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## Facing militant Islamic orthodoxy in Malaysia

Abdullah Ahmad

THIS thesis must be understood if anyone wants to understand the rise of radical Islam in Malaysia - that in any Islamic religious, or religious-based or named institution, the thrust of trendy politics among the students and teacher is very similar to the political beliefs of the ulama.

It is a fact. Whether it is compatible or incompatible with Islam is another story altogether. We are discussing Islam which has been systematically and dangerously politicised by Umno's main opponent - some claim the ruling party's alternative one day - Pas.

The religious teachers who call themselves ulama or "intellectuals" have always exerted considerable pressure and continue to do so on the majority of pupils, students, undergraduates and even post-graduates.

During the early days of independence the ulama could not make much headway; Umno was solid, an impregnable fortress. The popular tide of the so-called politicised Islamic renaissance began in the early Eighties and the Nineties; almost unabated for nearly 16 years. During this period many Malays became born-again Muslims, and those - although not fully "Islamised" - as a result of strong peer pressure did not resist. They enjoyed a sense of political Islamic brotherhood and solidarity with the wealthy and influential avant garde Polo or Armani-clothed Islamic leadership - which was anyway slated to take over the government some day.

The political phenomenon was strikingly intimidating as it was remarkable. Opposition to and warnings against cadres of the elite group - codenamed "Elrais" in some quarters - found themselves in peril, removed, sidelined and, in the case of one or two, "exiled".

It was an express gravy train which many wanted to be on, but only the "tested 1,000 apostles" of the "Elrais" - the Leader or Sheikh - were chosen. With powerful international connections it perplexes me why they failed. The unfinished agenda of politicised Islam is being taken over by Pas and the troubled Keadilan.

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."

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. The Ruler is the head of Islam in his state.

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 Conference of Rulers to let such matters be decided by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong as their representative."

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 hence 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 the three outlets serving liquor and detained 31 Muslim patrons on June 10.

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

Those caught under this section are liable to a fine of RM5,000 or three year's 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 offence, 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?"

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 Islamic laws and practices they are, as a and as a result, they are neglecting their defences and not acquiring new skills relevant to the present country.

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 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, Baharin, 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 Arabs than the Arabs themselves? The Arabs are opening - up and advancing whereas 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 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 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 - Wahabinism - the literal belief in Islam and an Islamic nation based on the syariah exclusively?

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.

This should always be the spirit and elan of Islamic legislation for a modern Muslim society in a 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 of being anti-Islam, no Muslim person for sure is against his religion.

What Nik Aziz suggested is exactly what the British colonialists did to us which we are still suffering to this day - divide and rule, or separate the nation into groups pitting one against the other, which is not good for a harmonious social environment and nation building.

The DAP, Pas' ally, has condemned the arrests. But it does not know the worst is yet to come if Pas captures the central government. Pas not only wants the likes of Damansara Utama raids to continue but it also desires to introduce the Hudud.

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 a 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.

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