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Not in Ramadan spirit

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ON Wednesday, at a mosque in Kampung Tempinis, Besut, Terengganu, a minor incident occurred with big repercussions.

On that day, a few mosque committee members were adamant in not allowing a buka puasa (breaking of fast) function to take place inside the mosque.

The committee's decision was based on political differences.

In the end, the 200-odd villagers attending the function had to eat on the grounds of the mosque.

It was not the first time this had occurred.

On Nov 29, in Kampung Bukit Tanah, also in Besut, 200 villagers were not allowed to break their fast inside the mosque.

On the same day, the Kampung Durian Telor (Besut) mosque committee ordered the organisers to find a different place to serve their buka puasa fare.

All these incidents occurred in Besut, a district which, according to local lore, originally belonged to Kelantan until it was lost in a cock-fighting bet.

Recent political history also shows that Besut, in the mid-1980s, was the centre of the controversial kafir mengkafir issue (whereby Pas had labelled Umno members as infidels).

It reached a ridiculous point when two imam insisted on burying the dead in separate graveyards (for Umno and Pas deceased members) and Pas members refusing to eat livestock slaughtered by Umno members.

The kafir-mengkafir issue came about when then Pas firebrand (Datuk Seri) Abdul Hadi Awang issued his decree, known as the Amanat Haji Hadi, which basically questioned Umno's Islamic faith.

Today, Hadi is the Menteri Besar of Terengganu and political differences have taken a toll on the unity of Besut folk who are observing their religious obligations.

Today, as the Malay Muslims celebrate Aidilfitri - celebrating their victory in a month-long battle against the evil in their nafs (soul) - calls for unity among Muslim leaders the world over reverberate.

For the spiritually attached and those who've observed Ramadan, it is the month that Allah promised pahala (merit) for life hereafter.

During Ramadan, the gates of hell are closed and all evil spirits led by Iblis (Satan) are chained.

At the same time, Ramadan too sees its fair share of hypocrites, pretending to fast for fear of being censured by their peers or punished by the nation's Islamic moral police.

Against this backdrop, the Besut incidents raise the question of whether the Malay Muslims have truly embraced the spirit of Ramadan or doing it out of habit and convenience.

For the Malay Muslims, it is as much a tradition as religious obligation.

This is especially true given the fact that the Malays become Muslims by virtue of them being born Malays which, under the Constitution, automatically makes them Muslims.

Those who on their own accord decide to seek an understanding of the faith by embracing the religion can probably be identified as "born-again Muslims".

For others, they are Muslims by birth and not by choice.

Such discussions tread on sensitive lines for the faithfuls would always

point out how lucky the Malays are since they are protected and ensured by the Constitution that they remain Muslims.

Opposing it, are those who question the need to impose and enforce religious obligations.

They argue that in the end, the community creates a number of hypocrites who are merely practising the religion to avoid embarrassment or worse still, punishment.

What occurred in the Besut mosques were unhelpful as they give the impression that political differences are more important than religious obligations.

Such acts trivialise the spirit of Ramadan.

They also create the perception that certain groups have sole control or even monopoly of the religion.

With that, the divide among the Malay Muslims widens.

If the problems here seem trivial, Indonesia, the nation with the biggest Muslim population in the world, is faring no better.

A journalist in Jakarta wrote about how two of the biggest Islamic organisation in the country are always fighting over matters such as when fasting should begin or when the Aidilfitri celebrated.

One group is the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) which boasts a membership of 60 million, while Muhammadiyah claims the support of some 40 million Muslims.

The fight over fasting and when to celebrate Hari Raya has led Indonesian Muslims asking whether they are fasting on NU or Muhammadiyah's decree.

These problems seem unlikely to be resolved.

It may sound pathetic, but the inability to agree on when to fast or celebrate Hari Raya involves a matter of mere 24 hours.

Pedants will argue that even though the difference is a mere 24 hours, it is not a light matter as it is a religious requirement which involves the science of sighting the moon and mathematical calculations on its movement.

This science is indeed stipulated in the Quran and Hadith (prophetic traditions).

But the question is why can't the leaders get together and share their knowledge?

There is no hope that the NU and Muhammadiyah may resolve other issues that impact on the ummah when they can't even agree on basic matters that unite the Muslims like fasting and celebrating Aidilfitri.

On the bigger picture, the latest attack on the Indian Parliament draws more attention to the Muslim community as the perpetrators are accused of being a Pakistan-based group supporting the Kashmiri cause.

No matter how strongly the Muslim community may feel against the Indian Government on the Kashmir issue, the Indian Parliament attack only serves to justify retaliatory actions against them.

The problem is that the powers they are fighting against are stronger than them, not just militarily but because of their unity.

It is similar to the present surge of violence in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict following the suicide bombings on Dec 3.

The Israeli Government has gone all out in its military aggression against Palestine leading to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad urging the United Nations and superpowers to intervene.

While waiting for them to respond and act, the Israelis are not likely to stop their attacks on Palestine.

With that the innocent Muslim, be it an Afghan, the Pakistani/Kashmiri and Palestinian will have hell to pay. And who said that the gates of hell are closed.

At least, the ones on earth aren't.

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