Appointment as Principal of Government-Aided Religious School (SABK) in Malaysia

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Abstract: This article discusses the appointment process of a principal in government-aided religious school (SABK) in Malaysia, which runs into several management problems. The research objective is to study the appointment process of a principal, in addition to examining the role and function of this office in the management system of Islamic education in SABK. This research adopts a qualitative methodology through interview questions and document analysis. Research findings highlight three main issues, namely: the vagueness of the power of appointment, role and function of principal and suggestions to resolve the problems. This research also shows that the actual problem originates from vagueness in interpreting the authority conferred by the Federal Constitution in terms of Islamic management of education. The Federal system which is the pillar of Malaysian political ideology does not give ample space for cooperation among stakeholders of the Islamic education management. This research suggests a rule of joint-management procedure based on a development and joint-management model (MPPB) to ensure that appointment to office of principal in the management of Islamic education runs smoothly without giving rise to disputes in any form.

Key words: Government-aided religious school (SABK), office of principal, Islamic education management, educational leadership

INTRODUCTION

Effective leadership is a very important aspect of a social system, in which human resource or manpower becomes the main driving force of its other components. A formal of social organization refers to manpower strategy utilising available resources and is known as a proper administrative system. A sound administration stresses on balancing between manpower and other resources to achieve organizational objectives and goals. Employees under such an administrative system will feel happy to work in such a working environment. In educational administration, leadership is categorized into five levels: policy-making level such as the policy-making executives; management level such as directors and administrative executives; supervisory level such as supervisory executives; technical level such as principals; and lastly, implementation level, namely, all teachers. The principal is the main administrative position in a school. Generally, the principal plays two main roles, as head of administration in the organization and implementer of policies in the daily affairs of the school educational system (Azlin and Roselan, 2007). As principal or headmaster, a principal is responsible for steering the educational institution to a high level, whether quantitatively or qualitatively in terms of academic, co-curriculum and moral conduct (Omar, 1993). As a policy implementer, a principal is also responsible for implementing laws and regulations set by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. However, a principal is at times in a dilemma because he may not be able to carry out his basic role as the head teacher in teaching and learning activities as best as possible.

The responsibilities of a teacher become increasingly burdensome when there is overlap between the tasks of curriculum management, daily administration, management of finance and physical facilities.This adversely affects the teacher's existing duties and does not promote his professionalism. In addition, teaching and learning planning may not achieve the actual objective of its educational strategy (Sufean, 2002). In the meantime, the school administration seems not to understand the teacher's real responsibilities. Instead, the administration has to use discretion due to lack of professional qualification, guidance and supervision (Abdul Rahman, 2007). This shortcoming is caused by the lack of formal skills training for administration prior to appointment as principal.

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Even if there was training, it would be only short-term, intensive and needs–oriented (Robiah, 2003). The administration should not deny the overlapping of a principal's duties, whether in terms of teaching or administration. Hence, a principal should be wise in time management and be ready with various skills as a teacher and administrator at the same time. This would ensure that additional duties will not affect his main duty in school (Saleh, 2002).

The Principal's Position in the Bureaucratic Structure:

Among the main characteristics of a bureaucratic organisational structure is the power held by officers. This power accords with the position in the hierarchy as in the diagram below. A simple meaning for hierarchy is the role, power or position structure of a vertically tiered organisation. It represents distribution of power or the chain of command among officers (Robiah, 2003). The officer who has the highest position and rank in the chain of command also has the most power, influence, status and salary. Diagram 1 shows the chain of command:
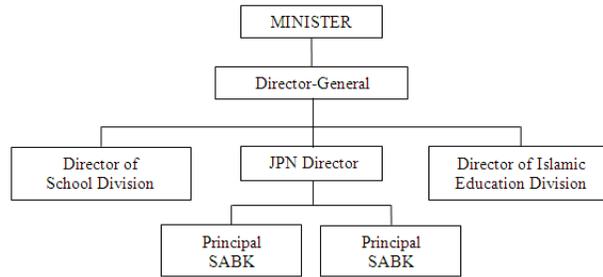

Diagram 1: Organisation Structure of Hierarchy.

In organizational theory, rational thinking and structure theory are the precursors in organizational management which focus attention on objectives and roles in seeking solutions to organizational issues. According to the Behavioural Theory submitted by Hoy (2001), the administrative process gives priority to improving motivation and work aspirations among officers and workers.The administrator is required to provide a comfortable work environment to ensure that tasks are properly performed. According to Abdul Shukor (1991), organizational theorists such as Max Weber, Robert K. Merton, Thompson, Blau as well as Scott dan Perrrow hold the opinion that the best way to strengthen an organization is through building a structure appropriate to the management aspirations and environment. They prioritize the formal role of organization which divides tasks and responsibilities among members based on policy, rules and management hierarchy so that all activities can be coordinated. In the above structure, the principal carries out his authority in compliance to a higher authority, whether at state, division or even ministerial level.

The Principal's Predicament in State (SMAN) and People's (SMAR) Religious Secondary Schools:

In a State Religious Secondary School (SMAN) and People's Religious Secondary School (SMAR), the principal has always been known since the beginning as the *mudir*. Experience in SMAR shows that a *mudir* or principal, not only acts as a teacher and administrator, but also also as a planner to source for funds to improve the school. However the main responsibility in sourcing for funds really lies with the School Management Board. The principal's nature of work suits the meaning of *mudir* which in Arabic means director. A director in the context of management in Malaysian education is much higher in position than a principal such as Director of State Education Department or Director of Islamic Education Division.

Some of the teachers in SMAR and SMAN also carry out daily administrative work as a responsibility without remuneration. It is considered as a contribution to the school. This responsibility does not take into account the heavy teaching workload for which there are no rules to limit it. This situation shows that SMAR is in dire need of improvement in administration so that it may properly plan all school operations. Without proper planning and management, it is not possible to develop SMAR towards achieving specified objectives.

As the owner and main authority over the administration of SMAR, the State Religious Authority and School Governing Board in cooperation with the Federal government should jointly develop SMAR through a proper coordinated system. Each party should revert to the concept of organizational planning and management as practised by other organizations. The difference is that focus should be on the existing concept of the educational administration. Hence, organizational theories and models may be applied and implemented in daily administrative affairs.

Appointment of Principal in SABK:

The name Sekolah Agama Bantuan Kerajaan (SABK) or government-aided religious school is the new name for a number of SMAN and SMAR schools, both secondary and primary, registered under the Education

Act 1966. By this Act, SABK is categorised as a government-aided school similar to SRJK or National Type (Chinese) Primary School and National Type (Tamil) Primary Schools (Sia, 2005). Prior to this, both types of religious schools, SMAN and SMAR were only registered under the State Islamic Religious Council Enactment. The SABK is the outcome of a proposal in the Tan Sri Murad Special Committee Report which aims to strengthen or empower the school and arrange its registration process under the Ministry of Education of Malaysia. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed by the two parties to avoid any future disputes.It is implemented nationwide since the year 2004. The major part of its contents are the same but there are small differences between States to suit theindivudual States and their respective schools. This difference is also due to the concern and responsible attitude of the State and SMAR in ensuring that the original spirit and purpose of establishing the schools are not lost and that similar history will repeat itself as it once did.

In terms of land ownership and school building, there are no changes. However, in terms of administration, there is a slight difference. Generally, SABK is jointly managed by the Ministry of Education and the Yayasan (Foundation), Jabatan Agama Islam Negeri (State Islamic Religious Authority) or School Governing Board (Azizi & Supyan, 2008). Up to the time of this research, the number of religious schools registered as SABK is 168 out of 385. At the time of writing this article, there is one school which signed the MOU but later revoked it because of disagreement on the vague points, particularly on the aspect of principalship.

Vagueness in Determining the Authority to Appoint A Principal as Head Administrator of School:
Discussion of the principal's office is unclear in the memorandum of understanding. For example, the position of the incumbent principal remains until resignation. Any new appointment for the position lies within the discretion of the Ministry oF Education of Malaysia because SABK is already registered under the Education Act 1966. This situation has complicated school administration. The understanding is also different for Kelantan because the memorandum for Kelantan (Yayasan Islam Kelantan or YIK) in the issue of a new appointment for a principal has to be jointly discussed by both parties.To ensure smooth running of a school, it has to be administered by a qualified principal. Usually a candidate must fulfill certain conditions in order to be eligible as principal. The requirement to meet these conditions exists whether for State or Federal schools, and even for private and NGO. However, in this case, all four parties have different conditions which are subject to their own other commiittee formed for matters related to promotion and selection.

It is that when SMAR becomes part of the national education institution, the appointment of a principal should be part of the Minisrtry's responsibility. In the writer's opinion, the MoU between Kelantan and the Ministry regarding the registration process clearly mentions that the tenure of incumbent principals remain until retirement or resignation. After that, the vacancy will be filled though joint discussions between the State and Ministry. This proves that there is vagueness at two levels in determining the authority of a principal at the time of reaching the understanding The first level is that this memorandum is not an agreement, instead it is only a memorandum of understanding which may be modified and amended. This memorandum is also open to breach and rejection. Hence, a more secure understanding is needed. And the second level is that it is open to various interpretations because it is stated in general terms and lacks clarity.

As proof, the writer presents the response of several respondents who are directly involved in the MoU tersebut. They comprise of officers who implement directives from the authorities:

Officer 1: In the aspect of appointment,the position is ours as requested, but they want the authority to appoint the principal. If they wanted the authority to appoint,we would not have taken the position, to take means to create the position, and to fill it but in this case we have taken the position. Not the religious department, they never had this position before, yet when we created this position, they start to make demands, this is unfair. Example, whom do they want to appoint, they cannot appoint someone unqualified. After appointment, who will pay the salary? And then, how is the position? Is it a position under the Ministry or what? All these have ramifications.

Officer 2: In the MoU they explain it as a joint affair. That is clear. In Kelantan there are 20 schools which have this clause when the memorandum was signed, meaning it is enforceable as is. Clear. As is. Now that there is a vacancy for a school principal, what was signed becomes a joint consultation between two parties, namely the Yayasan (Foundation) and the Ministry of Education.

As an example of this discussion, the result of a follow-up interview with the Deputy Director, Schools Division, Yayasan Islam Kelantan (Islamic Foundation) shows the differing interpretations on appointment of principal. According to him, the MoU clearly states that the appointment of a principal is determined through joint consultation between the Ministry and YIK when a principal resigns or passes away. The Ministry is of the view that they created the position of principal and hence, the Ministry should be the one responsible in terms of who, what qualifications and the need for other qualifications and the appointment itself will be made known to YIK. Instead, Yik insists on the appointment to be made after joint consultation. This means that YIK's consent is required after taking into account suggestions and viewpoints of the Ministry.

Similarly, the MoU signed by the Trengganu State Government is also vague as the appointment prosess is not mentioned in it. It has to be decided in a meeting between the two parties as it is considered a technical problem. To make it easier to understand this technical dispute, several issues may be posed as follows:

- Which organisation should issue the appointment letter for the principal?
- Usually the qualification for a principal is of those who are in grade DG48/DG52 or acting. Will the principal be from the State or Ministry?
- Who should be the Head of Service to the principal?
- Whose directives should a principal give priority to?
- How would a principal decide if given two differing directives from the two above parties?
- Who is responsible for appraising a principal's performance?

The above issues prove that the procedure and process of appointment of a principal are still vague in spite of the memorandum between the State and the Ministry. This is because a memorandum remains an understanding without clear details, particularly in the above matter. However, the draft memorandum states that any dispute will require the views of an advisory board appointed and consented by both parties. In the writer's opinion, it would be difficult for such an advisory board to play an active role because it would be centralized-oriented and difficult to resolve disputes within a short period. An advisory board with a major function but has only to meet and decide on the appointment of a principal shows that the procedure is increasingly complex and difficult for all parties concerned.

The Federation is Authorised to Appoint the Principal:

In the context of Malaysian management, the qualifying condition for eligibility is determined by the Civil Service Department (JPA). The position of principal is in the category of promotion or appointment in service, unlike other careers. When an SMAR becomes part of the national eduactional institution, it is automatically subject to the regulations and circulars set by the Federal authority. The conditions determined by JPA on a principal of a school registered under the Education Act 1966 is the holder of position DG48.

Officer 1: In administration, it is necessary to follow standards, inconsistency will make it difficult. The Ministry has its standards in management and appointment of principal.

Officer 2: We hold joint discussions to appoint a new principal but he still must be appointed from the Ministry of Education Service, not from outside. The position belongs to the Ministry. So whoever is appointed must have reached the level 48, Standard 48. Some are from 52. And we appoint those who have reached 52. The qualified ones. We still can bring our list into discussions with the Board of Governors. As long as it is limited to the JPA list of promotion.

Officer 3: It becomes a constraint if the School Board of Governors or Religious Department interferes in the process of appointment. If they hold on to the opinion that they have the authority, it is an obstacle. But if they comply, there is no obstacle to appoint, to propose a new principal though basically we must remember the existing principal remains as status quo and he is incumbent until he can become an executive, the priority is that he remains in his position.

The authority to appoint begins from the authority given by 10th Part of the Federal Constitution, Civil Service, Article 132 (1) on human resource affairs as follows:

For the purposes of this Constitution, the civil services are the (a) armed forces; (b) judicial and legal services; (c) Federal general public services (d) police force; (f) common civil service as stated in Article 133; (g) civil service of each state; and (h) education service.

Reference to the Constitution is reinforced by education matters being placed under the authority ofthe Federal Powers and not under State Authority. At the same time, State Governments also have their own educational institutions which are presumed to be under State jurisdiction as stated in the Constitution (Abdul Aziz, 2003). The vagueness in areas of jurisdiction has become a legacy as old as the management practice of religious education or schools in Malaysia, including the aspect of appointing school teachers and principal.

Continuous Conflict Between Two Authorities in Appointing A School Principal:

The office of principal is the main administrative position in the school. All planning and implementation come under the responsibility of the head administrator in any school. The principal is the person officially appointed by the authority (Mohd. Ismail, 2008). In the context of SMAR, there are three authorities, namely, the Board of Governors and School Advancement (JPKS), State Islamic Religious Council and State Government. However, if SMAR is under the authority of the Federal administration, then it means the actual authority is the Ministry of Education. In the registration process of SMAR, the status and procedure of appointing a principal is very vague and gives rise to conflict and thus should be clearly stated to avoid misunderstanding. The following response of respondents prove the above discussion:

Officer 1: Yes, it is supposed to be that if the Federal government gives the money, then they appoint the new principal. The danger of letting the school appoint their own principal is that most probably, the principal is not qualified, not trained, cannot manage financially and everything else, and he cannot be controlled because he is not tied to the Federal Act, he may do as he likes.

Officer 2: But all successions to the office must be done by the Ministry of Education because it has the authority. No more the Board's. And no more the authority of the Religious Department because if the post were theirs they ccoud appoint whoever they want, but since this post is the Ministry's as requested by they themselves, they should not start putting conditions when the Ministry wants to appoint. Before this they say one thing, now they do something else.

Officer 3: For example, when a principal resigns, maybe the Yayasan or Foundation should assert that if the matter is already left to the Ministry to determine who will be the next principal, it means that the Yayasan will have no more authority. That is already agreed to in the MoU. So here it means joint consultaion, not completely left to the Ministry. A vacancy calls for joint consultation. Not givng the responsibility to the Ministry. Lately, there ae a few examples, such as the Ministry is posting its teachers. Ministry teachers going into schools registered as SABK. But Ministry teachers and not Yayasan teachers given to the State government means a lessening of State authority. So what I see up to now, Yayasan will continue to take ours. That's one example that I can give. We should leave to the Yayasan teachers, matters relevant to them.

Based on the response above, it is agreed that appointment of a principal should be jointly discussed. In the writer's opinion, the 'joint consultation' is very confusing to both parties because it does not explicitly clarify the following matters for easy solution:

- Whose circular will be applicable for appointment of a principal?
- Who will be the Head of Service to the principal?
- What are the qualifications for eligibility as principal?

Findings of interview with a former Ministry of Education officer, Ustaz Ishak Ahmad, who once held the position of principal in an SMAR (namely, SMKA Masyhor which was taken over in the year 1983), on request when the school became a government-school administered by the Ministry. At the same time,, the school still retained its own principal. This situation caused the school to have two principals although there was only one position. This circumstance had caused disruptions in the administration. This situation occurred because of lack of clear understanding on the appointment of principal for the SMAR which was taken over in administration.

Dilemma in the Principal's Role:

Research findings also show several problems faced by the principal of SABK after four years of implementing the MoU. The writer presents a discussion of only two of these matters, namely:

- The principal's duties increased considerably in management, particularly in the human resource aspect.
- The principal receives two different circulars from two organizations, namely Yayasan (Foundation) or State Religious Department and the State Education Department (JPN).

The first matter is caused by the main basis of the MoU between the Ministry of Education and the State Religious Authority, not the State Education Department (JPN). In terms of organizational structure, JPN is one of the departments under the Ministry of Education which facilitates and runs operations at the state level. Not all the jurisdictional authority of the Ministry of Education is delegated to JPN. In terms of human resource, it is actually not the full responsibility of the Ministry of Education because it comes under the Civil Service Act. The organization responsible for managing human resource is the Civil Service Department (JPA) and Educational Service Commission (SPP). Both organizations are organizations at the Federal level. The Federal Government does not grant full powers to the Ministry of Education, what more the State Education Department. This situation stresses the principals of SABK in terms of increased responsibility for which most of the principals lack experience to be able to handle properly. The writer suggests that this increased responsibility should be shared between JPN and the District Education Department. If necessary, an officer from the State Islamic Religious Department could help in managing affairs.

The second matter concerns the scenario of two different directives on a similar matter in the form of circulars from JPN or the Ministry and the State Religious Authority. As example, research findings show that there are two aspects experienced by a school SABK A, namely the issues of school holidays and sports participation at district or state level. As practised in the past, school holidays between the Ministry and the religious department differ, particularly for the purpose of replacing the number of insufficient school days.This situation makes it difficult for a principal to make decisions because school holidays are not determined in the memorandum. Thus the situation is open to various interpretations finally putting the SABK management in a dilemma. Likewise, in the case of sports paricipation, the memorandum states that co-curriculum activities may be continued in religious school without specifying the mechanism. The memorandum does not stipulate the mechanism because it is only an initial understanding in terms of only important basic matters and management.

Proposed Solution:

This research proposes a Development and Joint-Management Model (MPPB) to resolve the above problems. This model implies distribution of powers between the Federal Government and State Government, and between the Ministry of Education and the School Governing Board of Directors or State Islamic Religious Administration. By this model, the Federal Government will have jurisdiction over developmental matters while the State Government will have authority over school management.

In the context of appointing a principal, it implies the appointed position, with payment of allowances and the attaching of conditions by the State Religious Authority because it is a management position, not human resource such as teachers. Should the Ministry wish to determine the authority, it can set certain basic criteria suitable and relevant to current development. In view of the need for a principal to possess experience and logistical knowledge, it is better for the State Religious Authority to determine the authority of the school positions, including other school management positions such as Senior Assistant. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Education may play a role in developing the principal in terms of management expertise according to the curriculum and procedure applied by the Federal Government.

In addition, the principal himself needs to be prudent in weighing considerations and determining the mechanism to resolve conflicts which may arise later. This situation proves the actual authority of a principal's capacity as head of a school as discussed earlier in the article.

Conclusion:

The position of a principal is very important in determining the success of managing a school. Thus, problems in determining the authority to appoint should not be made an issue or be prolonged giving rise to conflict which can disrupt school operations. Any rules and procedures may be considered to suit them to current needs and circumstances. In view of the origin of SABK as the former People's Religious School and State Religious School, with its own history, traditions and sensitivities, it is only proper and humane to preserve the status quo which has endured so long in the school so that the acculturation of management will not be disrupted while giving ample opportunity for the process of change to properly evolve.

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