

07/01/2000

Much about Arqam remains untold

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THE number one hostelry in the Philippine capital is Manila Hotel. It is where visiting VIPs normally stay. It was where the late General Douglas MacArthur, American Commander-in-Chief in the Pacific during World War II, resided before becoming the American viceroy in Tokyo after the Japanese surrender.

Time marches on, so the cliché goes. On March 27, 1994, Al-Arqam leader, Ashaari Muhammad, arrived at the hotel with an entourage of 40 people, all wearing green robes and turbans. During their stay there, meetings were held with several Philippine corporate and business leaders and Congressmen. Among others who came a-calling was the Sulu Sultan in a vain bid to press his Sabah claim. "Spiritual leader asked to mediate Sabah dispute," the Manila Standard headline blared.

The story is told by Zabidi Mohamed, former magistrate and legal adviser of Arqam in his book titled in both Malay and English Arqam tersungkur dipintu syurga: The untold truth and inside story of Al-Arqam and ISA (Detention without trial).

Zabidi himself was invited by several Philippine Congressmen to give a talk at the Manila Breakfast Club.

At the time Arqam was 26 years old, and mentioned in the brochure and company profile distributed in Manila was a list of companies the movement owned. It had factories making ketchup and soap, mini-markets, a chain of retail stores, tailor shops, restaurants, a publishing company and also a maternity hospital.

The movement had more than 10,000 members and 44 communes throughout Malaysia. There were branches in Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Brunei, Jordan and Egypt. Among its members were lawyers, engineers and university undergraduates. So it was that the opening chapter was titled "The unsinkable ship".

The reason for the visit to Manila was explained thus: "According to a message from the Prophet the Philippine soil is the last to be visited by Abuya ("Our father", the name used by followers) before the emergence of Daulah Islamiah in Malaysia. Abuya will become Malaysian Prime Minister after (Datuk Seri) Dr Mahathir..."

Ashaari flew to his base in Northern Thailand on June 24 after his stay in Manila. Described at length then was the fateful meeting at a hotel in Subang Jaya between other Arqam leaders and a police team led by Special Branch director, Datuk (now Tan Sri) Norian Mai, now Inspector-General of Police. What transpired was later communicated by telephone to Ashaari.

On Sept 2, Ashaari was deported by Thai authorities and subsequently detained by Malaysian police under the Internal Security Act. Detained later was his wife Khadijah Aam and other leaders of the movement, including Zabidi himself and Khairil Anuar Ujang, former Sessions Court judge, and also legal adviser to Arqam.

The denouement came barely two months later on Oct 20 when Ashaari confessed in a ceremony at the National Mosque that he had strayed from the true path of Islam. Quote: "What was peripheral and external I had taken as a principle and the thrust of my struggle."

Knowledge of Islam should have been pursued on the basis of four principles - the Quran, hadith (prophetic traditions), ijma' (consensus among the ulamas) and qiyas (analogy) - but this was not done.

So it was that Ashaari and members of Arqam had been steadfast in

believing that one Sheikh as-Suhaimi who died many years back was still alive and would re-appear as the Imam Mahdi.

Ashaari admitted that the Quran had not specified who is Imam Mahdi. Nor was the name mentioned in the hadiths and there was no consensus among ulamas on the matter. Asked about his repeated claims to have had conversations with the Prophet, Ashaari replied: "It is difficult to verify its veracity because Satan can mislead us."

Some 18 months later several Arqam leaders were detained again for attempting to revive the movement. Zabidi noted with surprise that among those arrested was a woman by the name of Azura. "Why was she detained? She is not even a leader of the women's wing in Arqam," he had asked then.

Published in Al-Islam in its August 1996 issue was Azura's statement claiming to have been the spiritual medium in the dialogues between Ashaari and the Prophet.

Zabidi dwells on the consequence of fanatical loyalty to a leader when he recalled a special prayer session (sembahyang hajat) conducted on June 30, 1994, by Arqam members. Sought was God's intercession in order to rebut accusations that had been made against the movement. His Commandment was sought within three months!

In the event, according to Zabidi, the decisions came swiftly enough. On July 2, Ashaari and his entourage were banned from entering Singapore and forced to return to Thailand.

On Aug 5, the Fatwa Council declared the teachings of the movement to be against Islam followed by a ban two weeks later. On Sept 2, Ashaari himself was detained. Zabidi writes: "The gate of heaven which we had sought all this while is actually the gate of hell."

Proved yet again from the story by Zabidi is how the name of Imam Mahdi continues to mystify, intrigue and beguile some Muslims. Theirs is the belief that he would appear at the end of history to wage a jihad in order to establish total justice and equality.

Sheikh as-Suhaimi, regarded by some as the Imam Mahdi, died in Klang in 1925 but followers believe that he is still alive, biding his time for the resurrection at a sanctuary in Indonesia.

Published some seven years ago was a book titled An Islamic Approach to Rural Development by Dr Muhammad Syukri Salleh from Universiti Sains Malaysia. Originally his doctoral thesis submitted to Oxford University, the book was an investigation into the Islamic grassroots approach to rural development "initiated and practised" by Arqam.

Much about the movement is yet to be explained, including the 800-page statement said to have been written by Ashaari. Now in Rawang under the restricted residence ordinance, he is active in business minus the hype and publicity associated with Arqam's activities in the past.

The story has not ended.

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