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Debate over Islamic state

Shamsul Akmar

PEOPLE'S Progressive Party Youth chief T. Murugiah has proposed that the Government allow non-Muslim men to have more than one wife.

His justification will be debated and, chances are, the proposal will irk feminists and movements fighting for women's rights.

When the issue evolves to that end, some Malay Muslims, men and women, will come out in defence of polygamy, as it is something which is allowed by the religion.

In their support for the right to polygamy, some may overlook, intentionally or otherwise, the fact that the religion imposes strict conditions for those wanting to indulge in the practice.

Ignored will be the fact that Muslims who want to practise polygamy must be fair to all their wives and treat them equally in providing for their needs.

Ignored too will be the history behind the Quranic revelations and hadith (prophetic traditions) which allowed for the practice, among others that they came about during the period when many Muslim men had died from war.

It was a time when widows and children were left behind under harsh conditions, making them unable to fend for themselves apart from the threat of near-barbaric jahilliyah (age of ignorance) men.

In the end, what Murugiah had raised, would, instead of proving the wisdom of Islam in allowing polygamy, make the practice a mockery when the critics start a full-scale battle against the proposal.

To be blamed will be Malay Muslims who choose to defend polygamy without providing the historical perspective and the present practices whereby many Malay Muslim women had become victims when their menfolk abused the so-called right.

With that, instead of the attitude and behaviour of the practitioners being criticised, it is again, Islam that gets a battering.

The bottomline, when it comes to polygamy, the most basic principle is whether the Malay Muslims can afford or are able to do it and not turn the practice into a mockery or worse still, cause pain to their kin.

Then again, to some, polygamy is a trivial issue.

However, the principles behind it are as relevant as any other concepts in Islam which are being fought by the opposing Malay Muslim political forces.

It is by the same principles that the issue of setting up of the Islamic state is being fought between Umno and Pas.

The Islamic state concept is not something new and in fact, over the years, ever since Pas shed what little is left of its Malay nationalist skin in the early 1980s, had turned it into the moat for the opposing Malay Muslim political forces to reach out to the other.

As the nation embraces the Gregorian new year, the debate over the Islamic state concept is anything but waning.

In fact, the last couple of months had seen the issue cropping up regularly.

What holds over the Islamic state concept in 2001?

It started with Pas being put on the defensive with the DAP, its partner in the Alternative Front becoming its staunchest critic.

After the Sept 11 attack on the United States, it was almost fait accompli, the DAP left the opposition front citing its position in it was

untenable for as long as Pas continued to struggle to turn Malaysia into an Islamic state.

At the same time, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad declared that Malaysia was already an Islamic state and a moderate one which is workable in a multi-racial coexistence like Malaysia.

Leaders of component partners in the Barisan Nasional expressed their support for Umno's Islamic state which was declared under the present framework of governance and constitutional provisions.

The DAP then decided to make itself the champion of secular rule, proposing to set up a new opposition front, minus Pas, and that clearly opposes any efforts to turn Malaysia into a theocratic rule.

With that, the DAP chastised Pas, Umno and the non-Malay component parties in BN - Pas for wanting to set up an Islamic state and Umno and its partners in BN over the declaration of Malaysia as an Islamic state.

The DAP seems sure that a secular nation is best for all Malaysians and is worried that any efforts to set up a theocratic state will tear the fibre bonding the different races in the country.

What is baffling is that it did not seem to give these matters much thought when it threw in its lot with Pas when they fought the 1999 general election side by side.

No doubt, the DAP can claim that Umno's weakness has helped make Pas strong.

But the DAP cannot absolve itself as it was directly helping Pas to become strong, unless it now claims that it was not sincere when it joined Pas in the opposition front.

Pas has become quite a powerful political force that it is prepared to ignore DAP's views about the Islamic state even at the expense of the latter pulling out.

At the same time, with Pas getting more powerful and confident, it pushes for the setting of an Islamic state more brazenly.

With that, Umno became trapped. While its moderate brand of Islam is supposed to be the best for a multi-racial nation like Malaysia, its traditional power base, made up by Malay Muslims, has deteriorated.

Although it can depend on the non-Malays to fill up whatever vacuum left by the Malay Muslim voters, Umno will lose some of its bargaining power in the BN coalition.

Realising that, some of the non-Malay movements, be it political or non-governmental organisations took the opportunity to press for their cause, generally pertaining to the rights and opportunities for their community.

Cornered, Umno realised that it had to win back the support of the Malays to be able to lead the BN and not have to succumb further to the non-Malay demands which again, in the long run, would further erode its power base.

That in mind, Umno decided to declare that Malaysia is already an Islamic state and threw the gauntlet back at Pas, challenging it to publicly present its concept of an Islamic state.

The challenge did catch Pas off guard - only for the nation to discover that all this while when it was promoting itself as the champion of an Islamic state, it did not have a clear or detailed outline of what it is.

But this is a temporary setback. Pas has come back fighting, setting up a panel to prepare a blueprint and is expected to use it as a political tool soon after the new year.

The whole debate on the Islamic state will again be thrown wide open.

Even though Pas is keeping it very much under the lid, the concept can be expected to be something like the way it is running Kelantan.

It can also be expected that the proposed blueprint will go into details on the treatment of non-Muslims, be it in terms of their economic

participation, status as citizens and rights to religion, culture, custom and education.

But based on what Pas has been talking about in the past, constitutional amendments will have to be carried out to effect the Islamic state concept it promotes.

Most of them can be expected to be very much like what is seen in Kelantan and if the non-Muslims are comfortable with what the Pas Government in the State is doing and promoting, then everything should be fine.

However, if they are into a secular state and oppose the things that had been done by Pas in Kelantan and Terengganu, regardless whether they affect Muslims or non-Muslims, the Islamic state concept can be expected to be unpalatable.

What is the Umno Islamic state all about?

It is basically what the people see in the country today in terms of lifestyle, economy, education system and treatment of each other's faith, culture and custom.

That being the case, the declaration of Malaysia as an Islamic state by Umno means that the present system, including the legal system, remains and no constitutional amendments need to be made, unlike Pas'.

In short, Umno's Islamic state is consistent with the demands of the DAP and other non-Muslim organisations which oppose any attempt to change the Constitution to accommodate the fulfilment of a theocratic nation.

There are some aspects that needs to be asked between Umno's and Pas' Islamic state concepts.

Umno's Islamic state concept is already in motion and in practice. The only problem is that Pas does not recognise it as one and in fact describes it as secular.

The DAP too opposes Umno's declaration of an Islamic state.

The twist to it is that Pas has accused Umno's Islamic nation concept as a secular one but the DAP wants Umno to make a commitment to a secular nation.

If Pas' views were to be taken as true, then Malaysia is a secular nation. That should please the DAP.

If the DAP's views were to be accepted, then Pas should be glad as Malaysia has already turned into an Islamic state.

Obviously neither can be happy of how the nation should be shaped until and unless they are the ones deciding on it.

But like polygamy, the basic principle to Pas' plans to set up an Islamic state is whether it can afford or is able to do it and not turn it into a mockery, or worse still, inflict pain on the rest of the nation.

It is something Pas' and to a certain extent, the DAP, have to figure out.

But they may not have the locus standi to talk on these matters.

After all, their marriage, polygamous or otherwise, failed miserably.

* shamsulmk@nstp.com.my

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