

Halal Food Industry Deserves More Attention

Malaysia has been globally recognised as the world's *halal* food hub, despite its cosmopolitan, multi-religious nature. Foreign Muslims are attracted to Malaysia not only by the beautiful scenery and the prevailing peace, but also by the halal culinary delights commonplace in the country. Between 1999 and 2003, tourists from Muslim Middle East countries to Malaysia rose from about 20,000 to more than 800,000. And this number is increasing.

The certification of halal food has been conducted throughout the country since 1982 by the Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia (JAKIM). The Codex Alimentarius Commission, which is responsible, under the United Nations, for regulations of food preparation globally, has cited Malaysia as the best example in the world in terms of justification of halal food. The Malaysian model has been regarded as the role model for the development of world halal food industries.

According to MITI, quoting sources from the International Market Bureau Canada, the total world Muslim population is estimated to be 1.8 billion, and based on the estimated expenditure per capita for food of US\$0.85 (RM3.23) a day, it is estimated that the market for *halal* products is US\$560 billion (RM2.12 trillion) a year. In Malaysia, 60 percent of the population are Muslims and if one were to estimate the per capita expenditure for food as RM1 a day, then the demand for halal products is more than RM5 billion a year.

According to MITI, at present, there are no comprehensive figures on the performance of halal food production in Malaysia but the size of the market can be seen by looking at the imports and exports of processed food. In 2002, imports of processed food were valued at RM5.7 billion whilst exports were RM4.7 billion. From 1995 to June 2003, the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority (MIDA) had issued licences to 424 food manufacturing companies with a total investment of RM5.9 billion.

Determining the "halalness" of a product goes beyond ensuring that food is pork-free. Carnivorous animals, amphibians (frogs and mangrove crabs) and all insects except grasshoppers are not halal. Intoxicants in any form are also off-limits. Meat from permissible animals such as poultry and cattle must be slaughtered in accordance with Islamic rites to render them halal. Halal food also adheres to stringent standards in hygiene and sanitation, and must not be harmful to health. Halal food certification refers to the examination of food processes, from the preparation, slaughtering, ingredients used, cleaning, handling and processing, right down to transportation and distribution. The concept of halal food is truly from the farm to the table, and must be nutritious and prepared from permissible ingredients in a clean and hygienic manner.

Contamination from *najs* (filth as defined by Islamic law) or *haram* (prohibited) elements also renders food non-halal. Sticky areas include ingredients, genetically modified food and utensils used in processing. Cod liver oil may be halal, but the oil might be contained in a bovine gelatin capsule produced from cows that have not been slaughtered in line with Islamic rites, making the supplement non-halal. Cows might be halal animals, but splice their genes with porcine DNA, and the result is a haram hybrid. Another example is that, innocuous items like biscuits might list only halal ingredients such as flour, butter and sugar, but the egg-yolk glaze might be applied with a brush made from pig bristles, making the biscuits non-halal.

Logistics and packaging are vital too. Non-halal and halal goods must also be kept separately in the storage or during transportation and distribution in order to prevent contamination.

Since Malaysia is serious to position itself to be the halal food hub center in the Asian region and is the pioneer in the globalisation of Halal certification, the relevant authorities should implement stricter rules and regulations. Recently, Muslims in Malaysia were shocked by the news that the halal and non-halal meat had been kept together by one of the slaughtering house, and another company was misusing the halal certificate to make more profits. This issues can damage Malaysia's reputation as a global halal food hub.

To avoid the wrong usage of the country's halal trademark, the relevant authorities should have unlimited access to inspect the premises. The authorities should equip themselves with sufficient qualified manpower to enforce the existing rules and regulations. In the meantime, a sense of responsibility and commitment should be instilled among workers and producers of halal food. Probably, certain rules and regulations should be fulfilled even before the issuance of the manufacturing licence. The penalty for the abuse of halal certification should be reasonably stiff.

No matter what, Malaysia needs to act fast to iron out the kinks in its halal food strategy. Malaysia is not the only country that covets halal markets. Stiff competition abounds from both Muslim and non-Muslim nations, including Brunei, Thailand, the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand. Thailand is singled out as being especially aggressive; it is busily setting up an industrial estate for halal food production in the mostly-Muslim southern province of Pattani and is negotiating with French hypermarket Carrefour to supply halal food to the latter's South-east Asian branches.

The success of the halal food industry, in both domestic and export markets, depends on a broad range of policy developments including those related to the law and regulations, support services and infrastructure, such as human resource development, finance and R&D, as well as marketing and promotional efforts. Malaysia's role is not only to make sure that the food is 100 percent halal, but

also to add value through providing services such as halal management, logistics and finance. In other words, the country must also provide the system that would ensure its international credibility.

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