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Think-tank a success, but grapples with image problem

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DATUK Dr Ismail Ibrahim is of a demeanour kind and unassuming. The director-general of the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia, or Ikim, rarely speaks out of turn and, like many Malays, is often reluctant to express aloud his unhappiness on any issue.

Thus, his directness of speech during a recent seminar on Mufti and Fatwa came as somewhat of a surprise to those familiar with his style.

Facing the meeting of some 200, who included leading lights among the country's ulama, he spoke out against the way individuals had used the pulpit to criticise the Government and in attributing the haze to "punishment from Allah".

The haze, he said, may be a test by God but fires, he pointed out, are man-made. He implored them to search their conscience before making such claims and not to question the faith and intentions of the Prime Minister.

He says now: "They were using the kuliah mahgrib and kuliah subuh, even the khutbah in almost every mosque..., claiming the Government had rejected Islamic law and that is why we are being punished with the haze.

"I told them: the Prime Minister is a brave man, always frank. That is why he says what most Muslim leaders may not dare... because they are afraid for their popularity and don't want to jeopardise their political careers."

Ismail's ardent defence of the Government ought to come as little surprise for Ikim is, after all, a creature of the Government. It was set up with a generous endowment from the Government and, according to its most current annual report, received a RM3.3 million allocation in 1994 from the Government for operating expenses.

It also has as its chairman former Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Ahmad Sarji Abdul Hamid.

Its purpose is admirable - to help place the image of Islam in its rightful place among Muslims as well as non-Muslims.

And, to its credit, it is one of the few Islamic organisations endeavouring to explain Islam to non-Muslims without that perennial underlay of evangelism.

A great deal of its work has been through research, publications and seminars or forums.

The reading public would be familiar by now with the weekly Ikim columns in several newspapers, discussing a variety of issues from the Islamic viewpoint - from the economy and international affairs to abandoned babies and domestic maids.

Yet, in spite of its role and output, Ikim is seen to lack that certain credibility among Muslims, particularly Muslim intellectuals.

"I know they say we are a mouthpiece (of the Government)," Ismail admits.

Ikim, some Muslim intellectuals say, is too much under the "Government's tutelage" and that it has affected its standing as an Islamic think-tank.

A think-tank, they point out, is perfectly entitled to think for the Government but it should also have a certain degree of intellectual independence.

Ikim, some of them seem to suggest, tends to react to issues rather than anticipate them as think-tanks are expected to.

"They pick issues here and there. Their work doesn't contradict Islam but there is a certain lack of direction," says Universiti Malaya Deputy

Vice-Chancellor (admissions) Prof Osman Bakar.

Associate Prof Mohamad Abu Bakar, also from Universiti Malaya, adds: "Most views expressed by Ikim are in line with that expressed by the Government."

A good think-think, they say, would devise solutions to potential problems before they even occur.

It is probable that there are more than a few people who think the "Mufti and Fatwa" seminar was Ikim's response to rumblings within the Muslim clergy over what has come to be known as "the beauty queen issue" as well as Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's controversial speech during the Umno general assembly.

But, says Ismail, the seminar was planned a year ago.

He insists: "The Government does not dictate what we do or not do although the PM did give us some advice and opinion on issues to be addressed. Neither are we biased to any political party although, of course, we support the Government's policy."

Ikim, it is known, was designed to be an Islamic think-tank, on par with the more established Isis or Institute of Strategic and International Studies.

In fact, prior to the task of setting up shop for Ikim, Ismail had spent six months at Isis, presumably learning the ropes of think-tanking.

It is worthwhile remembering that Isis, too, laboured under the reputation of being a Government mouthpiece before moving on to forge an identity as an influential source of input to Government policy and thinking.

But Ikim faces a more intricate situation than Isis ever did or will. It is not merely dealing with issues but with Islamic issues. Its words and deeds are judged not by the effectiveness of a policy or project but by the Quran.

Issues it deals with are not some remote foreign policy or macro-economic ponderables but touch on the very core of the spiritual and emotional life of Muslims.

One such prickly issue concerned the position of Israel. Some Muslim groups alleged that Ikim was responsible for laying out the justification for establishing ties with Israel.

"It goes against the interests of the Muslim ummah," says an opponent of such a move.

But Ismail denies this: "We are not here to justify what the Government does. We gave the Government some background on the Jews. Islam has nothing against Jews but the general opinion is that we are against Zionism," he says.

Ikim has been grappling with its pro-Government image from day one of its existence. Harakah, the Pas political organ, had earlier on declared that Ikim was set up to counter the opposition political party.

"Umno trusts Ikim but not Pas," says a Universiti Islam Antarabangsa lecturer.

But, says Universiti Malaya's Mohamad, Ikim has in its brief years, helped add a dimension to the Government's efforts in promoting an understanding of Islam.

"Through Ikim, the Government has been able to have a long-term view of Islam. It is no longer seen in isolation from globalisation and world events," says Mohamad.

Its conferences and fora, he adds, have also encouraged a degree of intellectual discourse on Islam and social justice, economic development, ethnic relations and human rights, all of which have helped extend Islam in the world-view.

More important, Ikim has quite successfully projected the moderate face

of Islam among non-Muslims.

But here again, it has been pointed out that its activities are somewhat elitist. That, impressive as its string of conferences and publications may be, they are accessible to only a limited group and, besides, the effects of conferences tend to be over-rated.

The Muslim intelligentsia finds it odd too that an organisation championing the Islamic cause does not have within its intellectual midst, figures of authority in say, syariah or Islamic jurisprudence.

They say that apart from Datuk Dr Abdul Monir Yaacob, an authority on Islamic law, and also former Vice-Chancellor of Omdurman Islamic University, Muddathir Abd Al-Rahim, the rest are mostly "lightweight".

The Muslim intelligentsia also suggest that the bulk of writing emanating in such profusion from Ikim are "superficial" and "shallow". "Little original work of substance," as one of them puts it.

Mohamad is more accommodating: "I don't read them (Ikim articles published in newspapers) myself but I can imagine they may be interesting to those new in the subject."

A large part of opinions commonly expressed about Ikim are not entirely fair.

Ikim, as Ismail points out, is not a dakwah group.

It aims to help shape the public's perception of a progressive Islam, of an Islam that is a way of life for its believers and for others a religion that thrives on truth, dynamism and tolerance.

And the ways in which it hopes to bring about this are unpretentiously simple and straightforward - research; publications for public consumption and specific target groups; conferences, fora, discussions and dialogues, and joint projects with local and international groups.

Intellectual snobbery among research institutions is not new and it appears that Ikim, as a relatively new kid on the block, is being made to feel the heat.

It is probable that Ikim is a victim of sorts to the tendency - among certain Muslim groups - of professing to be truer in faith than the other, or what is known as the holier-than-thou attitude.

But Ikim certainly cannot afford to ignore peer comment about its perceived bondage to the Government's point-of-view, about its quality of research and writing or its inability to attract figures of intellectual repute to its fold if it wishes to hold high its head in the long term.

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