Thai Halal: ‘Religious Compliance and Scientific Support’

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‘Halal’ is an Arabic term which means permitted or lawful. When used in religion, it means what religion permits, such as permitting what to eat, permitting what to do, and permitting what to use. ‘Haram’ is the opposite of halal, meaning forbidden. For the purpose of religion, it means what religion forbids. From the above-mentioned definition, the term ‘Halal’ is not limited only to food but also related to service, behavior and matters of daily life.

Halal food adheres to Islamic law by taking into account cleanliness and nutritional value, in particular, contamination control during the selection and preparation of raw materials, processing, storage, transportation, and selling. Halal food is a kind of food that can be consumed by both Muslims and non-Muslims. For this reason, halal food is not mentioned solely as a religious principle, but it is also a standard in ensuring the safety and cleanliness of food products that can build consumer confidence. On July 27, 1997, the Codex Alimentarius Commission, in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Health Organization which has 165 members, jointly endorsed the term ‘Halal’ for food labels and Halal has become an internationally-recognized standard. In recognition of Halal as a scientific standard, the Codex Alimentarius Commission has officially documented General Guidelines for Use of the Term ‘Halal’ (CAC GL-24/1997).

Thailand, as one of the member countries of Codex, has responded to the standardization of Halal by translating it into Thai and setting it up as the national Halal standard through the Industrial Standards Institute, called General Recommendations for the usage of the term ‘Halal’. As a result, Thailand is one of the 10 countries in the world to set up Halal standards.

In 2011, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, consisting of 57 Islamic member states, has assigned the Standard and Metrology Institute for Islamic Countries (SMIIC) to
develop Halal standards. If this standard is fully applied, countries around the world must comply, including Thailand.

Since January 2017, Thailand has become a full member of SMIIC/OIC. Thailand is the first non-Muslim country to be certified as a member of this important organization because the SMIIC Board recognizes that Halal certification in Thailand is in line with established standards and Thailand has the potential to develop Halal science and gain acceptance. Undoubtedly, this success is reflected in the global acceptance of Halal standards and Halal logo of Thailand.

This article is not intended to describe the evolution of Thai Halal standards or lay the foundation for knowledge of standards and procedures for Halal certification (as the reader can find information on their own), but the main purpose of this article is to present the highlights of Halal Thai, which are the supportive factors for the acceptance of Thai Halal even though Thailand is a non-Muslim country. The key issues to be addressed are as following:

1. Thai Halal Origin: Cooperation between Muslims and Thai Entrepreneurs

Halal certification in Thailand dates back to 1949 when poultry exported to Middle East countries was rejected due to non-compliance with the Islamic form of animal slaughtering, which was considered as a religious belief for more than 1.6 billion Muslims. Thai entrepreneurs tried to find ways to build confidence for Muslim consumers and adherence to Halal certification has been the standard in Thailand ever since.

In the past, Halal certification was made by the Sheikful Islam Office. Until the end of 1999, it was transferred to the Central Islamic Council of Thailand and the Provincial Islamic Council. This is in accordance with the Islamic Organization Administration Act B.E. 2540, which stipulates that the operation of Islamic affairs is under the authority of an Islamic organization only.

In 2001, Thailand exported Halal food products to 57 Muslim countries worth U.S. $ 347 million in 2001. By 2015, 14 years later, the value of its exports reached U.S. 6.1 billion, increased by 17.6 times, which was the largest growth among all food exports of the country. The benefits flowed directly to Thai entrepreneurs and indirectly to the Thai government in the form of tax revenues, excluding the export of Halal food products to
non-Muslim countries. Currently, there are more than 3,500 factories that have applied for a Halal logo from the Central Islamic Committee and the Provincial Islamic Council and more than 100,000 products receive Halal certification. The majority of the entrepreneurs are non-Muslims but they are important players in driving the progress of Halal standards and certification that have been developing for more than 68 years, making Thailand the primary country that has developed Halal certification standards.

For this reason, the initiation of Halal business and Halal certification standards are the result of the cooperation of all the people of the country. This cooperation includes not only the Thai Muslim population but also Islamic organizations and Thai entrepreneurs which contribute to the people, society and the nation as a whole. Due to the fact that Thailand is considered one of the world’s major exporters of Halal food and that the Halal industry has generated excessive revenues to the country, the Thai government in all ages is highly committed and devoted to developing the Thai Halal business to gain confidence from the global consumer.

2. Thai Halal: The right to be certified by only one religious organization.

In general, any country with a minority Muslim population often encounters pleas for religious liberty in order to maintain a righteous life. At the same time, few countries have specific rules for promoting or granting rights for Muslims to live in accordance with Islamic principles. Thailand is one of those countries that facilitates and promotes Islamic leaders and Muslim scholars, as well as the civil society sector in designing their own religious administration which leads to the enactment of regulations and laws governing Muslims in Thailand, namely the Islamic Organization Administration Act 1997.

Thailand’s Islamic organization follows a hierarchical control structure. The position of Sheikhul, the leader of Islamic business in Thailand, is endorsed by the Provincial Islamic Council, which is further endorsed by the Imam of the particular province. However, the core of the whole structure is the Muslim population, who choose the Imam and mosque directors from each community. This reflects the encouragement of all Muslims to participate in the administration of their own religious affairs. The selection of the Sheikhul by the Provincial Islamic Council has resulted in a recruitment of a Muslim leader which fulfills the will of the Muslim population nationwide. For this reason, the Organization of Islamic Organizations Act 1997 is a model of Islamic Administration for non-Muslim countries.
Lately, many foreign Muslim organizations are interested in studying and applying the concepts to their own country.

Meanwhile, in the case of the Halal business, Thailand is the only country with a statutory law. In this case, the "Islamic Administrative Organization Act 1997," specifies the agency which has the authority for Halal certification, namely the Central Islamic Council of Thailand and the Provincial Islamic Council.

Due to the fact that Thai Halal business is operated by a single non-profit religious organization which has the ultimate authority to certify Halal products and has a single Halal logo, Thai Halal is more reliable compared with many other countries which allow associations, foundations or even private companies to certify Halal products.

3. Thai Halal: The prevalence of Halal logo

The Halal symbol or Halal Logo is the symbol which is stamped on the product label and informs the Muslims that the product is permissible for consumption. For Muslims, the 'Halal Logo' is the hallmark of the quality of a product that is legally recognized. As a result, Halal certification and Halal logo are important forms of representation for the global Muslim consumers to be reassured that the product is guaranteed to be "Halal" and in compliance with Islamic Shari‘ah principles.

According to Shafie and Othman (2006) Halal Certification: International Marketing Issues and Challenges, the Halal logo plays a major role in the purchasing decision among Muslim consumers and Muslims are more likely to support Halal logo products. As a result, the Halal logo is commonly understood by the general Muslim consumer as the “label” which assures that the product is safe and permissible to consume, regardless of which institution or country has the authority to certify a particular Halal logo. Moreover, general Muslims do not have the tools, knowledge, and time to investigate additives and food ingredients while shopping at the market or department store, particularly when buying processed food products with sophisticated industrial processes. For this reason, the Halal logo is a tool to assure that the product is lawful to consume and has gone through the process of production that is in accordance with the Islamic rules and principles. Thus, Muslim consumers often check for the existence of the Halal symbol before purchasing, especially for meat and processed products.
The Halal logo of Thailand is derived from the certification of the Central Islamic Council of Thailand, or 39 Provincial Islamic Councils, which allows the entrepreneur to stamp or display on the product label or any business using the Arabic symbol "Halal" within the rhombus, vertical stripes at the back of the frame, the words "Central Islamic Council of Thailand" under the frame, and the product serial number at the end.

This symbol will be issued to food and beverage products, including non-food products. Currently, there are more than 100,000 Halal products in Thailand whose Halal logos are displayed on various product labels and distributed around the world.

4. Thai Halal: Distinction between certification and accreditation body

Since 2002, the Thai government has started to push for the exporting of Thai food products to the world market in order to increase the revenue from the food industry. The food industry is currently supported by a strong agricultural sector under the ‘From Farm to Table’ concept and utilizes Thailand’s comparative advantage of the manufacturing and service sectors in international competition.

The strategies to lead Thailand as the “Kitchen of the World” is considered to be a strategic endeavor that has been implemented continuously through the development of a collaborative network between the public, private and civil society sectors. The result is that Thailand is able to position itself as one of the world’s major food product exporters.

Due to the robust food export strategies and the growth of the world’s Halal market, the Thai government agencies foresee that Thailand has a strong potential for food production and the opportunity to capture market share of the food market for the huge Muslim population. However, Thailand has a weakness being a non-Muslim country.
Therefore, Thailand’s competitiveness and capacity building depend on its ability to win trust and acceptance from the Muslim consumers.

To gain consumer trust and acceptance worldwide, Halal food standards and quality assurance accredited by religious organizations are considered as the most important criteria of success. For this reason, in 2003, the government provided support for Halal food standards and the establishment of a unified national certification body. In this regard, it has pushed and supported the budget for the establishment of the Halal Standard Institute of Thailand under the supervision of the Central Islamic Council of Thailand to support the implementation of Halal food standards in Thailand since August 11, 2003. The Board of Directors has been appointed which consists of highly qualified Islamic experts, academics, and specialists in various fields to meet the objectives of the institute.

The establishment of the Halal Standard Institute of Thailand creates a balance of power between Halal Accreditation Body (HAB) and Halal Certification Body (HCB). According to international standards, the Central Islamic Council of Thailand and the Provincial Islamic Council are HAB and the Halal Standard Institute of Thailand is HCB.

5. Thai Halal: Source of World Halal Science

Most modern food production technologies are operated by people who lack understanding of the needs of the Muslim consumers. As a result, a large number of products are contaminated with non-approval or “Haram,” which poses great uncertainty for the Muslim consumers. Such concern leads to the emergence of the Halal certification symbol for products and services for Muslims. This incidence is fast gaining popularity so that there are hundreds of Halal certification bodies in various countries.

It is estimated that the organizations that provide these Halal certifications are between 300-500 organizations around the world, including associations, foundations, and private companies, but most are run by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The operation of each organization has different characteristics, both with and without application of Halal standards. Most implementation of Halal certification activities lack support from scientific processes. As a result, when most Halal food producers are non-Muslims or are Muslims which lack understanding of Islam and Halal certification is implemented by improper production systems, a number of said-to-be certified Halal
products become contaminated. This affects the rights of Muslim consumers who wish to consume products that are free from ‘Haram’.

For this reason, it is necessary to apply science and technology to the Halal food production process, including both Halal foods which are certified by Islamic organizations and those that are not Halal certified.

Even though there is no known information on which country pioneers the application of scientific and technological processes to Halal food production, the establishment of Halal Science Center Chulalongkorn University is regarded as the world’s first Halal science institute which makes the term Halal science widely known.

Halal science development by Muslim scientists in Thailand under financial support from the public sector and close cooperation between academic, industrial and manufacturing sector in conjunction with the impact of Halal science to Halal certification have all played an important role in the development of Halal science in Thailand. They also enhance confidence in the quality and safety of Halal products and services for consumers. For this reason, it is needless to say that science, technology, innovation and experience regarding Halal science in Thailand are a gift to both Muslims and non-Muslims for the development of the Halal economy in their respective countries.

Epilogue: ‘Religious Compliance and Scientific Support’ approach

The Halal food certification process in Thailand has been developed for more than 68 years. One factor which contributes to the progress of Thai Halal certification is that Thailand is a non-Muslim country. Halal certification is therefore needed to protect the rights of Muslim consumers in Thailand and to export Thai products to Muslim countries, given the fact that most entrepreneurs are non-Muslims. This has led to strong government support in all ages in terms of industrial development and Halal certification standards. At the same time, Thailand is the only country to have a statutory law, the “Islamic Business Operation Act, 1997,” which specifically designates Islamic organizations to have the authority to perform Halal certification. This creates unity for Thai Halal business as there is only one religious agency which is authorized to certify Halal products under one credible Halal label. Furthermore, Thailand has also established the Halal Standard Institute in an attempt to
distinguish between Halal Accreditation Body and Halal Certification Body for the balance of power according to international standards. Moreover, the establishment of the world’s first Halal Science Center in Thailand has made Thai Halal certification more acceptable as currently, Halal certification in Thailand is not a religious process alone but it has also been verified scientifically. This is where the following phrase originates: *Halal Science-Thailand Signature*.

In conclusion, the acceptance of Thai Halal standards by the international community is based on the 'Religious Compliance and Scientific Support’ approach, leading to the upgrade of the country’s Halal industry and business as it becomes a model for Halal certification development for other respective countries.