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Rulers' role in religious conflicts

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THE majestic Istana Iskandariah perched atop Bukit Chandan in Kuala Kangsar seems to be standing vigil, looking after the nearby Ubudiah Mosque, an architectural wonder.

The closeness of the two buildings is not by chance but by design - a reflection of the symbiotic relations enjoyed by these institutions since days of past.

Post-independence had further strengthened the relations, from merely a cultural legacy to a constitutionally acknowledged existence.

In so far as the nation is concerned, Islamic religious affairs are under the purview of the Malay Rulers.

They are the heads of the religion in their respective States.

As such, it is not surprising when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad broached the subject on how the Rulers could play a role in the current religious conflicts which had affected the unity of the Malays. And it is equally not surprising when a reader wrote to the Mingguan Malaysia raising the same issue.

He even went further to question if the role of the Malay Rulers in Islamic matters was confined to determining whether the moon had been sighted for Ramadan (the start of the fasting month) or Syawal (Hari Raya Aidil Fitri).

No one can actually say which fatwa or religious decree is right or should be followed, be it those coming from the religious authorities or ulamak representing independent groups or Pas.

The decree in question ranges from labelling Umno members and Malays supporting the party as infidels, voting for Pas will provide the path to heaven to the right of Pas to use Islam in the party name.

There are of course, other fatwa and issues raised which had further contributed to the protracted battle between the two political parties representing the Malays.

They included the situation of prayers led by two imam representing two political parties and Pas members not allowed to eat the meat of animals slaughtered by Umno members.

However, none of these issues are being addressed by the religious authorities or the Malay Rulers.

And of the issues, it is the question of whether Pas has the right to carry the word Islam in its name which is the reason for the debate.

Detractors will point out that the minute a party incorporates religion in its party name, it inevitably gives it the right to claim to be the representative of the religion and in the case of Pas, Islam.

Advocates of Pas however believe that any political party can adopt a religious tag to its party name.

To them, if the party leaders and supporters lacked the Islamic credentials, no one will take them seriously as a party representing the religion.

Pas supporters have a point here but at the same time, can any political party stake a claim to represent the religion without the danger of affecting the sanctity of Islam?

These should not be a problem as it is up to the Malay community to evaluate how much more Islamic is Pas compared with other Malay-based political parties.

One can argue that in politics, like in love and war, everything is

fair.

However, this is politics laced with religious convictions in which faith cannot be used or manipulated to serve worldly pursuits.

To make matters worse, who is to say whether Pas has manipulated or used Islam to serve its political end especially when the religious authorities choose to remain silent.

The Malay Rulers and their role in religious affairs and customs have been acknowledged since the colonial period.

Much as the British colonisers had minimised the role of the Rulers in affairs of the States, the Rulers had been given the "proprietaryship" of handling issues pertaining to religion and Malay customs.

On the advent of the much-opposed Malayan Union, the British went one step forward to get the Malay Rulers to sign their consent to the colonialist-usurping concept.

But as time progressed, the Malay Rulers regained their footing in society and were generally accepted by the community as the symbol of Malay supremacy as well as defender of Malay privileges.

The Malay Rulers conference on Thursday is expected to delve into this issue.

It will not be the first time that the Rulers have to deal with predicaments arising from Islamic matters.

When the Al Arqam issue came to the fore in the mid-1990s, the Rulers, using their religious authorities and mufti, collectively issued a decree through the National Fatwa Council declaring the movement deviant.

That made the whole issue clear among the Malays in the country and put an end to a potential conflict between the community and the Al Arqam.

Now, the Malay Rulers are again in the position to play a role in helping the community overcome a divisive situation.

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