

INFLUENCE OF *SEJAHTERA ULŪ AL-ALBĀB* APPROACH ON STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract: *The influence of sejahtera ulū al-albāb approach on strategic planning for sustainability is inevitable. A holistic strategic planning process integrates sejahtera ulū al-albāb approach. This study argued that the sejahtera ulū al-albāb approach is powerful to provide a precise, rigorous and vigorous human-mind way. This study aims to investigate the influence of sejahtera ulū al-albāb approach in the practices of strategic planning among small and medium enterprises. The three small and medium enterprises owners' experience in the strategic planning with sejahtera and ulū al-albāb approach has been proven from the owners' experience in sustaining the business. There are various push and pull factors that shape the meaning of sejahtera and degree of thinking in the strategic planning for the enterprises. Notably, the three business owners of small and medium enterprises in this study mentioned that the influence of sejahtera and ulū al-albāb in their strategic planning practices is enhanced due to the grass-root networking provided by close friends, family members and the public to drive the motivation to operate the business and realizing his potential. Future researchers may want to adopt a qualitative case study method involving several small and medium enterprise owners.*

Keywords: *Strategic planning, Ulū al-albāb, Small and Medium Enterprises.*

INTRODUCTION

A holistic approach to strategic planning is essential to function strategic planning as enabler in formulating strategies that could generate profit and sustain competitive advantage. Strategic planning involves a lot of thinking in developing direction of companies, scanning the internal and external environment for the basis of formulating strategies and generating alternative strategies (Casey & Goldman, 2010; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Eden & Ackermann, 2013; Mhd. Sarif, 2020; Asobee, 2021). Strategists work with key stakeholders in trying to understand the environment before proposing alternative strategies.

A holistic and balanced approach in managing resources is essential. Large companies are more resourceful due to the pool of managers, thinkers and consultants they command. These companies are able to have big data and access to huge networking in their strategic planning activities (Porter, 1983; Hutzschenreuter & Kleindienst, 2006). This setup is advantageous large companies compared to small and medium enterprises.

Profitability is always the bottom line to companies. Accuracy in strategic planning leads to formulation of strategies that are able to generate high impact in terms of profitability and sustainable competitive advantage (Porter, 1983; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Eden & Ackermann, 2013; Asobee, 2021).

However, when sustainability is emphasised together with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there is a need to balance between economic ends with social and environmental objectives or triple bottom line (Mhd. Sarif, 2020; Asobee, 2021). While Islamic teaching accepts the concept of sustainability, it emphasises on *sejahtera* (peace) and *ulū al-albāb* (people of sound reason) on humanity (Adil, 2019; Abd Razak, 2020; Mhd. Sarif, 2020). The main purpose of this study is to explore the influence of *sejahtera ulū al-albāb* on strategic planning practices among small and medium enterprises for sustainability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The presence of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been incorporated into strategic planning in balancing between economic, social and environmental objectives. Conceptually, the triple bottomline is acceptable in Islamic teaching when Islam emphasizes on the benefits to the humanity with the duties as *khalifah* (vicegerents) to assure *sejahtera* (peace) and *ulū al-albāb* on humanity. Thus, strategic planning with *sejahtera* (peace) and *ulū al-albāb* approach requires achievement of sustainability

SEJAHTERA

Sejahtera is one of many terms from Sanskrit language that has been used in Bahasa Malaysia, the national language in Malaysia. Even the term ‘manusia’ used in Bahasa Malaysia is derived from Sanskrit which means ‘creature with thinking’ (Hoogervorst, 2012; Jalaluddin & Ahmad, 2012). The term *sejahtera* denotes “peace” and *manusia* as “creature of thinking.” When both terms are combined as ‘manusia *sejahtera*, the resulting term means human as thinking creature is peaceful and can share the peace with others (Abdul Razak, 2020; Baharom, 2021). *The Sejahtera* concept has been embedded in Malaysia’s education system since the 1990s when the *sejahtera* has been made the ultimate outcome of the education system. This education system has been producing human talents with *sejahtera* since the 1990s (Adil, 2019; Hussin, 2020; Hopkins et al, 2020; Nketsia *et al.*, 2020). This implies that the stakeholders in Malaysia have been influenced by the *sejahtera* concept at least since the last two decades.

Sejahtera is not new in Malaysia. *Sejahtera* has been in Malaysia’s system since the introduction of “Rukun Negara” or National Principles in 1970 (Hamdan, 2011; Malaysia, 2015; Abd Razak, 2020. There are five “pillars” in Rukun Negara, namely belief in God, loyalty to the King and country, supremacy of the constitution, rules of law, and Courtesy and Morality.

The national principles and *sejahtera* education are mutually reinforcing. The impact of both can be seen in people living harmoniously in a multiracial society (Adil, 2019; Abd Razak, 2020). The national policies have been able to facilitate people to live with unity in diversity, in a democratic system, upholding a caring and just approach to different traditions.

ULŪ AL-ALBĀB

Ulū al-albāb focuses on sound intellect (*‘aql salim*) and tranquil heart (*qalbun salim*). Aliyah (2013) defines *ulū al-albāb* as the ability of human to preserve natural disposition (*fitrah*) with sound mind by avoiding any distortion to the mind so that humans will be able to understand, to practice wisdom (*hikmāh*), to reflect phenomenon within *taqwa* (piety), obedience and guidance (*hidāyah* of Allah).

Lutfiyah (2017) defines *ulū al-albāb* as individuals with functional direction, intellect and heart are able to understand, analyse, decide and execute deeds in reality together with other humans and creatures. The Qur’anic concept of *ulū al-albāb* denotes that humans are able to live together with fellow humans and other creatures due to the intellectual ability that is moderated by tranquil hearts (*qalbun salim*) (Mhd.Sarif, 2017).

Ulū al-albāb (people of sound reason) demonstrates the ability to think with high order thinking (Jamil, Abd Khafidz & Osman, 2019) through *tazakkur* and *tadabbur*. *Ulū al-albāb* are also alert to their surrounding and always act in accordance with the obligation of enjoining goodness (*al-amr bil ma’ruf*) and prohibiting evil (*al-nahy anil munkar*) (Fauziah, 2018), applying their functional and productive wisdom (Mhd. Sarif, 2015), high emotional and spiritual intelligence (Hair, 2020) and resilience to face challenges (Zahrin, Hasan & Samsudin, 2020).

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Strategy analysis leads to strategies that generate high impact profitability and sustainable competitive advantage. While Islamic teaching accepts the concept of sustainability, it emphasises on *sejahtera* (peace) and *ulū al-albāb* on humanity. It is about planning with thinking. Strategic planning follows a linear process with single-loop learning. While the environment is complex, it needs strategic thinking with double-loop learning (Heracleous, 1998). Strategists think and plan (Goldman, 2007) with strategic thinking capability (Casey & Goldman, 2010).

Strategic planning covers strategy formulation in the three-stage process of strategic management (strategy formulation, strategy implementation, and strategy evaluation). Strategic planning provides the basis for strategy formulation which includes developing direction of organizations (vision, mission, and goals), organizational internal and external environment scanning, and generating alternative strategies (Bonn & Christodoulou, 1996). Strategic planning is a learning process for strategists and organizations (Porter, 1983; Hutzschenreuter & Kleindienst, 2006). Indeed, strategic planning is about a journey of thinking (Eden & Ackermann, 2013) with practice (Jarzabkowski, 2005) and social experience (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Thus, strategic planning requires strategic thinking capabilities (Asobee, 2021).

Strategic management requires a strong foundation of strategic thinking. Mhd. Sarif (2020) argued that the complexity of the environment and mindset of stakeholders requires strategists to acquire multidimensional aspects of learning and practice, which resembles attributes of *ulū al-albāb*. The complexity of the business environment is beyond social cultural aspects (Pour, Soltani & Abdollahi, 2018). The foundation of thinking with the *Tawhidic* paradigm enables multidimensional design thinking (Khalifa, 2001; Fontaine & Ahmad, 2013).

SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES

Small and medium enterprises are grass root business entities with certain characteristics in terms of size of capital, number of employees, and sales amount. As grass root entities, small and medium enterprises very close to the grass root socio-economic factors (Abdullah, 2002). These SMEs have social implications to people (Abdullah, 2011). Nevertheless, small and medium enterprises make important contributions to the economy (Abdullah, 2019).

Strategic planning is relevant regardless of the size and nature of enterprises. Any organization is obliged to attain its objective through people and structure in the organization. Small and medium enterprises are also practicing strategic planning (Cheng, Abdul Kadir & Bohari, 2014). The nature of strategic planning in small and medium enterprise is largely influenced by several factors, mostly ownership motivation (Wang, Walker & Redmond, 2006; Sosiawani, Ramli, Mustafa & Yusoff, 2015). The dynamism of the business market pushes small medium enterprises to formulate strategic plan and blueprint to enhance innovation and sustainability (Yuen & Ng, 2021).

The main purpose of this study is to explore the influence of *sejahtera* and *ulū al-albāb* the strategic planning practices among small and medium enterprises. Figure 1 illustrates the influence of *sejahtera* and *ulū al-albāb* the strategic planning practices among small and medium enterprises.

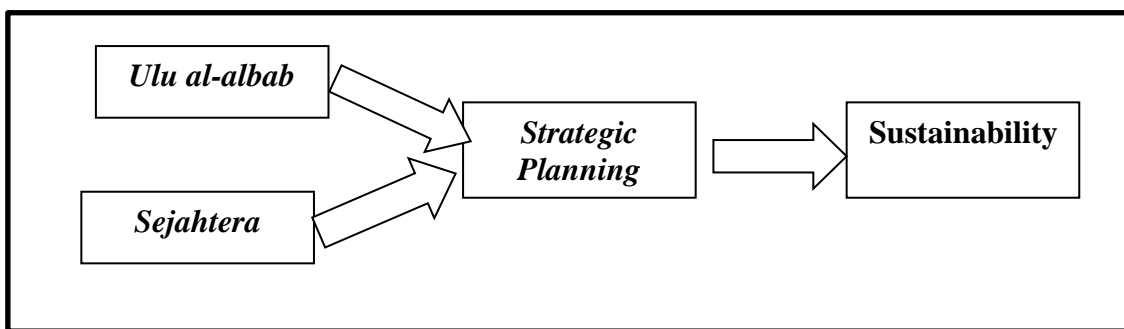


Figure. Research Framework

Figure 1 explains that in strategic planning, strategists and information are crucial in formulation strategies. Strategists use personal experience, knowledge and organizational competitive intelligence to scan environmental forces before formulating strategies.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses qualitative research methods through personal interviews with small and medium enterprises owners. The researchers approached them due to close relationships with the business owners. Since the basis for the interaction is about engagement, the personal interviews use conversations with the business owners (MacDonald *et al.*, 2013; Ngozwana, 2018; Jimenez *et al.*, 2019). Even though the conversation is casual, the researchers still need to do preparation before the interview (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Majid *et al.*, 2017), such as securing informed consent, research permits and validated interview protocol (Yeong *et al.*, 2018).

The study aims to obtain the views of the business owners of small and medium enterprises on the influence of *sejahtera* and *ulū al-albāb* in the strategic planning practices.

Before the actual interview, the researchers have secured informed consent from informants, research permits from relevant authorities, and validated interview protocol. The study obtained personal interviews results with note-taking due to data privacy and confidentiality sought by the informants. The researchers finalized interview notes immediately after the conversations. Then, the researchers obtained verification from the informants. The researchers use thematic analysis on the verified interview notes.

MAIN RESULTS

This part presents the interview results from the business owners of small and medium enterprises on the influence of *sejahtera* and *ulū al-albāb* in their strategic planning practices. All of the small and medium enterprises were given nicknames to honor their confidentiality.

Pak Bidin Enterprise

Pak Bidin used to work in the sports business for many years. When he saw the opportunities to run his own sports outlet, he quit the job. He approached his close friends and contacts to subscribe to his sport services apart from purchasing sport equipment from his shop. His main motivation to own a business was to enjoy financial freedom and to reach his potential in extreme sports.

For him, in everything he does he must make extreme efforts and to the fullest potential. He would not reverse or return back to his old job even though his business might not be successful. However, he was not just depending on luck to survive in his business.

When he was asked whether he has specific planning or subscribes to a certain approach to strategic planning to his business, he said:

“...Of course, for anything we do, we must have proper planning. I learnt a lot about formal planning, strategic planning, and scenario planning when I was part of the strategic planning team. When you are in multinational companies, you must plan and execute, then you have to show your numbers. You have a quarterly report that haunts you. Not just you, but together with your colleagues and subordinates. That’s why I quit because I was ‘tied’ to the norms of ‘by hook or by crook’ which is not morally right...”

Pak Bidin’s business enterprise implies the influence of *sejahtera* and *ulū al-albāb* in terms of grassroot networking from close friends, family members and the public. His motivation to operate the business with strategic planning is due to the *sejahtera* aim of financial freedom and realizing his potential (Mhd. Sarif, 2020; Yuen & Ng, 2021).

Ayah Chor Enterprise

Ayah Chor used to work in the army for 21 years. Before retirement, he has undergone a one-year vocational course specialized in culinary and catering. He has learnt a lot about cooking and baking. He chose the food business due to his passion. In fact, during his school days, he helped his parents with their food business. Nevertheless, his parents had encouraged him to join the army so that he could serve the country. In addition, it was a norm for those who were not able to pursue tertiary education to join the army or police force.

In recollection, after consulting family and friends who used to serve in the army and police force, Ayah Chor decided to join the army. The 21 years in the army made him distant from civil life. Thus, the one-year transitional course before retirement was inadequate to prepare him to live as a civil member in the society.

We asked Ayah Chor to explain his motivation for the business venture. Ayah Chor explained:

“...My wife and I decided to open our small business, basically, just a stall in front of our house. I have culinary skills that I learnt from the transitional course. My wife already has experience in selling food at the army housing area. She earned good money by supplying some food to the cafeteria and also to cater some food orders. However, when we moved to my home town, she could not resume her business. She persuaded me to start a small food business at home. Initially, I was reluctant. However, as we need more income to meet our family expenses, I agree to open our business. Both of us attended food handling business and obtained the typhoid injection. The municipal council has been very helpful with the ex-army. We could get our operating license easily...”

When Ayah Chor was asked whether he practiced some strategic planning for his small business? He said:

“...I am not much aware of the planning. But, my wife showed me her plans for our business. She did some market study with our housing area. She is very warmth with people and easily approachable. Based on her market study, she showed me the targeted customers and how much sales could be made. She made some sort of projection. For me, as long as the business could generate some income to top up my pension, it would be good enough. For my wife, she is ambitious. She discovered that she could face less competition because the area lacks food with of East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia . She organized a feast to invite neighbors to sample some food and most of them enjoyed the menu. Some of them already made some orders from her. With that order, we cooked and delivered to them. The power of word-of-mouth is huge. Now we have a stall and also do catering. During MCO [Movement Control Order due to Covid-19 pandemic] in 2020 until now, our small business is severely affected. Some neighbors still order food from us. However, we decided to be selective especially since our area is in the red zone and has a lot of positive Covid-19 cases...”

Feedback of Ayah Chor reveals that his business enterprise incorporated the influence of *sejahtera* and *ulū al-albāb* in terms of monetary need, family and friend's influence. Indeed, ownership motivation has a strong influence on strategic planning of small and medium enterprise (Wang, Walker & Redmond, 2006; Sosiawani, Ramli, Mustafa & Yusoff, 2015).

Mak Bee Enterprise

Mak Bee completed her secondary school and did not pursue tertiary education due to her passion to work in the retail industry. She loved women's accessories and handbag business. She did not care if her schoolmates of her age pursued tertiary education and secured good employment. She determined to achieve her passion to obtain 5 digits monthly earnings. When we asked her about strategic planning in her business? She said:

“...I am not a tertiary education graduate. I learnt about strategic planning from the street. We learnt through trial and error. We made mistakes and we paid a high price for the mistakes. We never give up and always stand tall. During Covid-19 pandemic, our business was severely impacted. Basically, no business for us since the Movement Control Order (MCO). We waited for a few months to adjust to new norms. My husband and I decided to venture into the food business. Yes, I am a foodie. I enjoyed the food and I wanted others to enjoy our food as well. We traveled a lot before the pandemic even though my business is not global business. But women accessories with premium stature made me travel to many countries to buy expensive accessories for our customers. We also brought our customers with us on our travels. I am not operating a travel business, though. But I provided overseas shopping experiences to the customers. Yes, Covid-19 pandemic has changed our business...”

Mak Bee’s business enterprise is replete with the influence of *sejahtera* and *ulū al-albāb* from her street-smart experience and determination to enjoy financial freedom. Mak Bee as the owner of Mak Bee Enterprise has strong motivation to sustain the business with comprehensive strategic planning (Wang, Walker & Redmond, 2006; Sosiawani, Ramli, Mustafa & Yusoff, 2015).

Implications

The three case studies revealed the combination of strategic planning with *sejahtera* and *ulū al-albāb* approach in sustaining the business. There are various push and pull factors that shape the meaning of *sejahtera* and degree of thinking in the strategic planning for the enterprises. Theoretically, strategic planning can be based on resource-based views and industrial organization views.

However, in the current Covid-19 pandemic with uncertainty on the movement restrictions and regulations, *sejahtera* approach of strategic planning provides them self-tranquility in facing the uncertainties with serenity (peace). Grass root networking with *sejahtera* approach enables small and medium enterprises to work closely with family and friends to optimize localized advantages.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore on the influence of *sejahtera* and *ulū al-albāb* elements in the strategic planning practices of small and medium enterprises. These elements have been identified among the three small and medium enterprises. There are various push and pull factors that shape the meaning of *sejahtera* and degree of thinking in the strategic planning for the enterprises. The *sejahtera* and *ulū al-albāb* in strategic planning practices may be attributed to the support provided by the grassroots networking from close friends, family members and the public.

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