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Don't leave it to Dr Mahathir alone

A Kadir Jasin

"AND we must not forget that people who cover their heads commit as many sexual crimes as people who do not. This is because we place more stress on the covering of the head than on preventing crimes."

WITH that damning indictment, the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, launched an attack on Muslims who place more stress on form than on the spirit, substance and the true teachings of Islam.

Acknowledging that what he was saying would not be to the liking of many people, including many Umno members, the party president made an impassioned plea to party leaders and members to defend the true teachings of Islam and reject all forms of extremism.

While he was clearly forced to make these very strong statements by the spate of controversial fatwa (religious rulings) on the daily practices of the country's Muslims and enforcement by religious officials, his decision for the Umno general assembly to debate the issue is no less significant.

It is a widely known fact that since the controversy started nearly three months ago following the arrest of three Muslim contestants of a beauty pageant by the Selangor Religious Affairs Department for allegedly exposing the aurat (the part of the body that has to be covered), Dr Mahathir has been less than happy with the response of Umno leaders to the issue.

He felt that while most of them were indifferent to it, others were too scared to make their views known.

What seemed to disturb him most was the awareness that there are Umno leaders, including some Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers, who are in cahoots with these zealous religious officials by encouraging them in their actions or who are too scared to offer advice for fear of being unpopular.

Dr Mahathir fired the first salvo against these zealous officials upon his return from a two-month vacation overseas on July 22 when he urged them to use their "little power" merely to arrest and handcuff those accused of breaking Islamic laws.

This was followed by his briefing to the Malay Rulers at the meeting of the Conference of Rulers and the Menteri Besar soon after on the need to standardise Islamic laws in all States.

What happened afterwards was both expected and understandable. While Dr Mahathir was squarely condemned in the Friday sermons of many mosques in the country, including being branded murtad (apostate), the majority of Umno leaders froze.

They were speechless except behind closed doors. And when they did speak up, it was to say that Dr Mahathir had touched on something very sensitive or that only he could have said that.

The initial reaction to Dr Mahathir's presidential address on Friday was not very much different. Everybody congratulated him for his boldness and said that only he could express such an opinion.

My question is: Why only Dr Mahathir? What then is the role of other Umno leaders?

Are they not speaking out because they are in favour of zealous and shallow implementation of Islamic laws? Or because they think the approach taken by Umno and the Government in matters concerning Islam is incorrect?

Are they not convinced that the economic progress and social justice brought about by the Umno-led Government are in line with the demands of

Islam?

What about the successful introduction of Islamic and interest-free banking, the setting up of the International Islamic University and helping oppressed Muslims in Bosnia, Palestine and elsewhere?

Are these less of a priority than covering the head, dressing up like Arabs and arresting beauty contestants?

If Umno leaders and members are sincere and care about their future and the future of their children and grandchildren, the good name of the country, religious and ethnic tolerance and above all, the good name of Islam, they should stand up and resist hypocrisy, fanaticism and extremism.

NEVER mind if the Prime Minister took a swipe at Pas and some zealous religious officials in his speech.

To my mind, Pas and the extremist elements are able to do less damage to the peace and harmony of our multi-ethnic and multi-religious society than the hypocrisy, reticence and inactivity of Umno leaders and members.

If Umno leaders and members are not convinced that they are doing the right things for Islam and Muslims, they should either cross over to Pas or be prepared to face the consequences of being rendered helpless by the extremist elements.

Surely the many Muslim nations, which have openly praised our country and bestowed upon our leaders esteemed awards cannot all be wrong in their assessment. If Umno leaders are reluctant to speak out against extremism for fear that they may become unpopular, they have no business remaining in the leadership.

Or are they still not convinced by the examples of Islamic civilisations, nations and communities which were destroyed by extremism as cited by Dr Mahathir in his address?

Some of the examples might be historical. But many are current events that receive daily coverage in the local and international media - reports and pictures of innocent Muslim villagers being slaughtered by Muslim fanatics in the name of Islam and Muslim nations co-operating with non-Muslims to wage war on Muslim neighbours.

Granted that not every Umno leader is schooled in Islamic theology. But all of us have basic knowledge of the religion and its practices. Islam is not a mysterious or mystical religion that is beyond the comprehension of the ordinary mind.

After all, it is not Islam that is the subject of debate but the manner Islamic laws, in particular the fatwa, are made and implemented.

Surely it is not beyond the comprehension of every Umno leader which is more important to Islam and the well-being of its ummah (followers) - arresting beauty contestants or putting behind bars fathers who rape their daughters and other girls.

Or to figure out which has higher priority: barring Muslim men from participating in body-building contests and acting against religious officials who steal the zakat (Islamic property tax) money.

Extremism and fanaticism, whether they are the product of a well co-ordinated campaign or of inaptitude, are the best ways to kill Islam. Any enemy of Islam who is worth his salt knows that Islam's worst enemy is extremism and fanaticism.

This is the case with many Islamic countries in the Middle East and North Africa where Muslims are killing Muslims in the name of Islam. In the end, there will be no Muslims left to profess the religion.

Umno leaders are challenged to take seriously Dr Mahathir's assertion that a leader of an Islamic community has not only the power but the responsibility to guide the ummah.

ACCORDING to photographers who covered the Umno assembly, Dr Mahathir excused himself for a few minutes on the opening day of the sitting to assess the haze situation.

What he saw was certainly not reassuring. While some gloom has lifted off the Kuala Lumpur stock and money markets, the city is still shrouded by the haze.

By now it should be clear that there is only so much comfort we can take in blaming the Indonesian forest fires for the haze.

Even though the Indonesian Government has admitted to the widespread burning of its forests, there is little to be gained by blaming that country especially when none of the nations in this region has the capacity to fight forest fires in remote places.

This type of fire can only be brought under control using the costly water bombing method for which specially fitted aeroplanes and helicopters are needed.

Only the rich and advanced nations in North America and Europe have these water bombers. For the nations of this region, it was only in the last few years that they were exposed to such technology through demonstration flights at air shows. In the meantime, forests continue to burn.

While smoke from the burning forests is contributing to the prolonged and widespread haze, we cannot ignore the local sources of pollution such as factory and motor vehicle emission.

At least, this is the case in the urban areas where the concentration of factories, commercial buildings and motor vehicles is high.

Take the case of the Klang Valley over the extended Merdeka celebrations weekend. With factories and offices closed and fewer motor vehicles on the road as well as a moderate amount of rain, Kuala Lumpur and its surroundings enjoyed fairly clear skies.

But on Tuesday, when offices and factories reopened and motor vehicles returned to the roads in full force, haze enveloped the city almost instantly.

This was confirmed by the Meteorological Department. It said the daily readings for total suspended particulates for the weekend were significantly lower than the days preceding it.

The microgrammes per cubic metre reading for Petaling Jaya decreased from 178.1 on Aug 29 to 109.7 on Aug 30 and 75 on Aug 31.

However, with factories and offices reopened and the traffic back to normal, Tuesday's reading showed the suspended particulates to be at 108.5 microgrammes per cubic metre.

Instead of closing down factories and stopping motor vehicles from entering the city in the worst case scenario, it is best that we consider a more permanent and less economically punishing solution.

We can begin by encouraging industries to use less polluting manufacturing methods. Those which cannot afford to do so or which are not willing to should be given the option to relocate to less congested industrial zones outside the Klang Valley.

The occasional action against smoke belching motor vehicles does not help much. It is good only for publicity and public relations. In the long run, we must implement stringent smoke emission standards for motor vehicles by making compulsory the use of catalytic convertors and doing away with two-stroke engines.

There are an estimated 7.2 million motor vehicles in the country, of which 3.8 million are motorcycles. The majority of motorcycles are powered by the polluting two-stroke engines.

Based on population, Malaysia is beaten only by Taiwan in motorcycle

ownership. There are 190 motorcycles for every 1,000 people in Malaysia as against 333 in Taiwan, 33 in Indonesia and 17 in India and China. Taiwan, which is plagued by motor vehicle-induced pollution, has plans to phase out two-stroke engines altogether by the year 2000.

The cost of installing smoke reduction devices and replacing the two-stroke engine with the more efficient four-stroke one will, in the long run, be cheaper than cleaning up the environment and treating illnesses caused by pollution and haze. A considerable amount of productivity is lost daily due to these illnesses.

It may in the beginning be burdensome to vehicle owners. But if the additional cost is spread over the operational life of the vehicles, the extra cost may amount to only a few sen a day.

This is certainly better than being enveloped in haze and smog, and depending on such temporary measures as rain-making. Although rain-making is a proven technology, we must always be mindful of the dangers of manipulating nature to solve a problem which is essentially caused by our own mismanagement.

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