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Exploring Contemporary Muallaf (Dis)Empowerment within Brunei's Islamic Governance: An Islamic Critical Realist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Muslim muallaf (rivert) is a unique identity, distinct from a convert or revert. Muallaf can experience life as a Muslim minority in a Muslim majority. Unfortunately, muallaf may face disempowerment, even in an Islamic governance system that provides zakat funding to them. To address this issue, the author examines the nature of the contemporary muallaf identity and how it can be empowered in an Islamic governance system. The case study methodology is chosen, underpinned by Islamic critical realist philosophy. The case of muallaf (dis)empowerment in Brunei Darussalam is presented to elicit the underlying governance mechanisms, which were constructed from secondary data, including official documents and news articles, and primary data collected from a focus group with 10 diverse muallaf residing in Brunei. Then, thematic analysis was conducted, and the governance mechanisms were categorized into two: empowerment and disempowerment. From the study, it is found that both mechanisms impact muallaf simultaneously. Additionally, the muallaf identity is not suppressed or diffused in the Muslim majority community but is lying dormant due to the lack of engagement. To empower a muallaf community-of-practice, Islamic governance needs to not only distribute zakat and provide support, but also to provide platforms for them to contribute back to the wider society. The significance of the research is the call for maximizing muallaf's potential in developing Islamic governance beyond zakat management.

***Keywords**:*
Brunei, empowerment, Islamic governance, muallaf, Muslim minority.

Introduction

Contemporarily, the *muallaf* identity is evolving. The word is Arabic and is linked to the Quranic verse (9:60), where the word '*Muallaf*' can be found in relation to the heart being attracted to Islam, and is one of the recipients of *zakat*. According to the *Kuwaiti Encyclopedia of Islamic Jurisprudence*, the term can also refer to non-Muslims whose hearts need to be reconciled, and some schools allowed *zakat* to be distributed to them (Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs 1404-1427 AH). There are many theological and juristic discussions of the muallaf. However, there is a lack of understanding of muallaf identity from their own perspective. This study aims to explore the experiences of muallaf becoming empowered within an Islamic governance system, specifically in Brunei Darussalam. An empowered muallaf refers to a person who is accepted by

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the Muslim majority community (Wu, 2014; Eskelinen et al. 2023). Members of the Muslim community may not even necessarily see the need to distinguish between a muallaf and a Muslim because they are the same (Awang et al. 2023).

The author argues that the Muslim muallaf identity is a unique one that should garner more attention beyond zakat distribution. To regard them as a transitional convert or revert may undermine the permanency of the muallaf identity with its distinctive capabilities. For example, the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, based in America, produced a report to highlight the similarities and differences between born Muslims and muallaf Muslims (Mogahed & Ikramullah 2025). In the report, both groups are similar in terms of religiosity and political views, but muallaf Muslims are less likely to internalize Islamophobia and to experience it. There are other distinctions to the muallaf Muslim identity from a generic Muslim identity that have yet to be explored.

Unfortunately, a muallaf can also be seen as a potential terrorist due to their naivety and susceptibility to extremist perspectives (Fodeman et al. 2020). A disempowered muallaf in a particular community would lead to deviancy and radicalization, dividing the community and breeding Islamophobia globally. There is a clear gap in understanding the contemporary muallaf identity and how best to empower them, rather than disempower them.

So, the first research question is: What is the nature of the contemporary muallaf identity, as evidenced in the literature? Secondly, how can a muallaf be empowered holistically in an Islamic governance? This paper contributes to the critical exploration of the distinct contemporary muallaf identity and how governance can help maximize their potential.

Methodology

To answer the first research question on the evolving nature of a contemporary muallaf, an integrative literature review on muallaf can help to establish the widespread practices of muallaf empowerment, as well as disempowerment. The review is underpinned by critical realism to surface the context, interventions, mechanisms, and outcomes surrounding muallaf (Jones & Gatrell 2014). The literature covers varying contexts, including America, Russia, and Indonesia, each with its own interventions and governance mechanisms. Many of these reviews highlight two outcomes: empowerment and disempowerment. By using critical realism, the understanding of contemporary muallaf can be divided into the disempowerment they experienced, support for them, and their contributions to the wider society.

The integrative literature review helps to answer the second research question: How can a muallaf be empowered in an Islamic governance? To answer this question, the case study methodology is most suitable as it enables us to construct a concise case narrative for theory-building (Yin 2014). The methodology is also underpinned by a research philosophy called Islamic critical realism. Islamic critical realism (Wilkinson 2013, 2015) is a derivative of Islamic ontological realism and epistemological realism, synthesized with critical realism. It adheres to the trinity of critical realism (i.e., ontological realism, epistemological relativism, and judgmental rationality). This has implications when scrutinizing verses from the Quran and the narrations of the life of Muhammad (peace be upon him), that interpretations of the absolute reality are bounded by one's judgments. The focus of critical realism and Islamic critical realism is about structures and mechanisms, not regularities or patterns of events that emerge in an open system (Pawson 2002). This philosophy fits well to examine an ever-evolving phenomenon of contemporary muallaf empowerment while still grounded in the Quran and the Prophetic tradition. Additionally, there are 'demi-real' phenomena, i.e., "they generate actual effects in the world although they have no real existence at the level of the physical or metaphysical structures of the universe" (Wilkinson 2013:422). For example, the disempowerment of muallaf is a telltale sign that the 'real' potential of muallaf has not been achieved.

Brunei is selected as a common case context of Islamic governance, examining the phenomenon of muallaf empowerment as seen from the viewpoints of selected muallaf themselves. Brunei has been an Islamic state since the first Sultan, also a muallaf himself, who

governed from 1363 to 1402. Brunei has placed Islam as the official state religion in the Brunei Constitution of 1959 and claimed full sovereignty from the British Empire in 1985 by the 29th Sultan of Brunei. The development of Islam has been emphasized continuously, and *Muallaf* empowerment is always on the national agenda. There are various publicly available documents from the Brunei government on the issue, which are collected and analyzed to construct a case narrative.

Additionally, the perspectives of the muallaf were also gathered in September 2023 using a focus group interview of 10 participants (five males and five females), with an age range between 28 and 73. Their muallaf status ranges from 1 to 36 years, providing diverse perspectives on the issue. A one-day workshop was conducted to elicit the participants' perspectives as muallaf in Brunei. This workshop was part of the author's training program under the *KAICIID International Fellowship Programme 2023* (Tarip 2025). After proposing the project to KAICIID and undergoing their ethical review process, they gave their approval and funded the project. During participant registration for the workshop, participants were provided with a participation information sheet to inform them about the research purpose and the overall research design. They were also informed that their inputs are kept confidential and their identities anonymized.

The focus group interview is an important data collection process to not only obtain their personal experiences, but also to capture the interactions among diverse participants. The process starts with gathering their life goals, followed by the challenges faced and the proposed solutions. The workshop concluded with participants proposing solutions to empower themselves and other muallaf further. After the data was gathered, prepared, anonymized, and thematically analyzed, the preliminary findings were shared with 18 various stakeholders of the Brunei muallaf community, including government officers and philanthropists, in October 2023 for internal and external validations.

The generalizability of the case study findings is dependent on the case study methodology. Yin (2014:68) explained that there is potential that findings from case studies can be analytically generalized "at a conceptual level than that of the specific case", and this is opposed to statistical generalization with large numbers of respondents used in quantitative studies. Since Brunei was selected as a common case study, the findings from the primary and secondary data can be generalized to similar Islamic governance contexts, where there is a muallaf minority in a Muslim-majority society. However, the findings need to be re-examined in other contexts for further suitability and validation.

Contemporary *Muallaf*

The muallaf identity keeps on changing. Originating from the Quranic verse (9:60), the word muallaf can refer to the inclination of the heart to Islam and a recipient of zakat. It also refers to a new 'convert' to Islam, or, as some would prefer, a 'revert' to Islam. There are other localized terminologies in place of muallaf, such as *'saudara baru'* in Malay, which means 'new relative' (Wu 2014). Interestingly, the label was changed by a Malaysian authority later to 'saudara kita', which means 'our relative', to remove the dichotomy between new and old Muslims. There are other unique notions in various contexts, such as 'becoming Malay', which was synonymous with 'becoming a Muslim'. This was because the Malays were known to be majority Muslim, and when Chinese and other tribal members converted to Islam, they also became Malay. From a sociological perspective, a muallaf is seen as a member of a religious out-group, but also of the cultural in-group, as well as a citizen or non-citizen of a country in which they converted to Islam (Wu 2014; Eskelinen et al. 2023). Their religious practices may also need to accommodate cultural customs (Jubba et al. 2025).

Gender may also be an issue in muallaf's identity construction. For example, Rao's (2015) empirical research of American muallaf showed gendered dispositions: men developed a disposition of responsibility, whereas women developed a sacrificial one, conditioned by their surroundings. Such development is more apparent in muallaf as they try to fit in. In the case of a female muallaf, the journey to wear the *hijab* and *niqab* has also been researched, as it has been

politicized. Piela's (2015:371) examination of online narratives of female British muallaf illustrated the *niqab* not as an outcome of radicalization and extremism as often portrayed by the media, but 'the outcome of a lengthy process of reflection.' Franks (2000) highlighted that white female converts wearing the hijab 'cross the boundary of whiteness.' On the issue of whiteness, it may also be linked to a 'unique form of persistent Islamophobia as they undergo a re-racialization', becoming 'non-white' or 'not-quite-white' (Moosavi 2015:53).

The journey of a muallaf is also worth examining, as it is unique to the Muslim *Ummah* and the Islamic economy. At the starting point, *a muallaf* has various motivations for entering into Islam, including *hidayah* (divine guidance), marriage association with Muslims (Kawi & Masyaa'il 2020), and intellectual endeavors (Snook et al. 2021). The narratives of conversion to Islam mainly revolve around three: awakening, continuity, and return. The first refers to a radical change from living in darkness to finding light and truth; the second refers to gradual natural changes towards the truth, especially among the Abrahamic religions; and the third is the Muslim 'revert'. Due to these varying narrations about conversions, some could not even pinpoint when exactly they converted to Islam (Vroon-Najem 2019). Even the conversion process can be either open or secret, which then gives rise to different conversion experiences for a muallaf.

Disempowered Muallaf

Being a muallaf does not necessarily bring only positive experiences. The journey of becoming and being a muallaf is filled with challenges. The many challenges can come from the original group as the muallaf transitioned to a new religion, from the Muslim majority who see muallaf as new and naïve, requiring support from the societal norms where the Muslim community is a minority, from the political norm where Muslims are actively vilified, from the global cancerous Islamophobic movements, and so on. Even in the case of intermarriage, a muallaf person may face difficulty in terms of difficult relationships with the original family, failure to communicate due to language barriers, financial challenges, lack of education, and child neglect (Kawi & Masyaa'il 2020). Even their names can be problematic (Samuri et al. 2018).

Radicalism may also be experienced by muallaf in some parts of the world (Fodeman et al. 2020), where there is a lack of formal guidance. Especially in the West, several studies have highlighted such tendencies. Snook and colleagues (2021) argued that 'the more strongly a Muslim convert experiences crisis leading up to their conversion, the more likely they are to endorse engaging in radicalism.' In the Russian context, Shestopalets (2020) reviewed several literatures on the topic and found the new Russian Muslims 'incapable of a critical understanding of their new religious tradition and thus unavoidably susceptible to radicalization.' Similarly, in the Canadian context, Muslim converts are 'highly representative' in domestic terrorist attacks. Several facilitative factors have been identified, including exposure to extremist ideology, social networks, charismatic authority, domestic political grievances, personal psychology, socio-economic and criminal circumstances, and enabling environments (Suljić & Wilner 2021). In the context of Romania, members of the muallaf group were also seen to adopt sectarian discourses (Alak 2015), which can further lead to intolerance and extremism. The danger of a disempowered muallaf is clear: this group is susceptible to deviancy and extremism.

Zakat and other Support for Mu'allaf

Over the centuries of Islamic governances in various parts of the world, support for the muallaf community has evolved. Arguably, muallaf support mechanism is a core feature of an Islamic system of governance. Zakat distribution is one of the main supports available, as it is ordained in the Quran as one of the eight groups eligible to receive it (9:60). Often, it is in the form of monthly stipends and/or business capital, and is generally found to be impactful to their religious practice (Shaharuddin et al. 2019). Contemporarily, there are experimental usages of zakat, such as zakat loan provision (Sarif et al. 2024), entrepreneurship (Mahmood et al. 2021), digitalization (Alam et al. 2023), and disaster mitigation (Hulwati et al. 2024). Zakat eligibility for muallaf may

also vary. Many zakat institutions adopt the idea that zakat is to be given to a 'new' muallaf only. It may have an expiry date since a new convert cannot be 'new' perpetually, as some would argue. Unfortunately, *zakat* management may not lead to alleviating poverty. For example, in the case of Bangladesh, Islam and colleagues (2023) found that *zakat* payers were ignorant about Islamic law and were unable to distribute *zakat* effectively. In Malaysia's higher learning institutions, Takril and Othman (2020) also found ineffectiveness in collecting and distributing *zakat* for many various reasons. So, although support from *zakat* management may help muallaf, administrative issues may be a hindrance. Additionally, the effectiveness of zakat distribution is not limited to monetary terms (Yusup et al. 2021). *Zakat* distribution needs to cover all five Maqasid al-Shari'ah, i.e., the preservation of faith, life, intellect, posterity, and wealth (Zakaria 2014).

So, another important support for muallaf is religious education, particularly on the basics of the Islamic religion (such as praying, fasting, and reading the Quran) (Awang et al. 2023). Often, muallaf learned from their informal social network and, more recently, from social media. However, these networks are arguably less effective, especially in the hands of untrained guides. There have been instances where social networks and social media have led to radicalization (Suljić & Wilner 2021). To avoid poor development, there is a need to provide systematic religious education for muallaf. Since there are various strands of theological and juristic school of thoughts, the muallaf's local association is responsible for providing guidance, which can vary according to context. The guide can be simple to cover the foundational Islamic knowledge, and expand into a formal school curriculum and livelihood. For example, Siregar and colleagues (2020) examined Islamic religious education in a traditional Islamic school in Indonesia. Other than the typical religious education on the Islamic faith and practices, the non-formal curriculum also included coaching, computing, Arabic and English language classes, sermon training, and other vocational education. In a different region in Indonesia, Mahfud (2018) captured the development of Chinese-based Islamic education, from kindergarten, primary, to Islamic boarding school. It is also linked to the first Chinese masjid in Surabaya, and has offered many social and educational activities, which keep on evolving to suit the needs of the muallaf and the surrounding context.

Other additional support has been proposed, but not necessarily relying on *zakat*, such as counselors and transition homes (Abdullah et al. 2022). Although converting to Islam is seen as a positive change, the change process needs to be managed well, particularly with regard to their mental state. A well-trained counselor can help to improve muallaf's faith, mental well-being, and lifestyle, enabling them to better integrate with family and community (McLaughlin et al. 2022). Transition homes can also be made available in case the new life transformation has caused ostracization and violence caused by family and community members. The Islamic boarding school also provides shelter and religious guides for some muallaf (Siregar et al. 2020).

Often neglected are the legal procedures and human rights in the conversion process. Samuri and Khan (2021) called for legal literacy related to pre- and post-conversion, which are often overlooked by many parties. In the context of Malaysia with legal pluralism, the multiple sets of laws can cause confusion, disrupting the mental well-being of the muallaf. Some of the legal issues include identity change, dissolution of civil marital status, non-Muslim spouses' alimony, matrimonial property division, child custody and guardianship, determination of child's religion, determination of deceased's religion, funeral arrangements, inheritance, and derivative pension claims.

Contributions by Muallaf

With proper development, a muallaf is expected to contribute to an Islamic system of governance. They can contribute as another generic Muslim, and also a unique muallaf. First, with regard to zakat management, they can become the generic Muslim contributors to the zakat cycle when they meet the requirement to pay zakat, closing the loop for muallaf.

On Islamic education, muallaf members may not only consume religious information, but also producers and publishers of these materials. Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia have also shown not only to educate and shelter new *Mu'allaf*, but to train them to become Islamic teachers

and preachers, and contribute back to the schools (Mahfud 2018; Siregar et al. 2020). In Canada, Guzik's (2018) ethnography of Muslim converts showed they produce religious content through written documents, as well as expressing it through physical actions and spoken words. Specifically, on the *niqab*, Piela's (2015) study on online narratives of female British muallaf showed the co-creation of knowledge among participants regarding the piece of cloth. As muallaf identity evolves, so too does their production and embodiment of religious knowledge. The co-production of knowledge is unique to muallaf, signifying their useful role as part of the community of muallaf. Furthermore, the muallaf's community-of-practice (Piela 2015) may provide a sense of belonging as a minority group within the wider Muslim community. Members can share their experiences as they practice the Islamic religion together.

Additionally, a muallaf can serve as a unique bridge between groups of Muslims and non-Muslims. The link can be based on race, religion, nation, profession, and other social segregation criteria. Their ability to connect to others is useful for dialogue, to foster harmonious relationships between the wider community, and to spread the message of Islam in whichever way is suitable for them and the community.

In summary, the contemporary muallaf are evolving as they experience changes in their lives. Many of these changes are unique, causing them to experience greater struggle from within and others. Various supports are needed to help them transition to their new way of Islamic life, including receiving zakat, Islamic education, counseling and mental health support, legal support, and so on. The lack of support leads to disempowerment, and even the potential for radicalization and extremism due to their naivety. With proper support, muallaf are empowered to contribute back to an Islamic system of governance, which can be categorized as unique to the community of muallaf, unique to the wider community as a relationship builder, or a general contribution like any other Muslims and non-Muslims.

Muallaf (Dis)Empowerment in Brunei

There are various ways to empower muallaf within an Islamic system of governance. Many examples are coming from various Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, and Muslim-minority countries like the United Kingdom and Singapore. In this section, Brunei Darussalam is selected for its current effort to empower muallaf, and where more efforts are needed. The reason is to highlight the evolving nature of Islamic governance and the need to respond to current and future issues affecting muallaf. A 2024 census tells that the Brunei population is 455,500. In terms of the Muslim population, a 2021 census report estimates 82.1%, and the rest are Christians (6.7%), Buddhists (6.3%), and others. The total number of muallaf all over Brunei from 1985 to 2024 is over 18,500, with an average of 464 conversions per year. However, this number is not reflective of the current number of muallaf in the country.

Many of the efforts to empower muallaf centered on the Brunei government, with other stakeholders playing their respective parts as support or in parallel. The Brunei government has done tremendous work to ensure that the faith and well-being of muallaf individuals are taken care of. As a welfare state, all members of the population enjoyed various benefits and subsidies. The Human Development Index for Brunei is very high; its economy is mainly driven by the oil and gas sector, and the people enjoy a high quality of life.

Muallaf enjoys additional benefits, including *zakat* funding, religious lessons, and other life developmental support from the government. There are various government agencies directly involved to support them, including the Muallaf Development Divisions of the Islamic Dakwah Center, and Zakat, Waqaf and Baitulmal Management Department. The zakat assistance can be for embracing Islam, monthly allowances, housing and shelters and/or other necessities to alleviate poverty. There are no publicly available data on the zakat distributed specifically for muallaf. On 8 July 2025, the Sultan of Brunei again called for reformation in the zakat management system.

163 muallaf successfully finished their Islamic religious course in 2025, covering various Islamic subjects, and graduated successfully, which is an annual ceremony. Although these

successes are to be celebrated, with more than 400 new muallaf every year, there is a clear gap in terms of their religious education. There is also a youth wing under the Islamic Da'wah Center, called the Belia Muallaf As-Syahadah officiated in 2017 and conducts its developmental activities with the guidance of the Center. Some of the latest initiatives are the Ikon *Muallaf* (*Muallaf Icon*) Program, a training platform for muallaf to excel in life and contribute to society. Additionally, the newly completed multi-purpose hall was given to the *Tutong Muallaf Association*, PESATU, which was funded by the Brunei Islamic Religious Council General Administration, completed in 2025. Indeed, there are many efforts being made by the government to empower muallaf, but there are evident gaps.

On top of the support provided by the government, there are also other private and non-governmental organizations operating to help the muallaf community. This includes various groups of muallaf based on geography and/or nationality, such as PESATU and Yayasan Kejayaan Muallaf Indonesia (Indonesian *Muallaf* Excellence Foundation). Additionally, other general non-governmental organizations are doing their annual charity work, particularly during the month of Ramadhan. There are also specific programs run by Islamic financial institutions, such as the Bank Islam Brunei Darussalam's Special Entrepreneurial Empowerment and Development Scheme, which supports budding muallaf entrepreneurs. On top of these supports, it is well-known that there are many generous individuals supporting muallaf in their individual capacity and not recorded in any news outlets.

The media presence of muallaf is also telling. Based on archival research on online local media sources in English, muallaf individuals are linked to the acceptance of zakat support and various donations by the government authorities, corporations, and the wider public. There is also coverage on muallaf registering for religious education with the Islamic Da'wah Center and graduating from it yearly. However, the word muallaf was also linked to being underprivileged, requiring help from various agencies doing charity work. Only two articles from the Scoop highlighted the unique role of muallaf in combating misconceptions of non-Muslims by opening up the Masjid and inviting them to attend and interact (Wasli 2018, 2019). Overall, the media portrayal showed that the role of muallaf is one that requires various support from the government and various agencies, but their contributions to Brunei's development are not well-highlighted. So, although much support is provided for muallaf, the contributions, acknowledgments, and empowerment fall short.

Current Gaps

Given the current situation, the muallaf empowerment research project was implemented to examine their growth potential through a 1-day workshop in September 2023. From the event, the participants have many similar life goals as other Muslims, but also have unique dreams based on their own reality, especially as a Mu'allaf. Furthermore, there were several shortcomings identified in achieving their life goals, which were categorized into individual, societal, governance, and muallaf community issues. At the individual level, participants expressed their regret and frustration over the difficulty of performing basic daily prayers. They also expressed their lack of self-confidence and lack of knowledge in Islam, which inhibited them from contributing as a muallaf. The limited time available due to other commitments, such as work and family, is also another hindrance to them from building their faith and their muallaf identity. Other than these internal issues, external issues were also echoed, such as constant tensions with and rejection by family members, friends, and other community members, which led to feeling isolated from the rest.

From society, participants expressed that societal members do not necessarily understand what a muallaf is going through in their life. Stereotypes about muallaf were constantly projected, being labeled as 'naïve' and 'ignorant'. Racism, discrimination, and cultural boundaries were also experienced by the muallaf who come from minor racial and cultural backgrounds. Such a lack of understanding about the muallaf livelihood is 'leading us away from unity', as one participant commented, citing Black Eyed Peas' *'Where is the love?'* song. It also led

to the lack of acknowledgment and encouragement of a muallaf identity and livelihood. Some participants also mentioned how their Muslim friends were unsure how to support them as a *muallaf*, signaling that only a *muallaf* would understand another muallaf.

The society's misunderstandings of a muallaf also influenced governance mechanisms to support them. Participants highlighted the lack of formal support and resources for necessities and for further learning. The current basic support system and follow-up from both governmental and non-governmental agencies is lacking, making the muallaf individuals feel isolated without the necessary resources to navigate their faith and the 'new' society. The situation is worse for non-Bruneian *Mu'allaf*, who can only receive even less support. The feeling of isolation is also linked to the gaps in the communication channels between support organizations and the *muallaf* individuals, which are often unidirectional from the giver. The lack of financial assistance programs makes it difficult for new converts to meet their basic needs and engage with their faith effectively.

There is also a lack of formal support for further learning, especially in accessing comprehensive Islamic education. The current religious education program provided by the Islamic Propagation Center is sufficient for basic Islamic knowledge, which is based on the formal religious education in Brunei. However, access to higher learning is almost non-existent, hindering their potential for more. There is also a lack of a comprehensive online platform for learning, which further restricts muallaf's ability to learn, connect with their faith, and engage with the broader Muslim community in the digital age. Another issue is the language barrier: the current practice of teaching only in Malay created a language barrier for some muallaf individuals, limiting their access to Islamic knowledge and resources, and leaving them questioning, 'Can't you learn English (to teach us Islam)?'

Most importantly, the absence of a well-structured and well-supported muallaf community was felt by all participants. The various shortcomings above have led to the belief that the overall support system for muallaf is poorly structured and complicated, leaving muallaf in a difficult position to develop properly, often relying heavily on their social networks. Participants echoed the absence of a dedicated Muallaf Center to cater to the growing needs of the muallaf community, as well as an outlet for them to contribute positively to the community. Additionally, the scarcity of capable leaders for and within the muallaf community limits the provision of guidance, mentorship, and advocacy for new converts, hindering their ability to adapt to their religious journey and societal integration. Muallaf participation as organizational members in various Islamic organizations, like the *Belia Muallaf As-Syahadah*, was also restricted, limiting their voice, participation, and contribution.

Furthermore, the unique capability of a muallaf as a bridge between diverse community members is also not properly harnessed because of a clear deficiency in structured programs aimed at developing future leaders and preachers. When muallaf individuals try to spread the goodness of Islam, rather than finding support, various members of the community would discourage them for their naivety, invoking potential fines for spreading wrong information. This hostile environment discourages muallaf individuals from openly sharing their experience, thereby hindering their integration and empowerment.

Suggested Solutions

Given these shortages, there were several suggestions offered to empower muallaf, which can be summarized as a muallaf community-of-practice with a centralized *Brunei Muallaf Development Center* (BMDC) to support it, run primarily by muallaf for muallaf. The development center coordinates and communicates all relevant support and activities from various agencies to muallaf with empathy and equity. BMDC is available for all, not only for Bruneians, but also for others residing in the country who can benefit from the muallaf community. For a new Mu'allaf, a concise information package on the new way of life as a muallaf can serve as a foundation, which is currently lacking. The basic information is needed to build a well-informed and well-structured

muallaf community. Additionally, the communication channels need to be diverse to help connect all the muallaf individuals in Brunei and build the community together.

There is also a need for BMDC to coordinate and channel the basic support available (e.g., *zakat*, funding, donations) from different agencies to the right muallaf at the right time. Other than coordinating and channeling basic support, more developmental activities are to be offered and provided, curated by the real needs of the contemporary muallaf. Activities may include providing counseling and mental health care, offering more scholarships for muallaf specifically to pursue further learning and training, organizing healthy competitions among members, celebrating various milestones (e.g., 10 years of being muallaf), rewarding role models in the muallaf community, and so on. Since the needs of the muallaf community vary, there is a need to gather input from the various muallaf individuals in the country. Organizing annual town halls for muallaf may be a good platform.

To ensure that the muallaf community is heading in the right direction, community leadership is needed. There is a need to develop muallaf community leaders to cater to different demographics (e.g., youth, races) and needs (e.g., English-based communication, education). Although many of the current leaders are Muslims, there is a need to nurture muallaf to lead their own community.

Entrepreneurship opportunities are also to be made available equitably. Additionally, there can also be specific job opportunities for muallaf to provide the above services, such as muallaf preachers, counselors, and translators. Also, there can be services run by muallaf entrepreneurs for the wider community (need to check whether it is available or not), making their contributions to the country more visible.

Additionally, BMDC can help bridge communities together. As argued previously, muallaf can serve as a unique bridge between groups of Muslims and non-Muslims in the community. The linkages can be utilized to further strengthen social cohesion if executed properly. Furthermore, BMDC is not only relevant locally but also abroad. It can coordinate their outreach to other muallaf associations internationally and to the wider global society. Such international networks are useful to build a stronger global Muslim Ummah, inspiring one another as the local muallaf can contribute to the rest of the world. Overall, with a muallaf community-of-practice supported by BMDC, muallaf can be supported more and contribute significantly to nation-building. These are the suggestions coming from the participants of the muallaf empowerment research project.

Discussions

Islamic governance empowers Muslims and non-Muslims, which also includes the muallaf. Although Brunei is an Islamic state, there is still room for a robust muallaf empowerment mechanism in place. Despite many resources and support provided by the government and the various community groups, focus group participants have highlighted the gaps in a truly empowered muallaf. Often, the majority Muslim community undermines muallaf's unique capabilities, which need to be rectified. The following discussion centers around the dormancy of the muallaf identity and the need to activate it, followed by muallaf empowerment in Islamic governance.

Dormancy of Muallaf Identity

A new muallaf individual has undergone a life-changing process of converting to a new religion, some more drastic than others. The muallaf identity is also changing, and will face challenges spiritually, socially, economically, and politically. In doing so, the muallaf identity might become diluted or suppressed, and replaced with a generic Muslim/Muslimah identity, a religious identity of the majority. Rather than identity dilution or suppression, the empirical study showed muallaf identity dormancy. From the muallaf empowerment project in Brunei, participants showed enduring muallaf identity despite being already accepted into the majority Muslim community, signaling the dormancy of the muallaf identity. This identity is dormant because there is a lack of an outlet to exert their muallaf identity in the wider governance mechanisms. Only when the

platform was provided did they surface their muallaf identity strongly, wanting to contribute further to a muallaf Muslim community.

Rather than seeing muallaf as a transitional phase from being a non-Muslim to a fully-fledged Muslim accepted by the Muslim community, the dormant muallaf identity reflects the special quality possessed by a muallaf. The unique quality of muallaf identity includes their natural role in community-building. With muallaf empowered, the wider community becomes more cohesive. The opposite may also be true; a disempowered muallaf may be a signal of a divided society. As mentioned, these muallaf individuals may be susceptible to deviancy, extremism, and radicalization, leading to social violence within the particular community. In Islamic governance, there is a need to address the lack of outlets for muallaf to be empowered and to contribute back to the community.

Muallaf Community-of-Practice in Islamic Governance

Many Muslim-majority countries have Islamic governance systems in place to support muallaf, but the support varies. In addition to the Islamic obligatory zakat assistance system for muallaf, other support systems are also needed, including education, counseling, and legal assistance, among others. However, there is a lack of acknowledgment and empowerment of a muallaf Muslim community-of-practice, which was highlighted from the empirical case of muallaf empowerment in Brunei. The participants highlighted the many gaps in the current Islamic governance system in supporting the muallaf community, including the shortcomings of equitable provision of formal support from the government and non-governmental agencies, the limited learning and educational opportunities, and the lack of community leadership to lead and develop the Muallaf community from within. These mechanisms are present but felt lacking, thus demotivating the participants to contribute further.

The proposed way forward by the participants of the focus group is crystallized as an empowered muallaf community-of-practice with a centralized *Brunei Muallaf Development Center* to support it, run primarily by muallaf for muallaf. Again, there are already smaller muallaf communities, but further empowerment requires greater centralization, participation, and engagement from the muallaf themselves. Doing so can boost their contribution to Islamic governance, even beyond the borders of Brunei, through international diplomacy among other muallaf communities around the globe.

Conclusion

Even though there are many similarities between a contemporary muallaf and a general Muslim, there are also key differences between the two groups. One of the important qualities is that a muallaf has a special bridge from their old life to their new one, giving them an innate ability to bring different races and religions together, if developed properly. Their role as community builders should not be undermined, as is often the case. Even within Brunei's Islamic governance, muallaf are often underdeveloped and even disempowered due to their naivety. To empower them, the dormant muallaf identity needs to be engaged, provided with the right platform for them to develop and contribute back to the community. Having a muallaf community-of-practice is called for within an Islamic governance system, as well as catalyzing them to become community builders. The recommendation here is applicable in both Muslim-majority (e.g., Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia) and Muslim-minority countries (e.g., America, Canada, Russia) as they reflect many similar issues of (dis)empowerment.

There are several limitations to this study. First is the minimal discussion on the theological and juristic aspects of a muallaf. Rather, the research is focused on the experience of muallaf within an Islamic governance context, which was deemed lacking. Second is the limited scope of the study to focus on 10 participants in the focus group, despite their diverse perspectives. Third, the cross-sectional primary data collected, which together limit the generalizability of the study. Future studies can re-examine the theological and juristic dimensions of a muallaf. They can also widen the scope of governance to include voices from the

government and non-governmental actors that are actively participating in muallaf empowerment. A longitudinal study of individual muallaf, an intervention program, and the overall development trajectory of muallaf empowerment may be fruitful in foreseeing the future for them and the wider community. Additionally, studies on muallaf can be established in different contexts, which can give rise to innovative findings. Lastly, studies on muallaf should not be seen as studying a minority group, but a valuable member of the *ummah* due to their special qualities in bridging communities.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest to be declared.

Author's Contribution Statement

As stated in the attached form, "I attest to the fact that the author listed on the title page has contributed significantly to the work, has read the manuscript, attests to the validity and legitimacy of the data and its interpretation, and agrees to its submission to the International Journal of Islamic Thought (IJIT)."

Ethics Statement

As stated in the submitted paper: "During participant registration for the workshop, participants were provided with a participation information sheet to inform them about the research purpose and the overall research design. They were also informed that their inputs are kept confidential and their identities anonymized."

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