

30/07/2000

Extremist groups look to Indonesia for role models

Shamsul Akmar

SLIGHTLY over a month ago, a vigilante group, calling itself the Laskar Pembela Islam (LPI - Defenders of Islam Army) attacked Kafe Jimbani, a pub in the illustrious Kemang area in Jakarta.

They did not hurt any of the patrons but destroyed liquor signboards and poured out barrels of beer from the joint.

LPI's parent body the Front Pembela Islam (FPI - Defenders of Islam Front) defended the action saying that it should serve as a warning to all owners of entertainment outlets against promoting vices to Muslims.

FPI chairman Al Habib Muhammad Rizieq, in an interview with a local publication, had this to say:

"We are not a sectarian movement. We are a movement concerned with the decaying morals of the citizenry.

"We have three demands.

"First, all advertisements which promote vice must be totally stopped.

"Two, places which are clearly vice dens must be closed down and thirdly, cafes which are used for drugs transactions must be closed down too.

"FPI will not disturb healthy cafes which only serve soft drinks, tea, coffee and halal stuff.

"It is in fact a sin for us to disturb these cafes."

President Abdurrahman Wahid a.k.a Gus Dur, when reacting to the report of the attack on Kafe Jimbani, said:

"What is this about a group wanting places selling liquor to be closed down.

"This is not an Islamic State."

Muhammad then chastised Abdurrahman, saying while the fact that Indonesia not being an Islamic State may be true, but it is also not a Satanic nation.

The conflict between the moderate Muslims and the militants in Indonesia is actually more real than in Malaysia.

It must be an eerie feeling for the republic's moderates to hear FPI claiming to have 15 million members of which some seven million are militants.

The FPI also admits that it provides martial arts training for its members to prepare themselves for their tasks but denied any military training being provided.

Comparatively, Indonesia has a Muslim population of which 80 per cent are Muslims but its constitution does not insist on any race to embrace the religion, unlike in Malaysia.

Back home, Malaysia may only have a 50 per cent Muslim population but its constitution provides that all those born a Malay will automatically become a Muslim.

In Malaysia, any attempt to give up the religion will result in a person being charged by the religious authorities.

Apart from that, the religious authorities are empowered to arrest Malays indulging in vices especially liquor and sex-related offences.

While there are differences in terms of constitutional provisions of Islam between the two countries, the attack on Kafe Jimbani is akin, though not necessarily equal, to the shooting of the brewery in Shah Alam by the Al-Ma'unah group.

If the FPI through its LPI wing wants to cleanse up Indonesia of immoral

activities without specifying that its ultimate objective is to set up an Islamic State, the Al-Ma'unah's objective is clearly spelt out - it wants to set up an Islamic State through armed revolution.

Against these backdrop, it is actually quite interesting to see the twist in the manner how these two militant groups react to their religious convictions.

In the case of the FPI, the fact that Indonesia does not have religious authorities as moral guardians to Muslims in the country, has made the group a self-appointed authority.

Whereas, in the case of Al-Ma'unah and other groupings in Malaysia which claim to be religious-based, their objectives tend to go beyond the role of being a moral guardian to the faith of the Malay Muslims.

To them, having the faith constitutionalised and the existence of religious authorities to safeguard the morality of the Malays is insufficient.

In short, to these groups, only the setting up of a formal Islamic State with all the syariah laws, including the hudud (Islamic penal code) in force, can be the salvation of the Malays.

Ironically, Indonesia which have an 80 per cent Muslim population and that they embraced and held on to the faith by choice, do not believe that the setting up of an Islamic State is possible.

However, in Malaysia, where the Malay Muslim population is slightly over 50 per cent, the advocates believe the setting up an Islamic State is possible and had become a potent tool to secure votes from the community.

In addition, as pointed earlier, Islam is constitutionalised in Malaysia making it difficult to separate the true believers and those who embrace it without having a choice to do otherwise.

On this score, by comparison, it should be easier for an Islamic State to be set up in Indonesia than Malaysia but as it turned out, Islamic advocates in the former did not seem to focus on that while in the latter, that is the ultimate objective.

Such facts may not be of essence for the advocates of Islamic State in Malaysia as to them, faith is not something to reason but to obey.

At the same time, there are contradictions among the Islamists in Malaysia when it comes to their support for their counterparts in Indonesia.

When Abdurrahman managed to assume the presidency, Pas and other religious groups in Malaysia hailed his ascension as a victory for Islam.

To them, such a situation will then spillover to Malaysia and the nation will be ruled not only by a Muslim, but a Muslim of their character.

At that time, not one gave any regard to the fact that Abdurrahman is a believer in a secular system and a strong advocate of the Panca Sila, the basic tenets of the Indonesian constitution which separates religion from politics.

Only after Abdurrahman started to talk about having trade ties with Israel and his proposal to lift the ban on communism, did the Islamists in Malaysia started backtracking in their exuberance about his appointment.

Now that Abdurrahman is no more a good term of reference for the Malaysian Islamists to relate changes in Indonesia to Malaysia's, one can't help but wonder who could be their new role model.

Such thoughts arise from the fact that many a Malay Muslim seems to have the need to want to follow what their Indonesian brethren do, regardless whether the circumstances are poles apart.

But it can't be Amien Rais, the leader of the Muhammadiyah and the champion of Indonesian reformasi as he is taken as an ambitious politician who can change his colour every other day to suit his political ends.

Neither can it be Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri as she does not

wear the tudung and alleged as having too much Hindu influence.

Golkar chairman Akbar Tanjung will not qualify as he is part of Suharto's Orde Baru (New Order) and never considered an Islamist.

With the dearth of any Indonesian Muslim leader as a potential "tie-up" for the Malaysian Islamists, it will probably pave the way for them to be comfortable enough in their own existence.

The Malay nationalists had gone through that cycle in the past when they took Soekarno as their role model and that ceased after the era of Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, Tun Hussein Onn and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Probably the Malaysian Islamists too have completed their cycle like the nationalists.

Then again, it is quite possible that the Malaysian Islamists, in their dire need for an Indonesian role model, are prepared to even adopt the likes of the FPI and LPI without giving thoughts to the contrasting existence.

After all, the Al-Ma'unah has given the early warnings. And if the Islamists are truly treading that path, then woe betide all.

(END)