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Is an Islamic State possible?

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IS Malaysia heading towards an Islamic State with a Constitution based on the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet and the imposition of hudud and syariah laws as articulated by Pas?

Is the green tide of Islamisation sweeping through the country? Do the results of the 1999 general election suggest that?

Let's consider some perspectives in trying to answer these questions.

Pas retained Kelantan, captured Terengganu and quadrupled its representation in Parliament, not because Malaysians or even most of the Malays who voted for the opposition front desire an Islamic State as articulated by Pas.

What Pas has gained is largely protest votes brought about by disaffection with Umno, rather than affection for Pas.

Just four years ago, when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was at the peak of his popularity and the country was engulfed by a sense of national well-being and national unity and pride as it reached new heights of economic success, the Barisan Nasional won a thumping victory at the polls, winning a record 65 per cent of the popular vote.

There is therefore no certainty that the green tide will inevitably turn into a green flood.

After all, it has taken the current Pas leadership of the ulama, installed in 1982, nearly 18 long years to reach this point.

And it was, ultimately the internal Umno politics that turned the tide.

Similarly in 1990, Pas recaptured Kelantan after 12 years of Barisan Nasional rule because of the split in Umno and the alliance between Pas and Tengku Razaleigh's Semangat 46.

This indicates that Pas is able to make inroads into the Umno vote bank only when Umno is in crisis.

As Umno's main rival for the hearts and minds of the Malays, Pas has been the main beneficiary of Malay disaffection caused by each Umno crisis.

In the 1999 election, the tide turned against Umno for several reasons.

Umno lost the support of the Islamist constituency of young educated Malays engulfed by the worldwide Islamic resurgence.

Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's ouster from government and Umno was seen to be the reason for the disintegration of the Islamist youth constituency he so assiduously cultivated as his political base. Some say it was to Pas' advantage.

The irony is Dr Mahathir brought Anwar into Umno in a stunning political coup in 1983, as Umno's antidote to Pas and its promise to create an Islamic State which will be led by the ulama.

Seventeen years later, Anwar became Umno's own poisoned chalice. Anwar was perceived by many as the charismatic leader of the Islamic revival movement in Malaysia.

This movement succeeded in attracting young, educated Malays who adopted a more Islamic way of life, based on a return to the Qur'an and Sunnah.

The combination of these young, educated Islamist Malays as represented by reform movements such as Abim (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia) and Jim (Jama'ah Islah Malaysia) together with the traditional Pas support found in the northern Malay States was potent enough to give Pas its unprecedented victory in terms of number of seats and share of the popular vote.

MANY Malaysians are alarmed by the Pas victory and the prospect of increased battle for Malay votes is now reduced to a contest between Islam and secularism.

Many fear that Umno will try to "out-Islam" PAS in trying to win back the Malay support.

A closer analysis of these issues suggest otherwise.

Do the election results suggest this is the end of the modernisation agenda for Malays?

Umno's loss of support in particular among urban Malays, both among professionals and working class, (especially in the Klang Valley and the big towns) reflect growing Malay disenchantment with the way things are, rather than a demand for an Islamic State.

The litany of issues have been listed before: the independence of the judiciary, the rule of law, the credibility of the mainstream Press, police abuse and misuse of power, the tangled web of business and politics, the government's identification with big business at the expense of the environment and community interests ...

This is not to say that the Chinese voters and others do not care about these issues. They do.

But for most of them the opposition front was not really a viable or sustainable alternative.

Knowing that Pas would be the main beneficiary of a vote for the opposition, the Chinese flocked to the tried and tested Barisan Nasional.

For many Malays, however, a vote for the opposition was still a vote for Malay political dominance, whether led by Pas or Keadilan.

It was therefore easier for Malay voters to decide on issues of justice and rights, rather than adhere to party loyalty or vote according to ethnicity.

Now that the votes have been counted, what is the message the Malays are sending to Umno? One message is that a full stomach is no longer enough.

The Malay urban middle class wants peace, stability and prosperity.

But they also want a clean, efficient and trustworthy government, as promised by the Barisan Nasional in the 1982 election.

There is palpable demand for greater transparency and accountability, independence of the judiciary, a free and responsible Press, a more participatory and open political system, and that the intricate web of business and politics be untangled.

In short, the Malaysian electorate wants to see change in the way this country is governed, how the law is applied, how politics is conducted and how business is run.

The election results should not be regarded as a vote for an Islamic State or a vote against development so that the clock can be turned back and all of Malaysia can be like Kelantan.

It is not a rejection of Dr Mahathir's modernisation agenda or his vision, but a rejection of the way it has been implemented and its subsequent cost to the country's democratic institutions, traditional values, community interests, and the environment.

The perceived mishandling of Anwar's case by vital institutions of democratic governance galvanised the public against Umno.

And, the judgement will be harsher in five years time when more than a million new voters become eligible to vote and will exercise that right in a much more politically conscious environment.

The challenge then is for Umno to go back to the drawing board.

It needs to reinvent and rejuvenate itself and to draw up a new contract with the electorate.

Umno must respond to the changing demands and priorities of a well-educated, critical, politically conscious, internet-savvy, upwardly

mobile, younger generation of Malays, spawned by the success of the New Economic Policy.

Umno needs young, well-educated Malays who are able to reconcile the demands of modernisation, industrialisation and democratisation with the competing demands of tradition, religion, and communitarianism.

Perhaps the past can offer some pointers to Umno today.

In the 1960s, Tun Abdul Razak consciously wooed intelligent, confident, articulate university-educated Malays to join Umno.

The Malays he sought were those who could speak both Bahasa Malaysia and English well, were comfortable in the company of non-Malays and foreigners alike, and who had the courage to stand up and speak out on issues.

This was how the Musa Hitams and Tengku Razaleighs of Umno were identified and promoted in Umno and in the government hierarchy.

They became the Young Turks of Umno.

Led by Dr Mahathir, they were at the forefront in rejuvenating Umno following the 1969 election debacle.

As it enters the new millennium, Umno needs to redraw its vision to serve the interest of the Malays, Islam and a multi-racial Malaysia.

And it needs to identify the talent that can articulate and implement this vision.

If this Umno-led government can meet the changing demands and concerns of the electorate, then the green tide of Pas will not engulf the whole country.

Pas' vision of an obscurantist Islam is unlikely to deliver the demand for prosperity and stability nor meet the demands of industrialisation and modernisation in a multi-racial and multi-religious society.

Neither can Pas deliver on the public yearning for more social freedoms in general and the women's demand for equality and justice, in particular.

However, the reality of governance and the desire to remain in power could push Pas to the middle ground.

Furthermore, the younger generation of Pas members, many of whom are professionals, could pressure the party to moderate its Islam.

If this were to happen, then a viable two-party system could evolve in Malaysia.

But given the current Pas leadership and the record of its pronouncements, the prospects of this happening are dim.

Will Umno try to "out-Islam" Pas? This is really not an issue.

Umno can never "out-Islam" Pas and win diehard Pas supporters who believe they will go to hell if they vote for any other party but Pas.

So why would Umno even bother?

If Umno tries to do this, it will lose the support of its traditional supporters.

It will lose the support of the Chinese and Indians as well as moderate Malays for whom economic prosperity, political stability, progressive Islamic values, and enriching multi-culturalism are the stuff Malaysia is made of.

Such a move could also alienate the voters of Sabah and Sarawak, for whom an Islamic State is not even in their vocabulary.

"Out-Islaming" Pas is a recipe for Umno's own political oblivion.

Moreover, Umno's leadership does not subscribe to the Islam of Pas.

Dr Mahathir's vision of a progressive Islam has been articulated clearly enough.

His deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, comes with an impeccable Islamic pedigree, both in terms of his family and his education.

Unlike Pas, Abdullah's Islam stands for democratic principles, women's rights, and an Islam that is dynamic and vibrant that can meet the challenges of changing time and circumstances through the process of

ijtihad (reinterpretation through human reasoning on the basis of the texts).

He does not subscribe to the taqlid (blind imitation) of Pas.

Will it be a battle between Islam and secularism?

This question ignores the fact that Umno's struggle since its founding in 1946 has always been based on race, religion and nation.

Umno cannot ignore the importance of Islam or the relevance of Islam to public life.

Umno leaders have always contended that it is not necessary to create an Islamic state for the government and the people to be Islamic.

This view is also shared by Islamic leaders in Indonesia, including the new President, Abdurrahman Wahid and the Speaker of the Consultative Assembly, Amien Rais.

The government's Islamisation policy in the 1980s therefore is an attempt to instil Islamic values and principles that are universal and acceptable to all in the policies and administration of government.

Government policies such as to live in peace and cooperate with the other races, to eradicate poverty, to develop and modernise the country, to build schools, hospitals, roads and highways are activities that enhance the goals of Islam.

They do not have to have an Islamic label before such projects are deemed Islamic, as Anwar Ibrahim himself used to say.

Thus, developments in the 1980s culminated in the 1990s in a Malaysian society that is far more Islamic than ever before.

The Islamisation policy gave the religious authority new powers and roles and expanded their influence on society and government.

Islamist groups committed to greater Islamisation of society expanded their influence by establishing more and more of their own alternative Islamic schools, medical clinics and other social institutions.

Furthermore in 1990, Pas gained control of Kelantan and launched an intensive and extensive campaign to support its call for the establishment of an Islamic State and imposition of syariah law.

In the deep rural villages, it declared this government as a government of infidels for co-operating with non-Muslims.

It declared the Constitution as un-Islamic as it was formulated by non-Muslims.

Therefore, this Umno-led government was un-Islamic and illegitimate.

By the 1999 general election, all it needed was the Anwar Ibrahim crisis to turn the tide against Umno.

Where Umno went wrong is in the machinery it depended on to deliver its message on Islam and mobilise support.

First, it depended too much on Anwar and the Abim machinery to deliver the support of the Islamist youth in the country.

Anwar's charisma and credibility as a leader of the Islamist movement persuaded students in the universities and members of the various Islamist groups to support Umno.

When Anwar was sacked, this support base turned against the government and became the core of Keadilan.

They combined forces with rival Pas and its ally, the university-based against Umno.

Second, the government's own Islamic Affairs Department (the former Pusat Islam, now renamed Jakim - Jabatan Kemajuan Agama Islam Malaysia) and the State-level Islamic Departments are dominated by traditionalist ulama.

Most of these ulama, certainly at the personal level, if not at the official level, do not share Dr Mahathir's progressive vision of Islam.

In fact, there is little to differentiate between the government's ulama

and the Pas ulama.

These ulama wield tremendous influence throughout society as they conduct religious classes in government offices, at mosques and surau, in public talks over radio and television, in ceramah in private homes and most importantly in the education of young minds in schools and universities.

Such output, churned out year after year, serves as fresh fodder inclined more towards an Islam as represented by Pas, but delivered via the government machinery.

One of the concerns of the non-Malays with the rise of Islam is the accompanying intolerance and segregation.

The objection of Malay university students to the policy of room-sharing with non-Muslims is only one recent example.

The government needs to overhaul its system of religious education to ensure that the Islam propagated at the popular level is progressive.

If the Government wants a new generation of ulama who are open-minded, it has to be more discriminating about how Islam is taught in this country and by whom, and where it sends its students to study Islam overseas.

As Malaysians and Muslims living in a modern, multi-ethnic society, the challenge before us is to debate and discuss this issue.

What Islam, whose Islam is the right Islam for this country.

Only after a considered debate, as well as through an open and accountable legislative process should this be resolved.

Matters of religion should not be decided at a closed door meeting of like-minded ulama who then declare their decision cannot be challenged and pronounce those who challenge it as questioning the word of Allah.

They have, in effect, elevated themselves to the infallibility of Allah.

However, most Muslims are not used to openly discussing Islam and get upset with differences of opinion.

At a recent seminar on Principles of an Islamic State in a Multi-Racial Society organised by Ikim (Institute Kefahaman Islam Malaysia), some participants were upset that the two main speakers held diametrically opposing views on the death penalty for apostasy.

Muslims in Malaysia must be educated that the history of Islamic thought and civilisation is replete with differences on key Islamic doctrines.

For example, many leading Islamic scholars have opposed the death penalty as punishment for apostasy - from Ibrahim ak-Nakha'i and Sufyan al-Thawei, two leading jurists of the eighth century, to Dr Mohammed Sayed Tantawi, the current Sheikh of al-Azhar University.

And yet, Pas chooses to adopt the most extreme and intolerant juristic view and demands the death penalty for apostasy.

Pas regards those who don't share that view as apostates or are anti-Islam.

In trying to reassure non-Muslims, Hadi Awang, the newly appointed Terengganu Menteri Besar, said there is nothing for non-Muslims to worry about because this was a problem involving only Muslims.

But Hadi, who is the chief proponent of hudud laws and the death penalty for apostasy, forgets this is a multi-racial society where mixed marriages are increasingly common.

Many of those who registered to leave Islam are converts.

They renounced their religion because of divorce, abandonment, or change of heart after conversion as well as for other reasons.

Would the parents and relatives of these converts keep quiet and accept the state sentencing their beloved children to death because they want to return to the bosom of their families?

Why would any right-minded parent allow her children to convert to Islam if a change of religion at a later time would mean mandatory death?

These are realities that have to be taken into consideration in legislating Islam - does the law in the end serve the best interest of society?

The government has for long been under pressure by calls to legislate apostasy.

It is scheduled to table a bill in Parliament that provides for a compulsory rehabilitation process within a time limit for Muslims who choose to leave the religion.

There will be no mandatory death sentence. The constitutional provision of freedom of religion will be upheld.

No action will be taken against those individuals who still choose to leave the religion peacefully after the rehabilitation process.

The rich heritage of jurisprudential tools such as *ijtihad*, *maqasid al-shariah* (the goals of *syariah*-to protect, life, belief, mind, property and progeny), *Istihsan* (the juristic doctrine of preference to ensure harmony between the letter and the spirit of the law) should be used to ensure that the Islamic laws drafted will serve the cause of justice, freedom and equality as insistently enjoined by the Qur'an.

These are the universal values and principles in Islam that remain eternal and that should guide our effort to build a just society within an Islamic framework that reponds to changing times and circumstances.

The debate on the bill will be a major ideological test between the moderate and extreme view of Islam. An open parliamentary debate on this issue will show whether Pas views can stand up to public scrutiny.

For too long, Pas leaders have not been held accountable and answerable for their extremist and intolerant positions on issues.

The failure of the mainstream media to report adequately on Pas activities over the past 20 years meant that Pas had enjoyed a blissful existence to promise heaven on earth and in the hereafter.

Now that Pas is in control of an oil-rich State, and with 27 MPs and the position of opposition leader, Pas will be held accountable for their words and deeds.

Pas will find that the shrill promises and pronouncements it makes to the Malays in the rural villages may not have the same resonance in the halls of Parliament.

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