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Questions over SAR relevance

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WHEN Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced the suspension of funds to the privately-run Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR) or People's Religious Schools, certain quarters wasted no time in milching political mileage from what was seen as a politically unpopular move.

Although Dr Mahathir explained that the temporary move to halt the funds was necessary to identify those who indoctrinate political ideology on the sly and deviate from Islam's true teachings, many Opposition-related websites pounced on it as a deliberate move to destroy Islam since "the SAR and pondok are the last bastion of the ummah to protect and preserve the faith".

Some went a step further, denouncing it as a prelude to a takeover of the schools "because Dr Mahathir does not want Muslims to be devoted Muslims".

And there were attempts to whip up the Malays' religious sentiments by equating the move with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's now-defunct proposed secularisation of religious schools.

Such over-reaction is unfortunate for it threatens to divert much-needed attention from the issues surrounding the SAR, whether they be run privately or by a state's Islamic Affairs Department.

From time to time, several Umno leaders had pointed out the need to put such schools under the national education system, but the rationale was limited to the need to prevent a split among the Malays.

Others had raised the need for a uniform curriculum. So far this has only been done for the Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia in 2000, where the curriculum is based on Al-Azhar's Maahad Al-Buuth Al-Islamiah - a task made possible only because people were united by the pragmatic need to find a qualifying standard for the students to gain entry into Middle Eastern universities.

But larger issues remain unresolved. One, the SAR is, on scrutiny, a departure from what is understood as modern Islamic education - one that maintains equilibrium between faith and knowledge, religious science (ilm') and worldly science.

Its focus, as Dr Mahathir pointed out, is on the teaching of traditional subjects ('ulum naqliya) such as tauhid (unity of God), fiqh al-ibadah (law governing worship), seerah (study of the Prophet's life), tajweed (Quranic recitation) and imlak (Jawi).

The dominant focus on fardhu `ain (personal religious obligation) stems from the psychological attitude that the acquisition of such knowledge is necessary for success in the hereafter. True, some Sekolah Menengah Agama Rakyat (SMAR) introduce other subjects into the curriculum, but the intellectual-spiritual milieu is orthodox due to the lack of qualified teachers and facilities such as science laboratories.

Two, the deviation from the essence of Islam. With no prescribed criteria for the teaching staff, it must be asked what and which "Islam" is taught. With no peda-gogical method, things are wrongly conveyed to the young.

An example: "Don't steal; God will cut your hands off. Ini hudud". And in this simplistic rendering of God's punishment, unwittingly or otherwise, elements of political Islam are rubbed off on students.

"Teachers play a big part in building concept of thoughts. Unfortunately, the quality of some religious teachers is questionable.

"Some equate dogma with Islamic pre-cepts. When people become teachers as a last resort, they create an environment that's dogmatic, unquestioning and with no development of the thought process," says Dr Nik Norzrul Thani, lawyer and former deputy dean of International Islamic University's Kulliyah of Laws.

A visiting Fulbright scholar in Islamic Legal Studies at Harvard Law School, Nik Norzrul points out that in such a milieu, the poor grasp of the Quranic matrix of ideas often leads to the teaching of Islam as exclusivist and whose absolute truth is divorced from the Quranic guarantee of religious freedom for all. In Malaysia's multi-racial, multi-religious context, this hampers racial integration efforts.

Long overlooked is the fact that the SAR is a piece of historical baggage in the nation's educational system.

The SAR, together with Malay and Arabic schools, were set up as a reaction to the education system introduced by the British. The Malays were afraid their children would renounce Islam if they studied at English or missionary schools.

But more than anything else, the SAR/Malay/Arabic schools denoted the poverty of the Malays then: materially, politically and intellectually.

That these schools should continue to exist as they did then - teaching the rudiments of religion in a limited sense - indicate an inexcusable statism of the Malays' collective mind. Whither the relevance of the SAR?

Nik Norzrul says its relevance must be considered against the need for the re-thinking of Islamic thought and thinking process.

If the SAR system perpetuates the import of Islamic symbols and approach of other Muslim regimes and posits their cultural nuances for Islamic values, then it will obstruct the creation of Malaysia's indigenous, moderate and progressive Islamic identity.

Professor Datuk Dr Ibrahim Bajunid, secretary of the Malaysian Association for Education and Unitar's Humanities and Social Science Dean, points out that with a national education system in place where the best of state resources is used to set the highest benchmarks, there is no reason to have an alternative system for the pursuit of religious knowledge.

Anything else, he says, should be complementary or supplementary. He singles out the Johor-run SAR as the best example of how SAR complements the national system.

In any case, the national education system allows the pursuit of both fardhu `ain with fardhu kifayah (the community's obligation to pursue exponential knowledge) in national schools, says Ibrahim.

Most SAR students further their studies in traditional Islamic disciplines at Middle Eastern universities. True, the nation needs clerics to man the mosques and religious affairs departments. But assuming that a majority of the estimated 162,000 SAR pupils pursue traditional Islamic studies, we will see a growing number of clerics or the "clericisation" of the Malay community.

The question is: With the continuance of this SAR system, can we strike a balance between the number of Malays who master all forms of worldly knowledge and the number of traditional religious functionaries to build a strong and progressive ummah?

Some question its existence and agree with Dr Mahathir's contention that the SAR system is now unnecessary.

For one, they argue that Malaysia's education system is not devoid of national religious schools. In 2000, there were 53 national religious schools (Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama) with a total of 40,008 pupils.

Nevertheless, this pales in comparison to the 210 privately-run SMAR with 70,235 pupils. In 1999, some 63,000 registered with state-run SMAR.

The trend is clear. There seems to be a clamour for religious education among today's Malays.

But Ibrahim cautions against the zeal for what he describes as "certificated religion" because those schooled in purely religious traditions are not necessarily more religious than those who pursue exponential knowledge as fardhu kifayah. Nor does a degree in religion make an ulama. As Ibrahim says, God is in our classroom unlike some secular systems where no hymn or tudung is allowed.

From a comparative perspective, the national education system with its mandatory Islamic/Moral subject is more religious than secular.

"What must not be allowed is an education deficit in all forms of knowledge from the early years, for this will deny the country the critical resources and edge to compete with other nations in today's knowledge-based economy," says Ibrahim.

Nik Norzrul reckons the issue does not merit controversy. "We cannot allow the imprisonment of the intellect in the name of narrowly understood religion," he says.