

Managing Differences of Opinion in Nursi's Thought: A New Framework for Community Leadership in Malaysia's Plural Society

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ABSTRACT

The need to form a nation-state and the existence of a high level of ethnic and religious diversity in Malaysia is a constant source of tension. The differences are frequently perceived as a danger and are dealt with in ways that favour "tolerance" or "homogenisation" of the leadership. But there is another narrative to the way Bediuzzaman Said Nursi thinks about it, in the idea of 'Managing Differences of Opinion' which has been neglected in the local community context of leadership. The purpose of this study is to examine a model of thought that is unlike the common civilizational discourse, considering the differences that Nursi's thinking contributes to the management and use of diversity for a pro-active leadership. It explores the possible translation of these principles into practical strategies for community leaders in Malaysia to build active and sustainable harmony rather than simply an absence of conflict, based on the principles of *tawhid*, *rahmah* and *'adl* in the *Risale-i Nur*. The lack of understanding of this approach can be fatal to the potential of diversity, and can actually help foster the seeds of division under the surface.

Keywords: Said Nursi, Community Leadership, Plural Society, Managing Differences of Opinion

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a country of many cultures and religions and is sometimes known for its fragile harmony. However, there are underlying fears and anxieties among the ethnic and religious communities that exist under the guise of "unity." We see the manner in which seemingly trivial matters could lead to conflict and broach the vulnerability of a social structure that we have only taken for granted.

Current methods tend to be top down and reactive, and are obviously inadequate for dealing with the complexity of these differences. They are more interested in controlling as opposed to constructive management. Surprisingly, in this sea of Islamic intellectual treasure which stresses justness and compassion, we have not come up with a system of leadership in our community that truly embraces and utilizes diversity as an asset to the community. It is important to highlight that there is a lack of understanding about the management of differences of opinion (*ikhtilaf al-nazar*) in a plural society.

Frequently, community leadership stories focus on reconciling differences, discounting unwanted difference, and engaging in superficial unity. Commonality is the usual tone of community leadership stories, and differences are submerged for the sake of superficial unity. It's a big no-no. A prescription that may fill this void is available in the 20th century, thanks to Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, an Islamic thinker. What he says in the book of *Risale-i Nur* is not just a call for tolerance, it's an exploration of how differences can be harnessed for the greater enhancement of faith and social justice. Yet, the implementation of "difference management" concept proposed

by Nursi in the context of community leadership in Malaysia still has a vague meaning. Why is it that we don't want to dig into something that could be a threat and a chance to be an opportunity? The reluctance could be due to a habit of sticking to traditional methods which though may have been somewhat successful are not entirely successful.

This study is conducted with the aim of creating a new model of community leadership in the context of plural society in Malaysia based on 'Managing Differences of Opinion' model in the thought of Nursi. It's not just a book for academic purposes, it's a book to help leaders who have the courage to do something about it. It is time to move beyond slogans of unity and to grasp the effective mechanisms that can help promote harmony in accordance with the principles of justice and mutual recognition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The management of differences in plural societies, especially in an Islamic sense, is a highly fertile area of study that is often narrowly read. The literature has been predominantly interfaith dialogue and passive tolerance without examining the possibility of *ikhtilaf al-nazar* as a catalyst for community development. The relevance of Nursi's thought to the context of community leadership in plural society of Malaysia has been recognized by scholars, but its specific contribution to the leadership concept in this context has yet to be explored in depth.

Much research has highlighted Nursi's thoughts on civilizational dialogue and coexistence. In this regard, Mohamad et al. (2025a) state that the thought of the *Risale-i Nur* that Nursi has left behind is a hermeneutical approach and a civilizational practice to promote coexistence in a world of polarization. They argue that Nursi's model of transformative dialog based on the principles of *tawhid*, *rahmah* and '*adl* provides a model that goes beyond apologetics. This is a crucial perspective as it challenges the superficial notion of 'talk' as simple conversation – instead it is a deep transformative process. They discuss important issues like *ma'na-yi harfi* (symbolic hermeneutics), *hizmet* (service) and *darshane* (learning circles) to demonstrate Nursi's efforts to reconcile revelation with reason, tradition with modernity. This study places the *Risale-i Nur* in the context of the contemporary issues of humanity and, notwithstanding its focus on the contemporary situations, maintains a strong Islamic perspective. This gives us a good base for comprehending how differences were seen by Nursi not as a problem, but as an opportunity for reflection and development.

Mohamad et al. (2023) more specifically explore the importance of the value of civilizational dialogue in Nursi's thought for Malaysia. They state that according to Nursi, dialogue is not a one-sided affair, but a two-way communication where both parties act, speak and listen to what the other is saying. The *Risale-i Nur* is full of examples of two-way conversation, with Nursi often discussing the interfaith dimension, which he emphasizes, as a key component of living together in peace and respect. Nursi's philosophy of fostering two-way conversation is centered on mutual understanding, patience, empathy and respect. These are important factors that are not discussed enough when talking about tolerance, which generally are passive and one sided. Consider the case of Malaysia, where a vibrant cultural and religious diversity can be used to help create bridges of understanding and unity among the nation's people through the promotion of inter-civilizational dialogue.

In addition, Nursi's efforts on integrating knowledge, faith, and dialogue into a potent tool for promoting religious harmony is emphasized by Mohamad et al. (2025b). They say that the thought of Nursi provides an excellent alternative to a modern-day secularistic perspective that sees religion as a source of conflict. His vision calls into question the separation between scientific reason and spiritual truth, promoting a deep complementarity, which can transform the approach of education and society today. It indicates that differences were not a problem that needed to be removed but one that could be brought together through the prism of faith and knowledge—an attitude that was characteristic of Nursi.

In the context of leadership and *da'wah*, Saniff and Mohd (2024) examine the *da'wah* communication strategy of Nursi and its relevance in the context of Malaysia's pluralistic society. They discovered that Nursi used the effective, rational and convincing *da'wah* method in both verbal and non-verbal communication. His way of showing tolerance, open dialogue and understanding the background of the *mad'u* (recipient of *da'wah*) was identified as being similar to the needs of *da'wah* in Malaysia. This is relevant because it sets forth the importance of a message that is not only clear, but one that is delivered in a sensitive and respectful manner in a plural

society where effective leadership is required. They also go on to say that in the eyes of Nursi, the starting point of any real social change was to be the individual in terms of his moral and spiritual evolution, which should be accomplished by education, in the first place, through the instruction of Islamic teachings and philosophy. This means a focus on decentralisation as opposed to traditional models of leadership.

In the article, Embong et al. (2017) explain how the idea of an integrated curriculum is introduced by Nursi in his educational institution *Madrasah al-Zahra'* as the solution to the educational dualism of Muslims today. They believe the key to tackling this problem is the fusion of traditional and modern sciences. It has implications for difference management as it demonstrates how Nursi envisioned integration as a mode of overcoming present binary oppositions such as those of the methodological and epistemological type. It's not merely a matter of subject content, it's a matter of unifying thoughts.

The present study by Mohammad et al. 2025c aims to present Nursi's Unity Model in the context of the Malaysian education system to influence the national identity of students. Moderation (*wasatiyyah*), discussion, and reinforcement of moral values are the main things that are highlighted in this model. It's a very important approach since it tries to solve the problem of national identity in a plural society by means of a national identity that has an inherent management of differences in the framework of Nursi. The fact that Nursi rejects negative nationalism, which makes one nation greater than the other, or gives more importance to ethnicity than religion, is also highlighted, as negative nationalism may result in extremism, violence and hostility. Rather, he considers ethnic and tribal differences to be a source of mutual recognition and support, rather than antagonism.

This study by Kholis (2023) analyses the Nursi's ideas about harmonious order of religions to establish an ideal society. He is looking at how "Nursi" wanted people to be able to value one another, cooperate and live in harmony with one another, even if they might have differences that might eventually result in conflict. This is an aspiration that is very relevant to the concept of *ikhtilaf al-nazar*, where differences are not rejected but taken into account to create harmony.

Nursi never explicitly used the term '*Ikhtilaf al-Nazar*' in a modern management context, but the spirit of his thought is clearly conducive to this approach. He felt that conflict and diversity were natural and that the important thing was how they were dealt with in the interests of the whole community. He promoted dialogue and tolerance. Another sign of difference management is Nursi's focus on *ta'aruf* (mutual recognition) as a basis for interfaith and intercultural relations.

However, the literature needs to be more explicit in articulating a theoretical and applicative *Ikhtilaf al-Nazar* model with emphasis on community leadership in Malaysia with Nursi as its focal point. The studies are generally descriptive, without creating an operational leadership framework, on the thoughts of Nursi about dialogue or unity. It is necessary to integrate the concepts of 'Nursi' into a usable framework with which community leaders can deal with the complexities of the plural society of Malaysia. But an important question has not been adequately answered: how can Nursi's principles be applied to effective leadership in situations where conflict is not directly present, but differences of opinion within communities can quickly rise to become sources of long-lasting division? This is the area that this study seeks to address.

METHODOLOGY

The conceptual analysis and documentation approach is chosen as a method to delve into the depth of Nursi's thought, and to develop a *Ikhtilaf al-Nazar* model suitable for community leadership in plural society in Malaysia. The choice of this approach is not only a selection for technical reasons, but it forms a mental barrier against the tendency of studies with extensive reliance on superficial quantitative or qualitative empirical data, which may fail to capture more substantial philosophical aspects. The selection of text and concept analysis has been deliberately chosen since the proposed model is derived from theoretical and ethical thinking, which should be explored hermeneutically.

Data collection included locating and selecting primary and secondary sources about Nursi's thought, especially the *Risale-i Nur*, and academic research that summarizes his ideas. We specifically sought academic journals, doctoral theses and scholarly books that had been peer-reviewed. This is to prevent that the information provided

will be biased based on non-reputable information or misleading interpretation. In order to prevent the selection of only materials that support the initial hypothesis, a wide range of search materials was used, including keywords like "Nursi *Ikhtilaf al-Nazar*," "Islamic community leadership," "difference management in Islam," "Nursi's civilizational dialogue," and "Malaysian plural society. Academic databases including Google Scholar, ResearchGate and local university repositories were searched to ensure the most relevant and the most authoritative literature was accessed. The intentional move was to provide a breadth and depth of materials analysed.

The analysis of the sources was carried out thematically and hermeneutically. We did not just summarize the ideas of Nursi; we went through an interpretive process and attempted to find out how the ideas of Nursi, though not necessarily in the current jargon of '*Ikhtilaf al-Nazar*', do in fact lay the groundwork for managing differences. For instance, by looking at his focus on tawhid (unity of God) as the basis of unity, *rahmah* (compassion) and '*adl*' (justice), it was examined how they can be used as ethical guidelines in the face of diversity of opinion and identity. The choice of this method also sought to allow us to sift and sort the ideas of Nursi which are spread throughout his writings into a usable and comprehensible model.

The analysis steps were as follows: (1) Extraction of Key Concepts: Identification of key concepts in Nursi's thought which are related to diversity, differences of opinions, dialogue and harmony in society. This encompassed ideas like *wasatiyyah*, *ma'na-yi harfi* and *hizmet*. (2) Contextual Analysis: Positioning these concepts in Nursi's socio-political and intellectual context then analyzing its relevance to Malaysia's Plural Society. This is significant to prevent the interpretation from being detached from historical and cultural contexts. (3) Synthesis and Model Formulation: Coherent 'Difference Management' framework of synthesizing extracted and analyzed concepts. This included the process of connecting Nursi's concepts with the demands of leadership in the current society in Malaysia. We deliberately looked for common ground with the problems encountered by those who live in the community, in between the philosophy of the Nursi and those of the community leaders. (4) Conceptual Validation: Logical strength and internal consistency of the model, and its feasibility in the Malaysian context, will be assessed by going back to the existing literature.

This is a purposive qualitative and interpretative approach and seeks to develop a strong theory that is not simply descriptive, but provides a prescriptive model within Islamic intellectual framework, but modified for modern challenges. A depth of understanding of and interaction with the text and concepts is essential to get the most from the thought of Nursi. This is an attempt to include not just an explanation of what Nursi said, but also an attempt to form what we can do with what Nursi said, particularly with regard to community leadership which is often caught up in the dilemma of difference.

FINDINGS

The analysis of Nursi's thought shows that there are several key issues, which constitute the 'Difference Management' model, a model that embraces diversity and values it as an asset. In plural societies the findings do not only confirm the pertinence of Nursi, but also raise the question of revisiting the traditional strategies in leadership, which tend to be exclusionary and oblivious to the differences.

1. The idea of *tawhid* (unity of God) is the key starting point for understanding and dealing with differences and is consistently emphasized by Nursi. It is not just a theological doctrine, it's an operating principle. When people discover that all creation is the expression of Divine Unity, ethnic, cultural or religious differences take a back seat to this newfound unity. This does not imply that the community leader with a Nursi's view will not view diversity as "fragments to be forcibly united", but as "multiple expressions of the same source." Conflict is not so much a result of difference, as it is when tawhid is not recognised as the common thread which holds it all together. Hence, leadership must be able to instill this awareness of tawhid, demonstrating that each person with his unique personality, can play a part in a beautiful picture of creation. It is now a change of thinking from 'tolerance' to 'appreciating unity'.

2. *Ma'na-yi harfi* (reading nature as God's letters) is the kernel of Nursi's epistemology that is pertinent to difference management. It helps us to understand that no phenomenon is independent (*ma'nay ismi*) but rather is a sign that leads us to the Creator. To community leadership, it translates to the need for community members to

perceive differences as 'verses' or 'signs' that need to be understood and contemplated, rather than feared and/or avoided. This promotes good curiosity and empathy, and that any other opinion or culture is read as another story that adds to our community's knowledge of the truth. A strong leader in *ma'na-yi harfi* will be an interpreter of culture and demonstrate the richness of diversity in the human experience, rather than its lack.

3. Throughout the entire book, but especially in the last chapter, Dialogue is not a mere exchange of arguments, but a way of doing things, a praxis, which transforms the self. Empathy and patience are key elements of true dialogue, in which it is not winning but understanding that is sought. In this model, it is important that community leaders embrace 'two-way dialogue', in which conflicts are not ignored, but challenged and explored in a respectful manner. This is a contrast between debate that is dominated and that which is not. Instead, it is a process of sharing and sharing of learning. School leaders need to provide safe environments for these conversations that give everyone a voice and in which everyone is heard. If this is not done then differences will simmer under the surface, waiting for some time to explode.

4. In Addressing Extremism, Nursi's principle of *wasatiyyah* (moderation) is adamant that all sorts of extremism, both in the field of negative nationalism and religious fanaticism, are rejected outright. He talks about *wasatiyyah* as the middle way which would lead to justice and balance. In the case of community leadership, this translates to either rejecting or abandoning overly strict or overly permissive strategies for dealing with differences. You need to have some wisdom to balance on the one hand with respecting the core issues, while on the other being able to interpret differently or practice the issues in different ways. Leaders who practice *wasatiyyah* will be mediators and bridges between opposing parties, not polarization, but justice, which results in understanding and understanding each other. This is a big problem in the fragmented societies.

5. Service to humanity (*hizmet*) is a social bond: The concept of "service to humanity" (*hizmet*) is key in Nursi's thoughts on community development. He felt that faith needed to be put into action and to be of benefit to all, irrespective of background. According to the difference model, *hizmet* is a strong social bond. When people from different cultures, backgrounds, and cultures work together towards common values that are in the service of the entire community, differences are not an issue, or are even strengths. *Hizmet* projects should be identified by the community leaders which can help to bring together different groups and foster togetherness and a sense of responsibility. This is more than volunteering, this is community-building, or acts of compassion, or acts of justice.

6. Integration of Knowledge as the Key to Holistic Understanding: Nursi is against the separation of knowledge (religious) from modern science, as he considers it to be a factor of backwardness. He pleaded for the unification of these two, urging to have one comprehensive understanding of reality. This is one of the ways in which community leadership can be encouraged by promoting education and learning where the spiritual dimension is not divorced from the rational or scientific dimension. If community members have a more comprehensive and holistic perspective, they will be better able to value differences and see them as contributing to a larger truth. Leaders need to assist in educating about critical and integrative thinking and help eliminate barriers of prejudice that may have been caused by a lack of understanding.

The overall results of this study have confirmed that 'Difference Management' model in Nursi's thinking is not an idealistic theory but is reality. It is a coherent framework rooted in deep Islamic values which is pragmatic and transformative, in regard to community leadership in plural societies. It requires leaders to be courageous enough to identify differences as opportunities not as issues to be addressed.

DISCUSSION

The 'Difference Management' model based on Nursi's thinking provides a new perspective on community leadership in Malaysia's plural society. It simply questions the narratives that are needed; that differences are a burden rather than a resource. This is not a theory, it's a call to more courageous and effective leadership practice.

The focus of Nursi on tawhid (the unity of God) as the basis of unity in diversity is something that is seldom mentioned in current debates on social harmony. Malaysian society, as ethnic and religious, is more likely to find common ground at the superficial level—shared culture, economic interests—for example, but not the

spiritual level. True unity does not mean negating differences, it is rather the awareness that differences are all expressions of one Divine Unity, as Nursi teaches. It requires more than open house events or ceremonial interfaith dialogues to be organised by a community leader in Malaysia. Rather, they must teach them that all people, no matter their background, are members of a greater family – created by the same God. Which might seem a pipe dream, but as long as this is not reached, there is always room for a division. Without understanding transcendent unity, divisions will stay as an impassable divide.

Therefore, the idea of "*ma'nayi harfi*" (seeing the world as Divine signs) also contributes to difference management in a new way. Community leaders must promote a more contemplative attitude in a society that is quick to judge and label. Where different cultures and/or views are encountered, instead of being rejected or criticized, we are taught to consider them as 'verses' that need to be interpreted and understood. This is a type of intellectual sympathy. For instance, a leader might be faced with various practices in the community, and his/her initial reaction might be that they are a threat to his/her identity; instead, he/she should be open to seeing how God is showing beauty or wisdom in their midst through that practice. This demands critical thinking within the leadership on the part of the leaders such that they guide the community to read differences with an open heart, as discussed by Yasin et al. (2023) on how to form a healthy mind through the *Risale-i Nur*. The method is essentially a different way of thinking from that of 'the other', one that challenges the marginalisation and suppression of differences and promotes integration at cognitive and emotional levels.

The relevance of Nursi's dialogue approach is also high. He didn't view dialogue as a platform for debate or opinion, it was a means of understanding and personal growth. In Malaysia, where interfaith dialogue is deemed sensitive and risky, community leaders may find inspiration in the way that Nursi talked about being empathetic, the spirit of patience, and the intent to understand, not to defeat. The results in Noor et al. (2024) clearly prove that the da'wah communication strategy of Nursi is relevant in Malaysia as a pluralistic society. This means that leaders must be good facilitators and be able to provide safe environments in which differences can be voiced without fear and threat. It is not simply sitting at a table, it's about learning to hear and value other, and sometimes conflicting, stories. If there is no willingness in this transformative conversation, disparities will remain and be a source of potential tensions as in a lot of other issues in Malaysia.

Nursi's notion of *wasatiyyah* or moderation is a remedy for the growing extremism in the world. Mohammad et al. (2025c) have demonstrated the importance of incorporating *wasatiyyah* into the education system in Malaysia through the emphasis placed on it in the Nursi's Unity Model. In community leadership, it means leaders will not be able to foster polarization by going to extremes and taking sides. They should however be fair arbiters who find a balance that takes into account the rights of all concerned without compromising justice. Nursi's stance on negative nationalism that deems one nation superior or ethnocentrism over religion is a good reminder for leaders in Malaysia who are often beset by identity politics. It takes courage to challenge the contrary narratives and build a more inclusive identity.

Lastly, the idea of *hizmet* (service) as a social bond is useful and beneficial. As communities work together to accomplish projects that are of mutual benefit, differences in background fade and a feeling of togetherness grows. The method is one that community leaders in Malaysia can employ to create bridges between different groups, not just words. For example, community initiatives that bring together people of different ethnic groups and religions for social action – cleaning neighbourhoods, assisting people in need, etc. – can be used to great effect. Nursi felt that faith should be made into concrete deeds that would benefit all people. This establishes that discussion-based leadership is not sufficient for effective difference management leadership, it must also be action and results oriented. This aligns with Khosim et al. (2023), who claimed that the Nursi's da'wah approach was to look at humanity from a holistic perspective in which spiritual, intellectual, and social development are taken into account as the foundation for sustainable community transformation.

In general, the ideas of Nursi are not just relevant but also essential to the leadership of the community in Malaysia. It offers a vision that embraces diversity and welcomes it as a potential for development and strengthening of society as a whole. If they are not incorporated into leadership practice, it would be a great risk to sustain the environment of tension and division within Malaysian society, where difference is always a weak spot and not a strength.

CONCLUSION

The process of Malaysian plural society to become truly harmonious has always been beset with the danger of differences being perceived as threats. Traditional methods that try to ignore or dismiss *ikhtilaf al-nazar* (differences of opinion) are ultimately not working and are causing a significant fissure in society. This study has introduced a novel model, the 'Difference Management' Model, to a field of community leadership that is both radical and practical, based on the thoughts of Nursi. This model does not view differences as a problem to be solved but as potential to be awakened by the principles of *tawhid*, *ma'na-yi harfi*, transformative dialogue, *wasatiyyah*, *hizmet* and integration of knowledge. As affirmed by Mohamad et al (2014), the unity model of Nursi is very important in the context of racial unity in Malaysia, because Nursi does not advocate forced assimilation but rather respect each other based on the concept of unity (*tawhid*) and justice.

These results have major implications. First, it is a call to community leaders in Malaysia to transcend the superficial unity rhetoric. It requires them to realize that unity is based on the realization of the Divine Unity, all space, all sky, and all creation, that differences are not barriers to unity, but supplements. Second, it calls for an epistemological turn as leaders recognize differences as "readings" of God's story, creating curiosity, empathy, and appreciation for the diversity of narratives.

Third, it establishes dialogue as a praxis not merely as a forum for debate; the aim should be to understand, not win. Fourth, the principle of *wasatiyyah* that Nursi emphasizes is the antidote to extreme polarization, one that demands that leaders be the "fair arbiters" and that they eschew narrow nationalism, preferring a more inclusive common identity. Lastly, the idea of *hizmet* offers a tangible way of bridging divides between groups by offering mutually committed acts of service, enhancing social cohesion across boundaries of identity.

It's not just a theory, it's a philosophy that can change the way community leadership is perceived in Malaysia, if it's absorbed. It requires leaders to go beyond mere administration and become educators, facilitators, role models, and wise, just leaders who can handle the complexities of diversity. If not, it will remain that "social fragility" which Malaysia has fallen into still needs to be addressed and the differences will continue to create "fragile harmony" in the country that will make them susceptible to any minor change.

Further research should validate the model in actual community settings in Malaysia. Research may be carried out on the improvement of measurement tools to evaluate the effectiveness of the community leaders in managing *ikhtilaf al-nazar* based on the principles of Nursi. Case studies of communities that have been successful in managing differences in a constructive way could offer more evidence of elements of the Nursian that may have been 'aided and abetted' by the community.

Comparing Nursi's 'Difference Management' Model to other Islamic or Western diversity management models could be another way to augment understanding. This way of knowledge integration is also aligned with the focus of Lick et al. (2019) which an effective multicultural education system can mold the national identity of Malaysian students without sacrificing their ethnic and cultural diversity.

If Malaysian society does not take note of the potential that lies in constructive difference management, we may be left to see even greater divisions, with each group cocooning itself in its own identity. This will reduce the nation's resilience and make it difficult for Malaysia to really become a country that is strong and stable on its diversity, as a truly multi ethnic society. A future of harmony requires leaders who have the courage to accept and not ignore differences.

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