

## THE ROAD TO SUCCESS: THE CASE OF PERAK STATE ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS COUNCIL

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**Abstract:** *State Islamic Religious Councils (SIRCs) was established with the purpose to manage Muslim affairs in Malaysia, especially for the underprivileged group through improving their social and economic welfare. Many criticisms were addressed by the public and media on how well the SIRCs function and manage their finance. The critics do not come empty without evidence of the real mismanagement cases reported by the public auditors and media. As scandals are prone to invite negative perceptions from the public, it also eclipses the organisations' achievements by hyperbolically concentrating on the negative stories. As a result, most literature related to the SIRCs has majorly focused on discussing the issues rather than reporting both sides of the stories, the issues or challenges and the achievements of the SIRCs. Hence, throughout the years, the SIRCs have been striving in improving their performances through engaging with many fruitful initiatives, which subsequently enhance the SIRCs' ability to productively serve the Muslim community. The outcomes from the improvements can be seen in many awards and recognitions received by the SIRCs. Highlighting the achievements of the SIRCs will not only increase the positive perceptions but motivate other SIRCs to follow the same footsteps. Thus, the objective of this paper is to discuss both sides of the stories, i.e. challenges and achievements of Perak SIRC. The paper starts with an introduction of the roles and functions of Perak SIRC, then highlights the challenges of Perak SIRC in carrying out its roles and continues with a discussion of the efforts undertaken to improve their operations and the achievements gained through the effort. The study utilises a case study method. The study found that Perak SIRC has a long history (since 1874) and has achieved many milestones and awards for their excellent performance.*

**Keywords:** *State Islamic Religious Councils, roles, challenges, achievements, management.*

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## Introduction

State Islamic Religious Councils (SIRCs) plays critical role for every state in Malaysia in matters pertaining to religion. It was established with the purpose to manage Muslim affairs in Malaysia, especially for the underprivileged group through improving their social and economic welfare. SIRCs in Malaysia have long existed before Malaysia gains its independence as a result of the desire to uphold Islam by the Malay Sultans in their respective states. Currently there is a total of fourteen SIRCs have been established, one for each individual thirteen states and one for the three Federal Territories in Malaysia (JAKIM, n.d.).

Ever since their establishments, SIRCs have been facing many criticisms from the public and media on how they operate and carry their functions. Among criticism that they received are mismanagement of funds, inefficiency, and breach of trust. The critics do not come empty without evidence of the real mismanagement cases reported by the public auditors and media for the past decade. In 2011, two Muslim officials in one of the SIRCs was found guilty due to breach of trust involving RM2 million was sentenced to four years jail (MStar, 2011). There was also a case where a Chief Executive Officer of one Islamic institution in Malaysia was charged with corruption, allegedly receiving luxurious items since 2010 (Berita Harian Online, 2017).

The criticisms worsens where SIRCs are described as “monsters”, flayed for incompetence and unprofessional management in a forum discussing the problems of mismanaged waqf (Nambiar, 2019). More recent cases of misuse of funds and bribery still can be seen involving religious government agencies and one of the SIRCs in Malaysia in the first quarter of 2021 (The Star, 2021; Zulkifli, 2021).

As scandals are prone to invite negative perceptions from the public, it eclipses the organisations’ achievements by hyperbolically concentrating on the negative stories. As a result, most literature related to the SIRCs has majorly focused on discussing the issues rather than reporting both sides of the stories, i.e. the issues or challenges and the achievements of the SIRCs. Hence, the objective of this research is to provide a balanced view of both challenges and achievements of the SIRCs. The paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews previous literature and then followed by the research method employed in this research. Next, the paper discusses the research findings, followed by a conclusion.

## Literature Review

The interest in religious institutions have instigated various research studies since many years ago. Prior literature can be found extensively specifically on (1) *zakat* (see Lubis, Yaacob, Omar, Dahlan and Rahman, 2011; Ab Rahman, Alias & Syed Omar, 2012; Ahmad Razimi, Romle & Erdris, 2016; Salleh and Chowdhury, 2020; Rahman et. al, 2021), (2) *waqf* (Hamdan, Mohd Ramli, Jalis & Haris, 2013; Ab Hasan, Othman, Ibrahim, Md Shah and Mohd Noor, 2015; Yaacob and Nahar, 2017; Abd Jalil, 2020) and (3) *baitulmal* (see Ab Samad, 2004; Abang Abdul Rahman and Mohammed, 2012; Kasan and Mohsin, 2013; Mohd Nor, 2015, Muttaqin, 2021).

This prior research often focuses on the efficiency, performance and accountability aspects of the religious institutions (see Ihsan & Adnan, 2009; Mohd Noor, Abdul Rasool, Md. Yusof, Ali and Abdul Rahman, 2015; Sulaiman & Zakari, 2015; Afifuddin and Siti-Nabiha, 2010; Siraj and Ismail, 2015; Mohd Jaapar and Kamarulzaman, 2020). More commonly, many prior

studies have highlighted the issues or challenges experienced by the religious institutions such as a study by Ab Rahman et al. (2012). Their study explores the problems and issues of zakat institutions in Malaysia.

Some studies offer suggestion for improvement (Ismail, Salim & Ahmad Hanafiah, 2015; Ahmad Dahlan, Awang & Mahmood, 2015). For example, Ahmad Dahlan et al. (2015) has suggested the usage of e-ZAKAT4U, a system that is built to increase the efficiency of the distribution of zakat among the asnaf with the collaboration several related agencies in Terengganu. Their study found evidence that the usage of the system and with collaboration of mosques as a platform have made zakat distribution more convenient and efficient. This is supported by Salleh and Chowdhury (2020) who highlighted the importance of technology adoption and awareness to push SIRC's becoming more proactive and innovative through technology adoption to increase the zakat fund operation. In a more recent study by Malib, Markom, Nordin, Mustafa and Arif (2021), their study provides an overview of the role of the SIRC, focusing in the context of waqf property management.

Even so, a gap still exists in the literature where less studies have been conducted to highlight the effort and achievements of the SIRC's, in addressing the issues and criticism that they have received. The lack of exposure and the invisibility of their roles, efforts and achievements may lead to a biased view towards these institutions. The situation is worsened when they are frequently being put in the centre of attention when negative issues come forth from the media. Thus, a study that highlights both perspectives is warranted to provide a fair and balanced view of the SIRC's. Hence, the objective of this paper is to highlight both perspectives covering the challenges faced by one of the SIRC's along with their efforts and achievements.

### **Research Methodology**

The research utilises a case study approach, centring on Perak Islamic Religious Council & Malay Customs, which will be addressed as Perak State Islamic Religious Council (Perak SIRC) throughout this paper. Semi-structured interview and document reviews were utilised for the data collection. The interview lasted nearly for two hours, recorded and transcribed. The research enriched the research findings through reviewing additional available documents which consists of presentation materials provided by Perak SIRC and any other material such as annual reports and other news documentation found in Perak SIRC and other websites.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Perak SIRC was successfully established based on the Article VI (1), Part One of the Law of the Creation of the Perak State that clearly states:

*"The State Religious Head is His Highness, and His Highness would rule that there should be legislation to arrange matters of religion and establish an Islamic Religious Council & Malay Customs to help and advise His Majesty in respect of religious affairs matters and Malay customs. "*

The State Religious Head has always been the Duli Yang Maha Sultan, which can be traced back to the Pangkor Treaty on 20 January 1874. The Pangkor Treaty outlined that all matters relating to the Islamic Affair and Malay Custom shall be under the jurisdiction of the Malay Rulers. Thus, the Chairman of the Islamic Religious and Malay Customs have complete control

in the State at that time and this practice is maintained to this day, bringing a long history of Perak SIRC's role in its Islam community (Perak SIRC, n.d.).

Therefore, Perak SIRC carries two main roles in the administration of Islamic affairs. First, Perak SIRC is the advisor of His Majesty in respect of religious affairs matters and Malay customs. Second, Perak SIRC consists of different divisions that are responsible for administrative functions that deal with the collection and distribution of zakat, baitulmal and waqf matters. This can be confirmed by the following comment by one of the Deputy Chief Executive Officers of Perak SIRC:

*The 'Council' (Perak SIRC) has two faces (functions). One is the Council who is the policy maker and the other one is the administrative function which is limited to the operations and activities related to zakat, waqf and baitulmal.*

Usually with limited resources, most of the SIRCs and specifically Perak SIRC is a self-funding entity. The main activity of collecting and distributing the fund consumes a huge amount of operation costs. Hence, managing Islamic wealth while at the same time generating income for the sustainability of their operations pose a great challenge for Perak SIRC. Perak SIRC aims to be creative in generating their income and has come up with an effort to establish a subsidiary company to help them develop their waqf land. Shifting the responsibility to the subsidiary company to fully utilise and develop the waqf land allows Perak SIRC to concentrate on their main function to manage the collection and distribution of zakat, waqf and baitulmal funds. The Deputy Chief Executive Officer of Perak SIRC further elaborates:

*The state government has given two lands as a waqf for the religious school. It is to be developed and the yield will be included in a trust account for the religious schools; for their needs such as repair and improvement of facilities. How can we build the land if we do not have expertise in land development? Therefore, we submit these to our subsidiary as they have expertise in plantation... Our subsidiary has entered into a joint venture with other companies to plant latex clone timber. That is one of the ways in which we connect with our subsidiary, so that we can focus on our functions and take care of our beneficiaries and stakeholders.*

On top of that, managing Islamic wealth especially zakat and waqf is not an easy task as Perak SIRC is subject to Shariah rules. The Shariah rules provide specific rules that outlines the list of the rightful recipients and their allocation. Thus, Perak SIRC must take this into consideration and subsequently making the distribution process longer and complex. This has brought them many criticisms, claiming that they are inefficient in the collection and distribution of zakat. The criticism can be further understood in the comment below:

*For instance, if we received around RM100 million in December. How could we spend RM100 million in just a month? This amount would definitely be carried forward to the next following month. And when people pay so much in December, the collection amount in January will drop. So how do we want to distribute to the asnaf for that month? We had to use the remaining money from December. This is what the public misconceives and claims that we do not distribute the zakat collection efficiently. ... Moreover, we have to be very careful in distributing the zakat collection. Let's say we have set a budget of RM20 million for dialysis*

*purpose, involving 800 patients. If many patients die during that year or if we receive a lot of sponsorship for the dialysis, a surplus would occur and the remaining balance from the RM20 million cannot be spent easily on other things.*

[Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Perak SIRC]

Hence, it is clearly evidenced by the comments that the operation of Perak SIRC and the distribution of zakat may not seem as easy as the public thought it would be. Other than they have to strictly follow the Shariah rules, they also face several limitations such as huge operation costs and lack of human resources to conduct such big operations. However, Perak SIRC has taken the public criticism as a serious matter and resulting of them to undertake the effort to continue improving their operations through several initiatives such as providing online payment method and online assistance form. Another notable effort is by developing i-Syura, an innovation product by Perak SIRC consisting of a management system of zakat distribution. The system is able to improve the application of asnaf in requesting zakat assistance, further aiming for a better and efficient service delivery towards Muslim community in Perak (Perak SIRC, 2016). i-Syura has received *Anugerah Zakat Kebangsaan (Inovasi Terbaik – Agihan) 2017*, which is an award that recognises the best zakat distribution system in Malaysia (Perak SIRC, 2018, 2019). The function of the system is further elaborated below:

*The i-Syura system is for zakat distribution. It starts with the applicant filling out the application form manually and then, we will enter it into the system. Applications are made manually because an applicant may submit multiple applications at once. The i-Syura system can keep track of the status of the application as well as the approved amount and date of payment. This is why Perak SIRC develops this system and this system covers all phases from the application, approval until the payment phase.*

[Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Perak SIRC]

Last but not least, Perak SIRC also faces uncertainty in owning some of the assets given to them, especially by the government. The government has given several lands to Perak SIRC in which most of these lands are gazetted land. Therefore, there is no grant acquired by Perak SIRC for this type of land, consequently hampering the future development of the land. This issue is stressed by the Deputy Chief Executive Officer of Perak SIRC in the following comment, further jeopardising their strategic plan of owning RM1 billion of asset in 6-year period:

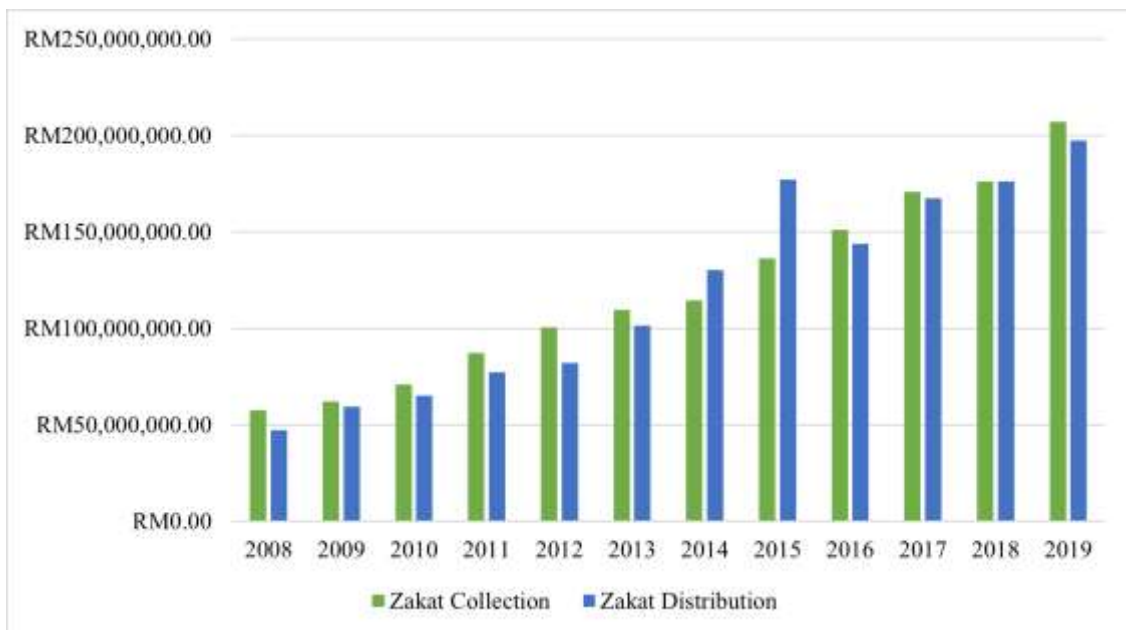
*Some of the lands are from government and individuals. If we get from the individuals, it is easy because the land has a grant and its property is guaranteed whereby the Perak SIRC is the owner or trustee (for waqf). But, the government gave us land in the form of a gazette. Therefore, we are concerned and have no guarantee. If there is a land acquisition, for instance for a railway construction, we will not get any compensation because the gazetted land is considered as a government land. Therefore, we have been conducting a two-year meeting with several agencies involved and we have proposed that all these lands to be converted into grants. Alhamdulillah, the proposal has been accepted and finally later, all lands such as grave and mosque land will have their respective grants.*



Therefore, by reaching upon the said agreement, Perak SIRC believes that the future development on the said land would be beneficial and could help them to sustainably contribute towards the social and welfare of the Islam community in Perak. Inclusive of what have been discussed above, more challenges faced by Perak SIRC and the efforts taken by them to improve as well as the achievements obtained by Perak SIRC are clearly summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Challenges and the Effort and Achievements of Perak SIRC.

Challenges	Effort and Achievement
Huge operation costs	Establishment of a subsidiary company (private company) to develop waqf land for specific purposes such as education and mosque welfare. Income generation responsibility is shifted to the subsidiary company allowing Perak SIRC to focus on other matters.
Inefficiency of zakat collection and distribution	<p>Figure 1 demonstrates that total zakat collection and distribution by Perak SIRC for the past 10 years, showing a constant increasing trend. Perak SIRC has provided various payment methods to encourage zakat collection such as through the counter, agent, FPX or online banking. With Sistem e-Potongan Zakat Berjadual (e-PZB), Perak SIRC won the top three innovation project for the state level in 2015 (Perak SIRC, 2015).</p> <p>Perak SIRC also won <i>Anugerah Zakat Kebangsaan 2016 (Inovasi Zakat Terbaik – Kutipan)</i> in 2016, which is a national award for the best zakat distribution (Perak SIRC, 2017). Perak SIRC also developed and fully implemented i-Syura system (renamed from e-Syura) since 2012 to improve zakat distribution. The system is able to expedite the zakat application and approval process (Perak SIRC, 2016). i-Syura is recognised as the best innovative zakat distribution system at the national level in 2017 (Perak SIRC, 2018, 2019).</p>
Uncertainty of asset ownership hampers future land development	Reached an agreement with the related government agencies to convert the gazetted land and acquire a grant for every land given to Perak SIRC.



**Figure 1: Perak SIRC Performance for Zakat Collection and Distribution (2008 - 2019)**  
 Source: The annual reports (2008 until 2019) of Perak SIRC.

### Conclusion

Throughout the years, Perak SIRC has a long history which can be traced back to 1874 and Perak SIRC has strived in improving their performances through engaging with many fruitful initiatives, subsequently enhancing its ability to productively serve the Muslim community. The outcomes from their improvements can be seen in many recognitions and awards for their continuous excellent performance. The findings of this study also conform to a recent article by Mohd Jaapar and Kamarulzaman (2020) who conclude that Perak SIRC was able to achieve zakat collection efficiency and zakat distribution efficiency from within 2013 to 2017, indicating that Perak SIRC is putting effort and working hard for improvement. Hence, the study hopes that the findings of this research may be able to shed a light not only on the challenges experienced by Perak SIRC, but also highlighting the efforts taken by them to continue improving its day-to-day operation. This is not only to increase the positive perceptions of the public, but also at the same time may motivate other SIRCs to follow similar footsteps in enhancing their operations and performance. Future study may incorporate a larger number of SIRCs to gain a better picture and understanding of other challenges and achievements by other SIRCs. In addition, future researchers could extend the study by looking at the adoption of technology system by the SIRCs in improving their services.

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