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A grey grey matter

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"ATTACK on Islam? I don't know. Maybe, the United States is fed up and is using this as an excuse to satu kali hentam (hit all at once) so that others don't mess with them," says Tan Chee Seng, a 54-year-old butcher.

This is not an isolated opinion. Since the first bombs were dropped on Afghanistan, many Malaysians have expressed this buli-kecil view.

Some say it is because America's ego has been dented badly, that is why it has to retaliate.

"This is the US showing people that they have come out of the tragedy as winners instead of losers," says Syed Dzain Yahya, a 26-year-old operations executive.

Stella Chin, 28, who works with a conservation-related NGO adds, "This whole thing is a pride thing. Whether they lose lives or not does not seem important to them, because they have lost face."

Such views may smack of US-bashing but these are among the considered opinions of ordinary Malaysians interviewed by Life & Times.

It would seem that all the signals and symbols suggest that the Sept 11 attacks and the bombing of Afghanistan are but a clash of civilisations, and Malaysians seem to recognise that the issue is swathed in folds of grey.

"My first reaction is that it is dangerous to call it a clash between the West and Islam. It doesn't help in the long run to oversimplify.

"The Muslims are a broad community, with many different perspectives and the West is also not one monolithic whole," says Tan Soo Inn, 46, a counsellor and freelance writer.

"I can't help but look at US involvement in the Vietnam war. There, they automatically saw it as their lot to defend the French because of that concept of `either you are with us or against us'. This is a very black-and-white perspective of the world that shuts out the complexities. I would shy away from that sort of interpretation. When the diagnosis is wrong, the solutions will also be wrong," she adds.

"I find it hard to believe that the US has a premeditated agenda to destroy Islam. I think they were happy to go on as they were, enjoying the fruits of their new economy. They are a very inward-looking country that is just now painfully discovering that what they do has an impact on others. They have not been sensitive to the results of their action or inaction."

Tan also says the Americans by and large "don't understand why they have enemies. They are generous but insular. Their knowledge of the wider world is very limited. They can't differentiate between Indonesia and Malaysia. So they are very confused why people are angry.

"However, there is a legitimate perception by Muslims that the West is out to get them. They see this in the US support of Israel and they see the US as slow to react when Muslims are in trouble."

Some also feel that the US is selective in their fight to defend the free world.

"Why behave as though they are only after the Taliban when the whole of Afghanistan is the target?" asks Fatimah Zahrah Mohd Dom, 60, a retired primary school principal.

"A clash of civilisations? I don't know. The West - the US and Britain - against Islam? I'm not sure. But their actions certainly don't match their words."

M. Raj, a 21-year-old medical student, says "if the US says this is a fight against terrorism, and yet they ignore acts of terrorism in other nations - like the Irish Republican Army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam - then this not right. "If, after this, they proceed to go after the Hezbollah and ignore the others, then they are not really after terrorists but only the ones who are doing it in the name of Islam."

"This is really just between Osama and the Bush administration," says Maria Ahmad, 31, administration assistant with a multi-national company.

"I don't see the Taliban or Osama as the `real' Islam. They do not represent the true face of Islam," says 25-year-old lawyer Adele John.

"I am a Christian. If these were Christian extremists, I would feel they have given my religion a bad name."

Raj adds, "To me, the Taliban doesn't represent the whole of Afghanistan. And Afghanistan is not a nation of mad fellows, only a small bunch completely throwing the country into chaos. It happens everywhere. Just look at Nazi Germany. It was the party, not the whole country."

Interviewees also stated, strongly, that bloodshed was inexcusable, whatever the grievances.

"You don't have to use terrorism," says Maria.

Nevertheless, some, like Mohd Yasin, 69, believe it is clearly an inevitable clash between the West and Islam.

"This is a war of religions," says the former police officer.

"Afghanistan is a small and weak nation. As fellow Muslims, we must defend our brethren. Even if they are Chinese, they are still our brothers if they are Muslims.

"The US are an arrogant lot. They refuse to listen to the pleas of others. They won't even listen to our Prime Minister. There is this need to show their greatness by snubbing the rest of the world. But deep down they have always been enemies of Islam.

"The conflict in the Arab world is also the work of the Americans. They know that their sophisticated weapons will not destroy Muslims so they provoke us to bicker among ourselves, just like the stupid Arabs are doing now.

"And then they say that anthrax originated from Malaysia! Do we have the technology to create such a weapon? It is their way of making us look bad and also to incite hatred for Muslims."

"There is even talk that the CIA is responsible for the anthrax attacks," says Jimmy Appadurai, an IT consultant.

Others are reluctant to brand this a religious war.

"It'd be difficult to establish if this is a war on Islam. But, in the West, the stereotyping of Muslims and prejudice against Islam is definitely ingrained," says Muhammad Ali Hussein, a 29-year-old MSc student.

R. Ratnam, a Malaysian businessman based in the US, explains why he thinks this has happened.

"Eighty per cent of us are speculators. We decide what others are like before even meeting them.

"Take the American attitude to Islam. Where and how did it start that in Islam, if a Muslim kills, he will be forgiven and honoured by God? This comes from an ignorance of other people's religion.

"We listen to something, and before you know it, everyone believes it. No one says `let's call the imam and find out', and the media doesn't help. PM was 110 per cent right when he said that the American media was propagandist.

Ratnam, 61, also says that it is the American media which is responsible for dictating the attitude of the country.

"Nobody quotes anything, everything is attributed to reliable sources.

Who are these sources?"

"What the media is doing to the American people is EXACTLY what people like Osama do to their followers. They say 'This is what we need, and this is what we'll do to get rid of the undesirables.'

"If you asked Americans, 70 to 80 per cent of what they know about Islam is Louis Farrakhan, which is a more vociferous, seemingly violent kind.

"I don't think we have that level of ignorance in this country; we have far greater knowledge of what's happening in the world. In the US, the world news often consists of two paragraphs on Israel.

"But having said that, there is a deeper split between the Muslims and non-Muslims. You see, even moderates are of the view that they (the WTC attackers) are right."

Even though Malaysians seem to recognise that such issues are far from clear, there are still ripples of anxiety among some people.

"I am worried about how Islam will evolve here," says Chin. "Even among my colleagues, I see how different leaders affect the way they practise the religion.

"I can't say that this attack has altered my perception of Islam," says Anne Chandran, a 29-year-old lawyer.

"I don't know very much of the religion but from what little I know - the practices, the rights that Muslims have - it seems quite repressive, especially to women.

"I don't know if this is the true Islam. Actually, I don't think it is. This further exacerbates the worry that PAS has declared jihad and is now defending Afghanistan on religious grounds. And while most are confident that the Malaysian Government will maintain its modern, moderate approach, and continue its rejection of extremism.

"Some Muslims themselves are calling it a holy war, and saying that they are fighting in the name of Islam. You just never know who is going to flip over to the other side and when," says Chandran.

"At present, we are protected because our Government is secure," says K. Sharmini, a 29-year-old marketing consultant.

"Mahathir has a very good policy regarding extremists. But what about the Malaysian guy who bombed the building in Jakarta? It shows it can happen anywhere," she says.

Still, some Muslims and non-Muslims feel that a degree of solidarity with other Muslims is only natural.

"Those of the same religion would want to help defend their religion. Although the Arabs may agree to help fight terrorism, as Muslims, they will still have the urge to defend fellow Muslims under attack," said Syed Dzain.

"Although I do not subscribe to the Taliban doctrine, I do believe that it is their duty as Muslims to protect Osama, a fellow Muslim," says Juana Jaafar, a 20-year-old student.

"But should there be substantial evidence to prove him guilty, then it is the Taliban's duty as Muslims to turn him over."

One thing is certain - the horror, the pain and the tragedy of both the Sept 11 attacks and the bombing of Afghanistan were keenly felt by all those interviewed.

"I don't have to be Muslim to feel grief," says Muhammad Ali. "Just a human being."

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