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Focus: Kindergartens

MALAYSIAN POLITICS ENTER KINDERGARTENS?

By: Abdul Halim Taib

KUALA LUMPUR: Following the resurgence of Islam, Muslims in Malaysia appear to have become more interested lately in deepening their knowledge of their religion and in imparting religious education to their children.

This can be seen from the hundreds of kindergartens that have been set up by both government and private sector agencies, non-governmental organisations, political parties and individuals.

They include the Taman Didikan Kanak-kanak (Tadika) and the Taman Bimbingan Kanak-kanak (TABIKA) which are managed respectively by the Education Ministry and the Community Development Department (KEMAS), and the Pusat Asuhan Tunas Islam (PASTI) by PAS.

The aim of TADIKA and TABIKA is to fulfil the national aspirations of bringing up children with knowledge of this world and the hereafter.

It is also to build a united, harmonious, progressive and respected Malaysian nation with vision.

PASTI which has mushroomed in recent years, has raised the eyebrows of some leaders and the people eager to know their actual motives and objectives.

#### CLAIMS AND COUNTER CLAIMS

There are some people who claim that PAS has deviated from the original objective of setting up these pre-school educational institutions by using PASTI to sow hatred for some leaders in its teaching system.

This prompted Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to issue a warning to PAS that the government would close down such centres if it continued to make use of these educational institutes to foster hatred for the leaders and the government, instead of imparting religious knowledge to the young ones.

Dr Mahathir said a study would be made on whether to introduce new laws or amend existing ones to ensure that the objective of these pre-school centres is not sidelined by politics.

Several incidents occurring in this country had negative elements which could be linked to the hate-talk against the ruling government and leaders. These incidents included the arms heist by the Al-Maunah Group and the terrorist incidents of the Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM).

All this should prompt the authorities to nib the problem in the bud and root out the menace before it would spread.

#### STATE JURISDICTION

Law lecturer of the International Islamic University of Malaysia Dr Abdul Aziz Bari said that at present the setting up of pre-school education centres is under the jurisdiction of state governments.

Hence, amendments to the relevant laws could be easily done in states administered by the ruling Barisan Nasional but in PAS-controlled states of Terengganu and Kelantan, it would be quite difficult.

Dr Abdul Aziz, however, suggested that since the matter was related to Islam, a committee under the auspicious of the Conference of Rulers should be set up to investigate and establish the truth of the claim that PASTI has been turned into a place to plant hatred for the government and its leaders.

The Government should also establish the actual number of PASTI classes in the country and ascertain if they are functioning on the correct

platform.

The Government should also try to find an answer to the question as to why certain people are still sending their children to PASTI classes.

"We need to know if the curriculum used in government Tadika classes is less effective in educating pre-school children," he said.

Head of Umno Youth Permanent Secretariat on Islam, Shamsul Najmi Shamsuddin, proposed that PASTI need not be closed but be turned into alternative pre-school classes run by government teachers on full time or part time basis.

#### UNIFORM CURRICULUM

He said the curriculum in all pre-school classes in the country should be standardised and approved by the government.

"Only in this way can the government prevent negative elements from influencing the thinking of innocent children," he said.

Public Relations Officer of the Selangor Islamic Religious Affairs Department (Jais), Fakrul Azam Yahaya, said his department had taken follow-up action on the Prime Minister's suggestion, in collaboration with the Department of Islamic Development (Jakim).

He said Jais has directed in June last year that all PASTI classes in Selangor be closed down.

Chairman of the PAS Council of Ulama Datuk Haji Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat denied that PASTI classes are being used by PAS to sow hatred for the government and its leaders.

"No matter what, any PASTI teacher found to have incited children to hate certain people will be sacked," he declared.

He said the role entrusted to PASTI teachers is clear -- teach the children how to write, read the Quran and know Allah.

#### LONG-TERM PROGRAMME

Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad said his ministry would work with Jakim to draw up the appropriate curriculum module and provide qualified teachers for such education centres.

The ministry proposed to open some 1,500 pre-school classes each year through its long-term education development programme.

A spokesman of KEMAS said the TABIKA curriculum is the same as that of the ministry, which includes Bahasa Melayu, English, Civics and Islam.

At present KEMAS operates 8,003 Tabikas with 7,779 teachers nationwide for 224,183 children aged between five and six. -- Bernama

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