary deed strongly encouraged to Muslims as a way to get closer of oneself to Allah SWT. There are various forms and waqf methods implemented nowadays such as cash waqf, share waqf, land waqf, education waqf, etc. Educational waqf is a well-known form of waqf among Muslims. It is a waqf method with the aim of contributing benefits in the form of education. For example, the building of schools, tahniz center and madrasah on waqf land which beneficially provide to the community as a place to acquire knowledge. Therefore, the waqf fund need to be expanded and multiplied by adding the quantity of waqf and the quality of benefits while having clear internal structure of the waqf organizations.21

An effective and efficient administration could ensure the maximization of educational waqf expansion and development. A non-uniform administration and management of the waqf fund contributed to the conflict in managing waqf asset.12 The waqf administrative issue also relates to inadequate expertise and human resource that constantly turn into challenge and burden to waqf asset management in Malaysia.16

Good and visionary leadership is needed to drive administration of educational waqf towards excellence. Leadership form and leaders-in-need have to change due to the increasing changes in demographic structure and student requirements as time goes. The chosen leader must be able to make needed changes.9,6 He must also be smart enough to suit leadership style which is suitable with the changing time. Lynch, Blum, and Wilson9,6 stated that leaders in the education sector must be aware of all the development, changes, and relevant trend and to be effective, they must encourage and motivate those who delivers the educational program to accept, practice modern thinking and approach, while giving feedback to the students on the outcome of education and assessment. A good leader is molded by experience and thereon will create history to be remembered.8 The same goes for leaders of religious school education. An excellent past will create leaders and replacement leaders for continuous excellence in religious school especially SAR.

An organization does not stand and operates alone. They must communicate with other entities and parties to remain relevant and to ease their operations. People’s religious schools in Malaysia encounter similar situation. A harmonious relation with the stakeholders ought to be in good condition. The existence of a visionary leader, the
good and harmonious relation could be continued for mutual interest. The good dual way relation is important as it indirectly ease the process of human capital development. A holistic development of learning institution in terms of good curriculum and one that could develop self-identity could be harness with the relationship built.4 With the existence of a good relationship, those in SAR’s has the chance to refer and obtained advise related to curriculum development so that they could improve on quality of education in terms of training, teaching and learning as well as assessment and recognition for the implementation of education at their schools.

For an organization to flourish and popular, promotional efforts has to be frequently done for that purpose.19,22 The same should be done by the people’s religious school in Malaysia in their endeavor to ensure continuity and sustainability on the growth of the religious education system is in a class of its own. It is undeniable that SAR has its own strategy to promote their own schools, however besides the traditional promotional method such as using posters, banners or buntings, lectures, and verbal promotion, SARs administrators ought to aggressively manipulate the social media for this purpose. Bhattacharya, Gaurav and Ghosh and also Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela3,23 stated that social media is undeniably influential in conveying messages and in influencing people into doing something. Social media is not only cheap to use but it provides the opportunity for organization to maintain current customer as well as to attract new customers.

Satisfactory learning facility is an important asset to ensure academic quality. Study by Ahmad Zabidi and Abul Razak1 showed that school, which is clean, beautiful, save, and with adequate learning space produce environment to motivate learning development. Without sufficient and consistent fund, a waqf educational institution will never be operate excellently.14 There are examples of some SARS and government funded religious schools which lacks physical development where generally the facilities are inadequate. Among them are science laboratory and computer laboratory. In fact, there are schools without both facilities, as found by the study. Moreover, number of students per class exceeded the maximum capacity due to inadequate classroom. Therefore, government funding assistance is still needed to improve the school building.11 One of the efforts to confront this situation is by uplift the governance capability so that the educational waqf could contribute toward improvement of SAR. The existing waqf fund need to be developed and expanded.

3. Research Method

This study intends to identify administrative practice and the challenges faced by SAR’s administrators in managing their schools by using qualitative methods. It uses the explorative approach to analyze administrative system of SAR in three selected states of Northern Peninsular Malaysia, namely Kedah, Perlis, and Penang.
The data collection was done in two phases. The first phase involved collection of secondary data by researching document sources such as book, thesis, journal, working paper, magazine, and others. The second phase involves collection of primary data. The primary data was acquired through a thorough face to face interview session with eight informants consisting of the best SAR administrator in Kedah, Penang, and Perlis using semi-structured questions. Selection of informant uses purposive sampling method based on suggestion from Pertubuhan Hal Ehwal Sekolah Agama Kedah (HESA) or Kedah Religious School Affairs Association which is responsible for coordinating all SAR registered under it especially in Kedah.

The selected respondents were administrators from Ma’had Tahfiz Al-Quran Al Imam An-Nawawi (Perlis), Sekolah Rendah Islam Al Furqan (Perlis), Sekolah Rendah Islam Bahrul Ulum (Pulau Pinang), Maahad Tahfiz An-Nahdhoh (Pulau Pinang), Sekolah Rendah Islam Darul Ulum (Kedah), Maahad Tarbiah Islamiyah Derang (Kedah), Madrasah Zubaidiyah (Kedah), and Sekolah Islam Al-Islah (Kedah).

The collected data through the interview process were then analyzed by using content analyses with the assistance of Atlas.ti version 8 (AV8). This software was used to help the researchers to interpret the interview transcription more orderly. The researchers then analyze the transcript outcome to get results or findings related to the research objectives.

For the study’s purposed, eight (8) SAR’s best administrators in Northern Peninsular Malaysia were selected to get information in relation to the research title. SAR’s involved were two (2) for each SAR in Perlis and Penang, and four (4) from Kedah.

3. Findings

A. Demographic Profile

SAR chosen from Perlis were Ma’had Tahfiz Al-Quran Al Imam An-Nawawi (MATIN), Jalan Abi Batas Paip, Kangar and Sekolah Rendah Islam Al Furqan (SRIAF) in Jejawi Dalam, Arau. SAR’s involved in Penang were Sekolah Rendah Islam Bahrul Ulum (SRIBU), Mengkuang Titi, Kubang Semang and Maahad Tahfiz An-Nahdhoh, Permatang Pauh. Four SARs were selected from Kedah, namely Sekolah Rendah Islam Darul Ulum (SRIDU), Batu 3, Tandop, Alor Setar, Maahad Tarbiah Islamiyah Derang, Pokok Sena, Madrasah Zubaidiyah, Merbok and Sekolah Islam Al-Islah, Pinang Tunggal, Sungai Petani. Summary of SAR’s involved as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>SAR’s Name</th>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number of</th>
<th>Number of Student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Table 1. Information on SAR’s involved in the study
B. Administration practiced by SAR’s involved in study.

Results from the study found that all SAR’s involved in the study applied some best practices in managing educational waqf administrative affairs and the operation of their SAR. However, from the long list of practices, the study concluded six (6) best practices practiced by those SAR that made them more efficient in handling the management of educational waqf and the operations of their schools. Table 2 concluded those practices.

Table 2. Administration practiced by SAR’s involved in study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Administration Practiced</th>
<th>Responden (PSAR No.)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Academic Excellence Program</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Waqf Expansion</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Promotion of Educational Institute</th>
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<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Transparency of Governance and Leadership</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Human Resource Efficiency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Good Relationship with Government / Related Agency</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Study, 2018/2019

It could be clearly seen in Table 2 above that all the SAR’s involved in the study have an organized and systematic academic excellence program. For example, besides mainstream education system, the SARs also practiced tahfiz (memorization) excellence program, diniyah (religious), and also tarbiah (spiritual) (PSAR 1, PSAR 2, PSAR 3, PSAR 5, PSAR 6, PSAR 7 & PSAR 8). For PSAR 4, their academic excellence program was added with input resulted from their best practice benchmarking program run by them at best madrasah in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia.

SARs involved also has their strategic plan to enrich the education waqf received. For instance, they rent out the school hall to the public and also to the external organization for events such as wedding ceremony, manufacturing their own product like soap, coffee, food stuff, and also catering service (PSAR 1, PSAR 4, PSAR 5, PSAR 7). PSAR 4 is more advance where they have restaurant, laundry shop, mini market, hotel, barber’s shop, tuition center, bus service, travel agency, even up to welding service that can generate and expand their waqf fund even more. All the SAR’s involved in the study have their own way of promoting their schools in term of promoting educational waqf institution. They have their Promotion Team comprising of the academic and non-academic staff that combined their energy and ideas for this purpose. Apart from conventional “word of mouth” method, promotional effort also used the social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, printed media, electronic media, and using series of lecture and banners. This resulted in the SARs name becoming widely known and thus open opportunity and simplify people and companies to donate to the waqf fund.

Transparency of governance, and leadership were evident at the SARS involved in the study with the existence of well organize governance system that helped in smooth leadership process of the SAR. Among the examples were the availability of Advisory Panel, Management Committee, School Administration Board, School/Maahad Management Board, and School Board. The existence of a transparent and efficient governance enabled SAR leadership to move forward more effectively for the sake of the educational system sustainability in people’s religious school in Malaysia.

Human resource efficiency in all the SARs were at a good level although more still need to be given attention, due to the result of good transparent of governance, and leadership. Basically, the academic staff in the SARs involved have the required qualification for teaching and learnings the mainstream, tahfiz, and religious streams (PSAR 1 to 8). PSAR 5 stated that most of the academic staff in his school possess at least a bachelor’s degree qualification. There were also retired academic and non-academic professional staff volunteering themselves to
teach and work at the SAR (PSAR 6). This indirectly helped trained and guided the young and new staff in the SAR which contributed towards improving the SAR’s human resource efficiency.

Next, to ensure SAR smooth operation, good and cordial relationship with government and government agencies such as the local government, state government, State Islamic Religious Council (Majlis Agama Islam Negeri), Department of Waqf, Tithe, and Hajj (Jabatan Wakaf, Zakat, dan Haji), Malaysian Waqf Foundation (Yayasan Wakaf Malaysia), and others, need to be given appropriate attention. Without this good relationship, it would be difficult for the SAR to manage its operation smoothly. There are principals and staff of the SAR, being appointed into the Government Meeting Committee (Ahli Syura Kerajaan) (PSAR 4). This is a good relationship as it benefits both parties. PSAR 8 indicated that his school always work closely with government agency and they are registered with the State Islamic Religious Council (Majlis Agama Islam Negeri), State Education Department, and also the District Education Department. Overall, all the SARs involved in the study possess good relationship with the government and related government agencies where it helps a lot in smooth operation of the SARs.

C. Challenge faced by SAR involved in the study

Basically, the challenge faced by the SARs in administering people’s religious school is almost like government mainstream schools. However, the most noticeable challenge in ensuring smooth operation of SARs are financial source constrain. Since the SARs operation does not received financial aid from the government, they need to depend mostly on student fees, and also from waqf cash donation received. They also need quite a huge source of finance for salary of their teachers, and administrative staff. Due to this constraint, some of the academic staff must take dual role as teacher and school administrator at the same time. Some of them even sacrifice by receiving minimum wages just to ensure the school operates as planned. The sincerity and enthusiasm possess by these teachers and school administrators became one of the secrets of the sustainability of the SARs involved.

The second challenge relates to human resource aspects. The financial resources constraint makes salary scheme offered in other places looks more attractive. Only those enthusiastic and strong will could endure in giving their service in SAR. Staff come and go according to their need and suitability. Due to this condition, at certain SAR, there are academic staff also serve as administrator. The next challenge relates to the level of awareness of waqf among Malaysian which is still at an unsatisfactory level. Most of Malaysian, especially in the northern area of Peninsular Malaysia are still not fully clear about the waqf concept, especially the educational waqf. Awareness campaign, and notification session at more frequent rate are needed to overcome this challenge.
D. Model Suggested for SAR Educational Waqf Administration

The findings of the study indicated six (6) form of administrative practice adopted by SAR’s involved that may make them the best in administrating educational waqf in their people’s religious schools. Therefore, a model based on best practice adopted by the SAR’s involved is recommended to be used by other SAR as a guideline to ensure smoothness and sustainable operation of each SAR in order to be more effective and competitive. Figure 1 shows suggested SAR Educational Waqf Administrative Model resulted from this study.

Figure 1. SAR Educational Waqf Administrative Model

5. Suggestion and Conclusion

To ensure that the suggested educational waqf administrative model could be effective and in good use, the challenges faced by SAR need to be handled to the best by administrators in SAR.

Constraint in terms of financial resources is the greatest challenge of most of the SAR. Therefore, to improve SAR financial resources, few suggestions has been put forward for the particular SAR consideration so that the wafq fund owned could be expand and improved (Figure 2).
Figure 2 depict the model for fund generating strategy that could be applied by SAR administrator in their attempt to develop the educational waqf received. Based on Figure 2, there are three applicable strategies, which are fund generation through cash waqf instrument, Islamic finance instrument, and syariah compliance investment instrument. All three instruments are applicable for the development of educational waqf in a more productive form such as constructing commercial building or involve in agriculture activity, and commercial husbandry.

Those development could use the tenancy or lease method that could yield income for the administrators. The income earned could be used for improvement purposes and adding to more amount of waqf asset. This situation shows that the benefit from fund generated could be used continuously, with more sustainable.

The second challenge that need to be addressed immediately is about human resources aspect. Insufficient human resources either for academic or administrative field is not a new challenge and is synonym with most of SAR. Workers come and go according to their life purpose. Only those serving sincerely could endure working in SAR because SAR is not a place for those seeking worldly rewards. Therefore, the waqf fund generating and development strategy should be given priority and cooperation by all stakeholders in SAR because it could produce multiplier effect. For example, if the investment and expansion of the waqf fund is successful, SAR’s financial resources also increase. This will indirectly enable SAR to pay their staff salaries more competitively, comparable with their colleague outside of SAR. With a more attractive and comfortable salary scheme, it will be able to attract newer workforce and at the same time retaining existing staff. SAR’s could seek assistance and
collaborate with public universities and teacher training institute for training their academic staff on teaching and learning methods, suitable with SAR’s requirement in enhancing its staff expertise, periodically. SAR can also cooperate with government agencies such as National Institute of Public Administration (INTAN) to provide training for its staff. This could be made easy if SAR has good relationship with government and its agencies as proposed by the model in Figure 1.

The unsatisfactory level of awareness on waqf needs among Malaysian is another issue that need to be handled continuously by SAR. All the promotional efforts whether conventionally or through social media need to be done continuously. Proof on waqf fund usage, and efforts to expand waqf fund by SAR should be attached and informed to waqf givers and the public so that they will be convinced of their hereafter investment. Lately, there are some parties taking advantage on the generosity of waqf givers for personal interest which resulted in many waqf givers and potential waqf givers feeling skeptical to donate to SAR.

Findings of the study suggested that for SAR to manage its operation efficiently, one of its condition is it must adopt an effective system of educational waqf administration. Since there is no model of educational waqf administration system that could be used as a guide by all SAR in Malaysia, especially in north of Peninsular Malaysia, each SAR are administer their school according to their own style. This caused some of the SAR to be lifeless, withered, and pathetic. With the emergence of the SAR Educational Waqf Administration Model, hopefully it could help and guide all SAR in administering their educational waqf, so that the prestige of Islamic education is on right track besides having a smooth and perfect process of study and teaching of SAR, comparable to other mainstream schools.

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