

Islam's worst enemies are its own followers

Modernisation in a largely Muslim nation like Malaysia is being undermined by ultra-conservative forces

On Politics

By ABDULLAH AHMAD

THE Islamic Foreign Ministers' Conference in Kuala Lumpur — the second time we hosted it — ended last Friday. Opening the conference, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad called on Islamic nations to close ranks, reduce petty conflicts, acquire knowledge via information technology and reallocate resources, otherwise they would fail in fulfilling their destiny as Allah's vice-regents.

The conference made new declarations and elected a new secretary-general. Abdelouahed Bekeziz, another Moroccan. Notwithstanding the many political changes which have taken place, however, the Jeddah-based Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) does not seem to have advanced much.

It is, like the United Nations, short of cash.

The OIC has not been as active or even vocal as many of its members wish it should have been — and could have

been. The OIC is a nonentity, not noticed and, worse, not even listed in any reference book or almanac I have come across. It does seem the OIC, like the Muslims it represents, is its own worst enemy. And the Muslims' worst enemies are themselves.

I agree with Dr Mahathir that the Muslims are far from being brothers (for example, among Umno and Pas members and between Iranians, Iraqis and Kuwaitis). They are more divided than ever and in a few cases at war with each other: that those failing to develop and modernise Muslim nations and to defend the ummah are committing "even greater sins which our personal devotion to the daily rituals of our faith will not absolve".

The enemies and detractors of Islam are not concerned how faithful or Islamic the Muslims are. Because to them they are all Muslims — their enemies, a backward people, unenlightened, cruel, polygamous and potential terrorists

A retired Tan Sri, and a haji to boot, telephoned me to ask: 'Taking it to the extreme, why didn't the enforcement officers arrest some members of the Selangor royalty for similar offences or, for that matter, will they arrest Tok Guru Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz and Tok Guru Haji Hadi Awang when they get down at the KL International Airport or the Subang Airport because they have been on Malaysia Airlines flights which serve liquor and in the airports which serve and sell drinks?'

— and will do their utmost to weaken and in many cases destroy Islamic communities

Kosovo and Chechnya. The demonisation of Muslim minorities continues in nations dominated by non-Muslims.

Modernisation in a largely Muslim nation like Malaysia is being undermined by ultra-conservative forces. Muslim solidarity is broken.

The Federal Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and although Islam is the official religion of the state, everyone is allowed to practise without let and hindrance, in peace and harmony, his own religion.

You would have noticed that we have no pan-Malaysian head of Islam. The Yang di-Pertuan Agong is head of religion only in his home state, in Malacca, Penang, Labuan, Kuala Lumpur, Sabah and Sarawak. Each Ruler is the head of Islam in his state.

As a result coordinating the administration of Islamic matters leaves much to be desired and hence we do not have a Minister of Religion though we have a Minister in the Prime Minister's Department who is in charge of Islamic affairs.

For sure, there is the Rulers' Conference but then as Tun Muhammed Suffian Hashim writes in *An Introduction to the Constitution of Malaysia*, "the conference fixes uniform dates for national religious acts and observances, like the beginning and end of puasa, which was

almost impossible before Merdeka; but the Rulers, having been convinced of the absurdity of, for instance, celebrating Hari Raya on a day different from their fellow Muslims a few yards away in the next state, agreed in the Conference of Rulers to let such matters be decided by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong as their representative."

Islam is essentially a state subject, which means that only states have legislative and executive authority over it. The central or federal government has no authority except in Kuala Lumpur, Labuan, Penang, Malacca, Sarawak and Sabah.

One of the many state powers is the creation and punishment of offences by Muslims against the precepts of Islam and this varies from state to state and thus there is no uniformity in Islamic laws and practices.

With this historical and legal backdrop you will understand better the various actions of the officers of the Selangor Religious Department who raided three outlets serving liquor and detained 31 Muslim patrons on June 10.

Although all charges against the 31 Muslims arrested were later withdrawn by the Selangor Religious Department, it has brought unlimited damage to its reputation. The

enforcement officers, according to Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar, did not fully understand Section 10 of the Selangor Syariah Crime Enactment 1995 relating to insulting Islam by being in premises where alcohol is served.

Those caught under this section are liable to a fine of RM5,000 or three years' jail, or both. This is no laughing matter, it is a serious offence. The 31 Muslims should sue the Selangor Religious Department for wrongful arrest.

A retired Tan Sri, and a haji to boot, telephoned me to ask: "Taking it to the extreme," he demanded, "why didn't the enforcement officers arrest some members of the Selangor royalty for similar offences, or for that matter, will they arrest Tok Guru Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz and Tok Guru Haji Hadi Awang when they get down at the KL International Airport or the Subang Airport (both are in Selangor) because they have been on Malaysia Airlines flights which serve liquor and in the airports which serve and sell drinks?"

According to Tan Sri Musa Hitam, he had met Malays who had talked to him about

Islamic laws and practices, as a result they are neglecting their defences and are not acquiring new skills relevant to the present country. No people, as Dr Mahathir rightly says, can defend themselves if they have to buy their weapons from their enemies.

If what Abu Hassan says is true and he sounds convincing, then the people are in real trouble: giving power to officers who do not know between right or wrong and easily become heady with power.

Education is the best cure for all this. A good Muslim does not drink liquor or gamble. Only bad Muslims accept bribes which many do

migrating because their contention is — I am quoting Musa — "If Umno blunders, the alternative is Pas. The Chinese worry as much as the average young Malay ... they think if Umno blunders and messes things up the country would go the Pas way.

"... I hope this will be used positively by Umno leaders to emphasise the urgency of us putting our act together, so that we can become acceptable again to the Malays and the population.

"In the Umno-Pas rivalry, the tables have been turned: Pas is tempering its fundamentalist message, while Umno suffers a 'persecution complex in its practice of Islam.'" (VOX, June 11)

The Muslims are being subverted and their attention diverted to the un-fundamental aspects of their religion. The Malays and the Muslims have great capacity — indeed special talent and boundless energy — to indulge themselves with the inconsequential rather than the big issues such as illiteracy, economic backwardness, corruption, decadence and low morals.

Too "syok" or obsessed with "splitting hairs" in their open-ended debates regarding Is-

and even more commit adultery, cheat, defame and libel people.

Holier-than-thou Islamists should be taken on study tours to see what is happening in Egypt, the Emirates, Bahrain, Jordan and Morocco. How the Arabs live in their own countries and where the people are nearly all Muslims. Are the Malays trying to be more Arab than the Arabs themselves? The Arabs are opening up and advancing as where we are trying to put the clock back.

On the whole Islam has changed little the inherent behaviour of the majority of Arabs but it has done wonders for good Muslims all over the world who have scrupulously followed Islam in the context of a changed and changing environment. Islam is not a rigid religion; what is unchanging is the divinity, the absolute oneness of Allah (tawahid) and Muhammad was His last Prophet and Messenger.

The wrongful action by officers of the Selangor Religious Department would not have arisen in the first place if they knew the law and were not out to embarrass other Muslims. Islam censures people who humiliate other

“ The Muslims are being subverted and their attention diverted to the un-fundamental aspects of their religion. The Malays and the Muslims have great capacity — indeed special talent and boundless energy — to indulge themselves with the inconsequential rather than the big issues such as economic backwardness, corruption, decadence a

Muslims or even non-Muslim people. It urges persuasion and re-education for those deemed to have strayed. It seems, in this case at least, they have exceeded the bounds of their power and must therefore face consequences should those who were humiliated take legal action against them.

A Mingguan Malaysia columnist has asked Abu Hassan to consider resigning for his failure to control the Selangor Religious Department (July 2). The time has come for a strong leadership to deal with this religious anachronism. A strong hand and new ideas are needed.

Indiscriminate actions are and will be taken in future by

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supporters of Pas in government service to undermine and even challenge the moderate Umno-led state governments. This is the impact of the rise of Islamic conservatism, even extremism, which is harming our multi-racial society.

Pas not only condoned the raid, it also encouraged the actions in the name of its politicised Islam. This can be the beginning of religious tyranny. What is next? Is this the forerunner of Pas-Wahabism - the literal belief in Islam and an Islamic nation based on syariah law exclusively? Must I be subjected to only orthodox views?

Islam is about progress; it was and is the catalyst to achieve independence from colonial rule and to preserve it from neo-colonialism and exploitative globalisation. From the time of Prophet Muhammad, social reform via the enunciation of moral principles of legal enactments formed part of the central core of Islam. The reform activity of Islam was concentrated on the social institutions of family and slavery.

This was, I need to emphasise, one of the early reform activities of the Messenger. This should always be

the spirit and elan of Islamic legislation for a modern Muslim society in the multi-racial and multi-religious situation we inherited.

Are these people better Muslims than the rest of us? Of course, not. I think I am a devout Muslim who avoids evil as much as I can resist it, and tries to do good whenever I can. I am not infallible. I am against any indiscriminate use or abuse of power by overzealous officers or by anyone. Although the extremist Islamists will accuse all who do not agree with them being anti-Islam, no Muslim person for sure is against his religion.

Unless the Government does something quickly, it is not going to be good for a harmonious social environment and nation building. What Nik Aziz suggested is exactly what the British colonialists did to us of which we are still suffering to this day - "divide and rule" or separate the nation into groups, pitting one against the other. The DAP, Pas' ally, has condemned the arrest. But it does not know the worst is yet to come if Pas captures the central government.

Pas not only wants the likes of the Damansara Utama raids to continue but it also desires to introduce Hudud Law.

The future is not bright for Malays if they are seriously taken in by the form of Islam rather than its substance. We must take a further leap and enunciate the principle of a reinterpretation of Islam in the light of the advancement of science and technology. The renowned and great Islamic authority - Ibn Arabi - said that observation and reasoning were the foundation for acquiring knowledge. What are the Malays doing?

The Malays, in the main, are finding fault with everyone except themselves and wallowing in self-pity. Yusof Al-Qardawi, for instance, has said that Hudud Law was not the priority in the Muslim agenda. Getting the Muslims to be economically and politically powerful is.

Be tolerant, understanding and acquire all the skills to be better Muslims. Enhancing Islam and understand it, and not Pas' political Islam, is the real jihad.