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Asean stand on Cambodia commendable

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ASEAN'S tough stand on political developments in Cambodia is highly commendable. It revives not only confidence in the regional grouping but more so in its relevance in the post-Cold War era.

Thursday's decision by its Foreign Ministers to defer indefinitely Cambodia's entry following last week's "coup" by Second Prime Minister Hun Sen should serve as a warning to countries aspiring to become members not to take Asean's consensus-driven decision-making for granted.

The unanimous decision should inspire two other applicants - Myanmar and Laos - whose entry date was confirmed at the Kuala Lumpur meeting, to continue to improve their domestic affairs.

This is especially so with Myanmar, whose domestic political situation is a touchy issue with some Asean members. It may be unwise for Yangon to misread Asean's dismissal of the US objection to its entry into the regional grouping. Neither should it take lightly Thursday's confirmation of its membership.

While it is not Asean's policy to interfere in the internal affairs of member states or to dictate the type of political systems they must practise, it is an unspoken rule that they must observe a certain basic rule.

The vehement objection of Asean members to the US attempt to block Myanmar's entry cannot be read as their total acceptance of the situation there.

Not all Asean countries are at ease with the situation in Myanmar. The views on the matter are even less favourable among many political and non-governmental groups in Asean countries.

Many have called on their Governments to either reject Myanmar's entry or to put specific conditions on its membership with regard to its political situation.

Since most Asean member states are ruled by democratically elected Governments, they cannot afford to ignore domestic opinions in pursuing their foreign policy.

Hence, it is not surprising that Thursday's decision found widespread endorsement among political parties and NGOs in member countries.

As for Cambodia itself, only sanity will save it from another calamity. This is crucial not only to the suffering people of that country but equally to the international community which is keen to help it get back on its feet.

Without political stability, security and workable economic policies, Cambodia may not even be able to hang on to existing foreign investors, less still attract new ones.

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WHEN Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim won in the 1982 general election days after joining Umno, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad made him a Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department and gave him the task of heading the steering committee on Bank Islam, thus launching his Islamic agenda in the Government.

Bank Islam was established the following year and so was the International Islamic University. Anwar went on to launch other Islamic-oriented projects with the full backing of his mentor and, understandably, to the envy of many.

Today, the Islamic agenda, albeit the liberal and moderate type, has

become part and parcel of national policy and, to the surprise of many who originally viewed Anwar as a religious zealot of sorts, is widely accepted by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Interest-free banking, modelled along the Syariah principle, has been widely accepted by conventional banks and customers alike. Sixty per cent of Bank Islam's trade financing customers are non-Muslims.

At Bank Rakyat, 12,000 out of 14,000 Al-Mudharabah fixed deposit account holders are non-Muslims and 40 per cent of Perwira Affin Bank's non-Muslim clients who opted for interest-free banking are multinational companies. Billions of ringgit has been raised by Malaysian and multinational companies through Islamic banking for manufacturing, infrastructure projects and property development.

The International Islamic University, which continues to receive Anwar's personal attention, has become the university of choice among Muslim and non-Muslim students alike. It produces some of the best graduates among local universities and is acknowledged by the Islamic world. About 1,000 of its students are foreigners.

These and other Islamic programmes coupled with political stability, ethnic and religious tolerance, economic success and active foreign policy have made Malaysia well known in the international community.

Some Muslim countries have gone to the extent of declaring Malaysia their role model. It is certainly very complimentary and satisfying to Muslims in this country bearing in mind that Malaysia is not a large Muslim nation and Muslims account for just over half of the population.

This is by no means a small feat given the fact that for 446 years of colonial subjugation, starting with the Portuguese in 1511, Islam was either under threat of being wiped out or was relegated to rituals of prayers, marriage, divorce, birth and death.

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SADLY, however, as national leaders like Dr Mahathir and Anwar are trying their best to foster the kinder and more universal side of Islam, not an insignificant number of State leaders, and their religious officials, seem able to see beyond the turban, skull cap and tudung (woman's head cover).

While Islam puts high priority on face-saving and protection of dignity of its followers, and placing persuasion above punishment, these leaders and religious officials have no qualms about "shaming" people in public.

With the consent, and sometimes encouragement and connivance, of State leaders, the zealots have gone to the extent of organising vigilante groups on the pretext of "performing the right and stopping the wrong".

I remember some years ago of having the honour of sharing a table with Dr Mahathir and a Menteri Besar, who is now out of office, at a media-related function in Kuala Lumpur and complaining to him (Dr Mahathir) about the tendency of some State Governments using the most debasing methods to enforce Islamic laws.

It so happened the Menteri Besar had just allowed the Religious Affairs Department of his State to organise a citizen's group with power of arrest. The Menteri Besar himself held the religious affairs portfolio.

This vigilante group went about spying on courting couples, checking on workers' hostels and other places where sinful activities were supposed to be widespread.

But the Menteri Besar and his religious officials found themselves in a very embarrassing situation when eight members of the group were arrested in February 1995 for impersonating policemen and extorting money from Indonesian workers.

The red-faced Menteri Besar was forced to disband the vigilante group. He himself later got into an embarrassing situation and was pressured by his party, Umno, to resign.

In this context, Umno and its acting president (Anwar), should be congratulated for taking an immediate and strong stand in reminding State religious authorities not to be over-zealous but instead sensitive in tackling and handling matters affecting youths, culture and the arts.

Although Anwar did not mention specific cases, the party's supreme council meeting that he chaired last Saturday discussed the action by some States to disallow concerts by local rap group, KRU, and the arrest of three Muslim participants of a beauty contest in Selangor.

Here, I do not think that Menteris Besar and State executive councillors in charge of religion can just wash their hands of the affair. They are equally responsible for such an act of zeal that makes Islam look like a "tabloid religion".

After all, in States like Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Kedah, the Menteris Besar themselves hold the religious portfolio.

Nobody is saying the enforcement of Islamic laws is unimportant. But does it have to be only against beauty contestants and courting couples? And has it to be in the full glare of television cameras?

What about the thousands of Muslim men who divorced or simply abandoned their wives without any financial support? Are they less evil and less guilty than three teenagers who took part in a beauty contest or Muslim women exercising at fitness centres?

Where is Islamic justice when religious officials have no qualms about arresting a woman on suspicion of immoral activities when she is forced to earn a living for herself and her children after being abandoned by her heartless husband? Is it not better for Islam and Islamic justice for these officials to be tracking down and arresting the recalcitrant men?

I hope Menteris Besar, Chief Ministers and Exco members in charge of religious affairs, and the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department responsible for Islamic Affairs, Datuk Dr Abdul Hamid Othman, will pay keener attention to the activities of State religious authorities.

Islam is a religion of peace and caring. It should not be allowed to be relegated to the gossip pages of tabloid newspapers and TV entertainment shows.

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WHAT started as an exchange of words between Minister of National Unity and Social Development, Datin Paduka Zaleha Ismail, and the Inspector-General of Police, Tan Sri Rahim Nor, has now spread to the Press and non-governmental organisations.

The police have lodged a report (to the police, of course) concerning the publication of an article by the New Straits Times on July 2 entitled "Making sure women are protected under the Domestic Violence Act".

A Press statement by Superintendent Ghazali Md Amin, Federal police head of public relations, on July 3 says the report was to enable the police to investigate the article.

In his words: "Tujuan laporan ini dibuat ialah bagi membolehkan pihak polis menyiasat kenyataan tersebut dibawah Seksyen 8A Akta Percetakan dan Penerbitan tahun 1984 kerana dipercayai bahawa artikel tersebut mempamerkan berita palsu." (The report is to enable police to investigate the article under section 8A of the Printing and Publications Act 1984 because it is believed that the article contained false news).

Bukit Aman's deputy CID director ACP Abu Bakar Mustaffa, also on July 3, wrote a letter to the writer of the article, journalist Shareem Amry, ordering her to be present at the Federal police headquarters the following day.

Abu Bakar said he was conducting an investigation under the provisions of "Bab 111 Kanun Acara Jenayah" (Chapter 111 of the Criminal Procedure Code) in relation to a case under section 8A(1) of the Printing Presses

and Publications Act 1984.

She was interviewed by Abu Bakar in the presence of a woman inspector identified only as Lee for two-and-a-half hours. Shareem was accompanied to Bukit Aman by New Straits Times' legal adviser, Mahiran Husin. But Mahiran was not at the interview.

As a journalist who has gone through similar interviews, briefings and "chit-chats" with the police over news reports that I wrote or had a hand in publishing in the past 28 years, I must say they can be disconcerting.

I do not blame Shareem or other young journalists for feeling the same way, especially when worse things had happened to their colleagues.

Take the case of Harian Metro reporters Yusaini Ali, 24, and Saniboey Mohd Ismail, 22, who were arrested on March 30, 1995, and remanded for four days by the Johor Baru police under the Official Secrets Act.

They were released on a month's bail of RM5,000 which was later extended for three months. On June 2 the same year, they were released after the charges against them were dropped, without any reason being given.

As we approach a new millennium and leave further behind the baggage of the Emergency and Cold War, we should guard more jealously our freedom and liberty, failing which the war we fought would end up a lost cause and the caring society we cherish will remain an illusive dream.

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