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Have no fear, we are not going the Indonesian way

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FINALLY, a Pas leader of Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat's stature dared to openly come out and state that there is no guarantee of all party members going to heaven.

Unless, he said, they perform the obligatory prayers. His remarks were obviously an attempt to dispel the myth perpetuated by certain groups that Pas members are guaranteed a place in heaven even if they did not pray.

In short, Nik Aziz has joined the chorus of those who wanted Malay Muslims to observe not only the form but more the substance of the religion.

Of course, his statement was well couched with political parochialism in which he was careful not to miss mentioning this line:

"Don't think only Umno members are not guaranteed a place in heaven. Pas members who do not pray will not get there too."

This line is quite simple to decipher: To go to heaven, Umno members have a more difficult task while Pas members are basically already there as long as they perform the prayers.

A good political strategy on Nik Aziz's part. The only question unanswered is where did he derive the divine powers to determine who can or cannot go to heaven?

While such baffling religious decrees can be debated no end, more interesting is the fact that many a Malay mind is still trapped in this self-serving political approach.

In Indonesia, amid its political mess, the approach which served some politicians since 1998 is starting to return to haunt them.

The republic's reformasi champion Amien Rais, noted for his role in leading street demonstrations which brought President Suharto's downfall in May 1998, is now facing demonstrations seeking his blood.

On Thursday, it was reported that in East Java, thousands, wielding sickles and machetes, marched on the streets near the Ketapang port, shouting "Kill Amien Rais" and "We will fight supporters of Amien Rais".

These were supporters of President Abdurrahman Wahid, a.k.a Gus Dur.

One day earlier, Amien, who is the Speaker of the People's Consultative Council (MPR - Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat), joined thousands of students demonstrating in front of the Presidential Palace calling on Gus Dur to step down.

An ironic twist of fate in so far as the events are concerned.

In 1998, prior to the downfall of Suharto and the subsequent period until the Indonesian general election in 1999, Amien led the reformasi demonstrations and was later joined by supporters of Gus Dur.

All the activities were carried out in the name of reformasi and to establish a more transparent, accountable and "people's Government".

After the 1999 general election, given the inability of any of the political parties to secure even a simple majority, Amien, Gus Dur and other Islamist groups teamed up to ensure that the presidency did not go to Megawati Sukarnoputri.

Megawati, who leads the Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (PDIP - Indonesia Democratic Party of Struggle), controlled more than 30 per cent of the seats in parliament, the biggest chunk.

But Amien and the other Islamist parties were not comfortable with the fact that Megawati is a woman and her nationalist party would not fit their Islamic agenda.

Besides, Megawati was not part of the reformasi movement and was, in fact, suspected then to be against it.

With that, Gus Dur ascended to the presidency and, as a compromise, Megawati was made the Vice-President.

Now, Amien is attempting to oust Gus Dur through street demonstrations.

If Amien gets his way, Megawati will end up being the President, the very person that Amien did not want to be there in the first place.

But, as in all political battles and struggles, such matters will be conveniently forgotten.

Ignored, too, is the fact that all these manoeuvrings had left the nation in shambles.

Apart from extreme poverty, the greatest threat to the survival of Indonesia is the disintegration of its sprawling archipelago.

This threat not only stems from the demands to break away from the central control of Jakarta but also the need to draw new boundaries based on ethnicity and religion as seen in Kalimantan, the Moluccas and Aceh.

Initially, Malaysia seemed to be descending to a similar path after the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in 1998.

The call of reformasi was embraced and street demonstrations erupted in Kuala Lumpur, though, as clarified earlier, on a smaller scale.

Prior to that, Amien was invited by certain quarters to Malaysia to share his reformasi experience in Indonesia.

Some Malaysian students were even then, during a dialogue in Universiti Malaya, asking Amien whether the Indonesian experience could be re-enacted in Malaysia.

The settings were almost the same. Malaysia, like Indonesia, was undergoing economic uncertainties.

There, the similarities ended. While Suharto had to relinquish his presidency, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad remained the Prime Minister.

Before that, Indonesia had to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for financial assistance to rescue its economy while Dr Mahathir chose a different path - ignoring the IMF recommendations and not taking up its proffered loans as well as imposing radical capital controls which have since been relaxed as the Malaysian economy rebounded strongly.

In contrast, Indonesia went on to suffer its worst economic nightmare in modern times, with millions losing their jobs following economic and financial "reforms" mandated by the IMF.

Interest rates soared and price subsidies on essential commodities were withdrawn, impoverishing tens of millions of Indonesians.

All these occurred throughout these past three years and there are no signs of the situation getting better. For many of them, with the current free fall of the rupiah in the wake of Indonesia's political deterioration, a greater disaster may yet lie ahead.

In Malaysia, street demonstrations tapered off after the 1999 general election which confirmed the Barisan Nasional in power with a two-thirds majority.

But it was not all rosy for the country as the citizenry grappled with some uncertainties in both politics and the economy.

Still, Malaysia has shrugged off most of the effects of the recent economic slump and is getting by though much attention is still focused on the political front.

Recently, the reformasi movement seemed to have found its second wind and had openly threatened to hold daily street demonstrations until the present Government is toppled.

Then came the clashes between rival groups in Taman Desaria, Kampung Medan, Kampung Lindungan and other areas in the vicinity, in which six people were killed.

Some sections of the foreign media were quick to see parallels in the incident with the ethnic blood-letting in Indonesia. They appeared quite "gleeful" in their reports on the incident, concluding that Malaysia is going the Indonesian way. It is difficult to blame them for arriving at this notion. After all, there are a number of Malaysians who seem eager to see the nation break down in chaos.

These sentiments are obviously motivated by political hostility against the present Government leaders and have nothing to do with championing reforms as they would like the citizens to believe.

It is up to the citizenry to evaluate and assess these events.

If, in Indonesia, reformasi champion Amien Rais has become the target of hate of some of the very supporters of his reformasi, obviously there are defects to his agenda.

It also goes to prove one thing: What goes around will come around.