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No room for politics of hate

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THE ancient rivalry between Islam and Christianity in Europe and the Middle-East in the mediaeval period, later political and economic competition (with the Ottoman Empire), anti-colonial struggle (in Egypt, Indonesia, Sudan and others) and the emergence of militant and radical Muslim leaders like Gamal Abdel Nasser, Sukarno, Ayatollah Khomeini, and even the images of the free-spending Brunei and Arab playboys, dictates Western views on Islam.

Those views and antagonisms are also structured predominantly by the erstwhile Middle-East terrorists and latterly by the images of fanatical organisations such as Al-Ma'unah and Pas' incessant demands (as if it is the essence of Islam) to identify the religion and even the state with what women wear and social roles.

It must be repeated that the larger proportion of Muslims in the IT-world today is in fact non-Arab. Most of the ummah are found in Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Iran, Turkey, Bangladesh, China, Malaysia, with minorities all over the world. The Arabs are a minority among the ummah.

Islam should, therefore, rightly be thought of in terms of historical, political, cultural, and social diversity. It is not an exclusive thing, a monolithic unity, except in the language of prayer (Arabic), the articles of faith, including the pilgrimage to Mecca, at least once in a lifetime and only if economic circumstances permit.

Islam in Malaysia should, therefore, interact with non-Islamic factors in varied ways because we are a melting pot. Agreed Islam will always play a major role, but that does not mean it must dominate other religions and cultures.

What's very dangerous is that Pas wants to establish a puritanical Islamic nation.

All must accept the fact that the majority race is divided as it has never been before. I do not want to argue about theories or the causes (there are many); I just want to stress it is a fact, not fiction.

Eight months have lapsed since the general election, but even after two by-elections (both won by Barisan Nasional), the Malay divide and indeed racial polarisation are spreading and widening.

The disgraceful heists at two Askar Wataniah camps in Grik, the torture and murder of two non-Muslim security forces personnel in Sauk and the spate of robberies and other crimes, power failure whenever there is a thunderstorm and the occasional breakdown of water supply and other services, which the public pays for, I must say, are not helping the Government or Umno's confidence building efforts.

What happens on the ground, I'm afraid, is not like what some leaders say and some even boast. We must not use Indonesia, the sub-continent and the Philippines as our benchmark.

Of course, even simpletons know we are better, but the question is how we compare with Singapore and Japan.

My schoolmate at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK), Umno secretary-general and Minister of Information Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob told me about how the people are "cemoh or have reached the end of their tether with a particular politician".

The Pas challenge is very real; never before has it been so significant a player. Its influence is growing because many Malays, as Khalil has sincerely stated, were and are fed up with the obvious culprits who remain

protected and unpunished.

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad always says - what is the use of winning posts in Umno if the party loses in the next general election?

And I am stating this, not that I approve of Pas, but people are veering towards it because they have become so disenchanting and disillusioned with several Umno leaders, especially in the north-eastern states and even on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia.

The verdict of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's long sodomy trial on Friday - whichever way the judge decides - can spark trouble. It is reassuring to know that the police have said they will be able to maintain peace and security.

An excessive reaction to either: conviction or acquittal can ignite trouble.

The Opposition's latent leaders are tempting their fanatical followers to threaten the delicately balanced racial interests, which have been deftly maintained since 1955 through bargaining and compromise among the leaders, first of the Alliance and now the Barisan Nasional.

While Umno, the lead party in the ruling BN, appears to be on the defensive, Pas, the major constituent in the opposition front, seems possessed by a gung-ho attitude.

Islam commands great respect from the Malays and Muslim bumiputeras. Umno puts greater emphasis on fardhu kifayah, or services to the community, besides faith and routine rituals, whereas Pas preaches with considerable success and appeal by harping on enhancing punishment for khalwat (close proximity between sexes), drinking, adultery, gambling, eating in non-halal restaurants, dancing and not wearing scarves.

Pas wants to turn multi-religious Malaysia into a puritanical theocratic nation. Umno is for multi-racial politics and progress. Pas has shifted from being a rural Malay-centric party to militant Islamic politics following other militant Muslim nations.

This is what Malay politics is all about today. Pas now has 27 MPs and it controls the Kelantan and Terengganu State Governments. Their Menteri Besar are both conservative theologians and preachers.

The stiff competition to win the bumiputera electorate has been entered in earnest even though the 11th general election is 52 months away.

Pas is in a state of euphoria. Be that as it may, I maintain Pas remains and will always remain an extremist Malay-centric party which exploits Islam to win power.

The Islamists' worst enemies are (fortunately) themselves. They insist and will fight to retain the word "Islam" in the party's name. The Government has been thinking for a long time about disallowing the word "Islam" to be used by a political party because it has caused the present serious Malay divide.

The Government should have acted firmly years ago, but it did not because it was, as always, overconfident.

There is no doubt now and in future that Pas is the greatest challenge Umno must confront. If Pas is clever enough, it must focus less on Islam and instead venture into issues beyond the Islamic confine.

In October 1990, 20 Islamic fanatics, dressed in white robes and brandishing swords, attacked the Batu Pahat police station. Like in Memali and the Al Ma'unah fanatics, they also had believed they were kebal or invulnerable.

All did what they did in the name of political Islam, anticipating that their action would precipitate an Islamic fundamentalist revolution and after the victory a puritanical Islamic government would rule.

As Pas faces the challenge of the blistering realities of Malaysian

politics, Umno must relaunch a bold plan to win back the hearts and minds of those who have become disillusioned and disenchanted and to capture the imagination and expectations of the youth.

It is purgatory listening to Pas' pronouncements and edicts. I say that only in fairy tales virtue, as claimed by Pas, is always rewarded. In real life, unfortunately, it very often isn't.

I wonder how long this potentially explosive mix of religion and politics articulated by Pas will be tolerated by the Government and the silent majority.

Must we wait until the politics of hate consumes us all?

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