

29/06/2000

To forgive is divine?

Shamsul Akmar

FOR officers of the enforcement division of Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor (JAIS - the Selangor Islamic Religious Department), they now epitomise religious contradictions.

On June 11, the officers decided to raid a restaurant in Damansara Utama, one of its normal operations to uphold the sanctity of the religion.

Less than two weeks later, the officers and department are being seen as religious zealots giving Islam a bad name.

As much as the episode is a one off thing, the furore over it has the trappings of turning into a religious conflict heavily laced with political selfishness.

As it is, Pas has already come out openly to defend JAIS.

The DAP, an ally of Pas in the opposition front has, however, joined the chorus of others, ranging from women's groups and government leaders to local entertainer associations to condemn the raid.

The protest is not so much about the raid as about the reasons behind the arrest of the 15 Muslims. The justification given by JAIS for the arrests is that these people were on premises where liquor was being sold.

This is not the first time JAIS' enforcement activities have raised controversy.

Some three years ago, its officers arrested three Malay girls for participating in a beauty contest.

The department was then reprimanded by no less than Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself who described the action as that of "a group of people who allowed a little power to get to their head".

This time around, it was Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who took the department to task for its action.

Somehow or other, Abdullah is treading on "dangerous grounds" for his reprimand.

As it is, Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor has already fired the first salvo, saying that the deputy prime minister had acted in haste by criticising the JAIS officers.

Fadzil is already scoring points with the Islamists by expressing sympathy for the JAIS officers.

It is difficult when dealing with anything done in the name of religion, Islam and other faiths included.

Those working in the name of religion are usually placed on pedestals far above representatives of other entities.

As such, it makes it difficult for other authorities to check on the behaviour of those working to promote religion from being subjected to the possibilities of going against the religion itself.

In short, conflicts between governments and religious authorities have prevailed and will continue to do so.

History has shown how Christians during the Middle Ages had gone through conflicts dubbed by scholars as the battle between the Church and State, in which priests fought against kings to secure the power of ruling the nation.

At one stage, papal monarchy was established in Europe in which the pope became the leader in place of the traditional king.

At the same time, there have also been cases in which the State cooperated with the Church to justify the action of the former in pursuing

its political strength.

Such was the inquisition by Isabella which, to cap off the reconquest of Spain from the Muslim Moors, was used against those from faiths other than Christianity.

The later Spanish inquisition, under Charles I and his son Philip II, used the power of the Church to carry out counter-reformation to justify suppression against the Protestants and to strengthen the political will of Catholic leaders.

The point is that all these episodes had allowed the worst act of tyranny to be justified because of the religious cloak they carried.

Of course, it is unfair to equate the JAIS incident to that of the inquisitions.

Yet, the fact remains that actions carried out in the name of religion, no matter how contradictory they may be to the teachings of the religion, had been allowed to pass for fear of being perceived as going against the religion.

Similarly in the case of the JAIS enforcement.

Criticising it has the potential of exposing one to saying something against Islam.

As it is, certain quarters are already trying to use the issue of morality as a weapon to justify the enforcement measure.

In short, the morality of those arrested is being put to question. This has the potential of turning the whole issue against Abdullah and those who opposed the raid.

If these quarters can convince the Malays that those arrested were of lesser morals, then the JAIS officers will be deemed as heroes for being brave to fight against immorality among Muslims.

Then the whole issue will definitely deviate from the original track.

The fact of the case is simple - whether or not the JAIS officers had acted beyond the perimeters provided under the state Islamic laws.

Next, can the Malays in the country accept the justifications given by JAIS, that these people were arrested because they were on a premise where liquor was being sold, is truly according to the teachings of Islam?

Yet, given the way the political twist that has been added, there is a strong possibility that quite a number of Malays will be made to believe that the criticisms were against Islam and not against errant officers.

(END)