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Changing mindset of Muslims

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THE nation is truly getting a steady diet of ulama. It started early last month when the Persatuan Ulama Malaysia (PUM - Association of Islamic Scholars of Malaysia) decided to submit a memorandum to the Council of Rulers urging them to act against writers and academicians.

This led to a full-scale debate, counter-arguments, counter-accusations and proposal for dialogues.

The debates were not confined to Malay Muslims, but also to non-Muslims representing the various groups and organisations, from the legal fraternity to the human rights watch.

While it is not known when these debates will abate, the proposal that a National Ulama Consultative Council be set up looks like the possible avenue to put a stop to the growing vitriolic in the criss-crossing commentaries.

The proposal for setting up the council came during last week's Umno supreme council meeting chaired by deputy president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

The idea was supported by party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on his return on Thursday, after a trip abroad.

Based on what little is revealed, the council, once formalised, will be expected to advise the Government on Islamic affairs.

It is proposed that members are made up of those truly accepted as knowledgeable and deserving to be called ulama.

The council is also supposed to be independent of party politics, experts in the respective fields of Islam and capable of advising the Government in the implementation of policies.

Apart from that, it will play the role of being the centre for discourses, dialogues and debates when issues pertaining to religion crop up.

Thus far it sounds good and it should be supported.

Most of the State mufti are supportive of the idea and even Pas leaders in the likes of its spiritual adviser Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat had responded positively.

But Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor seems suspicious of the proposal which he said is an attempt by the Government to mislead the ulama and rakyat.

Parti Keadilan Nasional president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, on her part, questioned the need of the proposed council when the National Fatwa Council is already in existence as the term of reference for religious issues.

Her concern sounds legitimate, as what is the point of having another council when there is already one which is accepted as the final arbiter of religious issues.

However, looking the proposed consultative council, which some sources said would also invite non-Muslims to participate, it cannot be deemed to have the ability to overlap that of the Fatwa Council.

For one, the Fatwa Council, from past practices, meets to discuss very specific issues such as the Al Arqam in 1994 and on the role of Malay Rulers in 1993 during the constitutional crisis.

Furthermore, the proposal of an ulama council is not something new. It was proposed in 1991 by the Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia (Yadim - Malaysian Islamic Missionary Foundation) albeit under a different name -

Majlis Tertinggi Ulama (Ulama supreme council).

The question now is, why it is so important to have a national council for ulama?

Under the present circumstances the main problems besieging the Malay Muslim community are definitely the claims of who is more Islamic than the other.

The political divide has truly blinded partisan Malay Muslims in determining which group is right or wrong. Judgments are made based on political affiliations, while hatred and hostility have become quite entrenched.

The culture of debate and the right to differ without ending up with hatred, are not of essence.

It is a situation of "either you are with me or with the enemy".

Along the way, many politicians from both sides of the divide decide to justify and promote party politics through religious justification.

In the ambiguity of circumstances, the Malay Muslims are sometimes unable to separate what is political rhetoric and what are truly the teachings of Islam.

To make matters worse, almost anyone who has Islamic credentials, either through the process of academic pursuit or through parochial recognition, wants to be heard. And they are mushrooming.

They come up with views which, at times, turn into decrees, and then feed them to a trusting audience.

It is against this backdrop that the ulama consultative council is being proposed.

The next question is: what will the council serve?

Going by Fadzil's suspicions, the council may be used to provide legitimacy to the Government in its actions and policies.

Such suspicions are not entirely baseless. After all, Pas too has its own Dewan Ulama which in turn acts as the adviser on religious issues for the party leadership.

For as long as the Dewan Ulama has been respected by the party members and the party's central committee is deemed to have worked according to the advice of the former, then the struggles and policies pursued by the party leadership will be legitimised.

In short, in the tradition of any Islamic rule, be it a monarch or a Government, the council of ulama will lend legitimacy to those governing the nation.

In fact, that is what the National Fatwa Council provides.

If one were to reflect over the issue of the Al Arqam and the constitutional crisis pertaining to the immunity of the Rulers, the Fatwa Council lent legitimacy and the religious support to the Government to pursue its objectives.

In the 1994 case of the Al Arqam, after the Fatwa Council decreed that the Al Arqam was truly deviant, all Federal and State authorities, including that under Pas rule, collectively acted against the movement.

Similarly, in the case of the Malay Rulers. When the Fatwa Council deemed that the immunity accorded to the monarchs was not consistent with the teachings of Islam, the efforts by the Government to remove it became legitimised from the religious perspective.

However, in many instances, the Fatwa Council reacts to issues and generally on the request of the Government.

On that score, if the Ulama Consultative Council is truly going to be what it is envisaged, then it will be more than that, meaning it is supposed to be pro-active.

In addition, it cannot be interpreting religious issues merely from the strict confines of Islamic jurisprudence, but also taking into

consideration the political sensitivities of the nation.

This is where the Ulama Consultative Council should differ from that of the Fatwa Council or other bodies which claim to represent Islamic thoughts in the country.

Otherwise, the new council will emerge as another body, almost akin to that of the National Human Rights Commission which, when its setting-up was proposed, was viewed with suspicion by certain segments of the Opposition.

However, the commission (Suhakam) is today viewed as a tool for the Opposition to undermine the Government.

Here is the problem about the setting up of so-called independent bodies which, when they are being proposed, are promoted as free of political influence.

Such bodies, as they gain respect, tend to get in the way of government policies as their interpretation will usually focus strictly on the prescription of the subject matter.

In the end, those proposing and supporting the setting-up of the body end up feeling the heat while those opposing start singing a different tune.

It can be said that this is how the political parties use a disadvantage to their advantage and when this occurs, the noble idea of setting up an independent body loses its focus.

Given the way politics is being played locally, it is not surprising if the Opposition attempts to discredit the Ulama Consultative Council when it gets formalised.

However, as time progresses and the council gains credibility and some of its ideas are consistent with that of the Opposition, the council will then be treated like an angel.

If the council continues to expose the Opposition, then efforts to impeach its credibility will be mounted and it is a matter of time before it becomes yet another body brushed aside as a stooge of the establishment.

By then, the conflict and divide of the Malay Muslims will continue to fester.

Without doubt, it is up to the Malay Muslims to open up their minds instead of lapping up all and sundry.

Looking at the past and present, it is difficult to see the changing of the mindset when dealing with religion based on partisan politics.

In fact, the Malay Muslims seem to have accepted it as a staple diet and they seem to like it.

Poor taste to some but fine for the rest.

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