

Malaysia by any other name ...

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THE challenge has been thrown by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad: show us in writing what an Islamic state under PAS will be like. The Islamist party president Datuk Fadzil Noor has replied that he will submit it (in the form of a memorandum) to the Prime Minister by the end of the year.

PAS, which has been pushing for an Islamic state, has given a hint - that syariah laws would be implemented while secular laws would take a back seat.

But for safe measure, PAS has said that other religions will be allowed to exist and the role of non-Muslims will be defined, taking into account the country's multi-ethnicity.

PAS leaders have repeatedly said Kelantan and Terengganu, both under PAS rule, are examples of what an Islamic state would be like.

It is not going to be easy for PAS. If the party produces a blueprint of an Islamic state ala Afghanistan, then it will lose what's left of its non-Muslim supporters. Even Parti Keadilan Nasional and Parti Rakyat Malaysia would find it hard to defend the party.

If PAS allows the syariah and civil courts to co-exist, as is the case with Kelantan and Terengganu, then it would be no different from the current administrative and judiciary structures set up by the Barisan Nasional government.

Any similarity of the existing structure, which upholds a written federal constitution, would certainly anger and alienate the majority of PAS members who want a theocratic state run by ulamaks.

When Dr Mahathir first said that Malaysia was already an Islamic country, there was a degree of uneasiness among non-Muslims but they were not alarmed.

Logically, Dr Mahathir is right because other countries recognise Malaysia as a progressive Muslim nation. Over 60% of its population is Muslim, the government is headed by a Muslim, the Yang diPertuan Agong is a Muslim and even the Opposition leader is a Muslim.

For non-Muslims, they are more fearful of the Islamic state envisaged by PAS than the statement by Dr Mahathir.

Non-Muslims understand that nothing has changed. Malaysia can be called an "Islamic state" or an "Islamic country" or an "Islamic society" but the fact is that its Constitution assures non-Muslims a place in the country.

As the saying goes, a rose by any other

name is a rose. The Communist Party of China insists that China is still communist but its people have clearly embraced capitalism.

Across the straits in Indonesia, politicians in provinces such as Banten, South Sulawesi and West Sumatra have been calling for the imposition of syariah laws. In a bid to win separatist hearts in the provinces, Islamist parties in Parliament have been backing these provinces.

The two parties in the forefront are the United Development Party and the Crescent Star Party. In some small towns in West Java, local administrations have reportedly begun applying syariah laws informally, including making it mandatory for women to wear headscarves.

The debate over the issue of Malaysia's status, if properly conducted, is certainly healthy as it would give Malaysians of all faiths a chance to discuss the future direction of the country.

Non-Muslims may not fully grasp the meaning of an Islamic nation, but it affects them as citizens. They have as much right to discuss and find out more about such a structure.

In Kelantan and Terengganu, non-Muslims have found their rights infringed by acts such as separating males and females at supermarket counters, the ban on unisex hair salons and

even the ban on the sale of alcohol in Chinese restaurants.

The PAS declaration of *jihad* against the United States and its directive to members to fight alongside the Taliban reflect the party's extremism. Until today, it has yet to explain the alleged involvement of its members and supporters in the militant KMM.

Although temples and churches are allowed in Kelantan and Terengganu, one must point out that freedom of worship is guaranteed under the federal constitution and those states under Barisan Nasional rule allow other religion to flourish.

The government must thus ensure that applications to set up places of worship should not be obstructed by over-zealous officials as that will be contrary to the policy of the ruling government.

When Barisan MPs challenged Fadzil to give a clear definition of what a PAS Islamic state was going to be like, the Opposition leader was lost for words.

Running a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural country like Malaysia is not easy. No one race or group can have its own way. The politics of accommodation and consensus has worked well and that formula has contributed towards making Malaysia a politically and economically stable nation.