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Keep local Falwells in check

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PAS - to its credit - has never denied that it always holds a position at the end of the politically far-out spectrum. To Pas, its followers and Islamists, religious extremism in the defence of political Islam is no vice. Indeed, it's a virtue!

But I maintain that extremism of any hue in the pursuit of power is an unpardonable depravity - an unforgiveable sin.

On the other hand, moderation in the affairs of the Malaysian nation is the highest virtue, the summit of our values.

We have done remarkably well, even our opponents would admit it. However, much remains to be done. We have enjoyed strikingly rapid socio-economic growth even as some critics insist that the economic wealth has been rather unevenly distributed along racial and regional lines - which has led and is the cause of some dissatisfaction and continued ethnic-political mobilisation.

Though Islam is centuries younger than other major religions, it has been under constant religious, political and cultural assault from the West since the time of the Crusades, and now from the United States - in the Bush Administration, especially.

We in Malaysia are anxious to maintain the status quo; and the enlightened among us, in fact, are trying to adapt the faith (but not impinge on the aqidah) to the demands of the K-economy and globalisation.

But to the forces of Islamic ultra-conservatism that have emerged (and some say are growing) Islam (as understood by the ultraconservatives) is and must be central to every aspect of life, especially politics. As is the case for language with the Chinese chauvinists.

In my younger days, the study of politics was a lot simpler than it is today. Ideology was nine-tenths of it, the rest was showmanship. The various political theories could be arranged in a linear spectrum.

You were either Left or Right, or tiptoeing in between. You either believed in socialism (or communism) or individualism (democracy), or some mixture of the two.

Umno, for example, began as a fairly liberal, laissez-faire party. It moved to the Left after 1969 in terms of its interventionist and social action policies under the ambit of the New Economic Policy. Then it pulled back towards the Right, to inspire the Government's Malaysia Inc, privatisation and other probusiness policies. Umno has been extraordinarily nimble in response to the times. At heart, however, it remains conservative in the defence, protection and promotion of its core constituency, the Malays.

Political ideologies all aimed for the same goals - justice, equality, stability, peace, prosperity, and what have you. But they differed, calamitously, in the means. After a long period of conflict and competition, some political scientists have asserted, ideology was finally killed off by the Cold War.

I don't think so. I think it is still there somewhere at the back of our political consciousness. It is there when we think of what the rich should do for the poor, what government should do for society, community and the individual, what education should accomplish, whether the United States should invade Iraq.

But I do agree that ideology has ceased to be the defining characteristic of politics. I think Samuel Huntington was quite right in

deducing that the bipolar, Cold-War world has become multi-polar, and that it would be a grave mistake for the West, the US in particular, to behave otherwise.

Multi-polarity means that politics is defined less by Left-Right ideology than by things like civilisation, culture and religion, and held together by concepts like "identity" rather than chosen affiliations.

Domestic and local politics, particularly in democracies, are also being shaped by the same mould. Certain forms of political activism are not conducted through political parties anymore, but through grassroots organisations and NGOs and even less formal means, such as the Internet.

That is not altogether bad. But the break-up of traditional political association and the fracturing of politics along ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural and all manner of lines multiplies the likelihood of extremism. Where there were once only two sets of extremists at the edges of a single spectrum, now there may be many.

Politics may also be pushed to the extremes by the nature of democratic bargaining - you ask for 10 in the hope that you might get five. Worse, in a swirling pool of competing interests, you might only get heard by adopting an extremist position. Worse still, extremism competes with itself, so that it is forged less by amity than by the compulsion of battling a common foe.

Take the Christian extremists in the US, for example. How did the self-professed religion of love turn to hate? How did the land of hope and glory turn out a Christian mad mullah in the person of Jerry Falwell?

The short answer, here as much as in America, is politics. Religious fundamentalism has developed a will to power by sheer force of numbers. There are said to be 50 million "born-again" Christians in the US. For the politicians, Christian revivalism, born of agnostic, anarchic times, is not counted in saved souls but in ready votes.

Even US President George W. Bush, winning on a thin national majority, is counting on them, and has himself been caught sounding like a madcap televangelist raining hell on his enemies. He hasn't said a word against Falwell and the other whiskey preachers who've been defaming Islam.

Like his equivalents in Pas, Falwell liberally distorts scripture for his own purposes - to win supporters, raise money and excoriate his pet hates. Last weekend, during a television interview, he called the Prophet Muhammad "a terrorist". He was playing his usual red-neck politics. He has blamed everyone he can think of for the Sept 11 attacks - homosexuals, civil libertarians, abortionists. But his Christian soldiers need an enemy big enough to bring down the Apocalypse, and he's found it in Islam.

He is, of course, dead wrong. Muslims have always been misunderstood, for whatever reason they might have chosen to take up arms. Thomas Carlyle wrote in 1840 that, "History makes it clear that the legend of fanatical Muslims sweeping through the world and forcing Islam at the point of sword upon conquered races is one of the most fantastically absurd myths that historians have ever repeated."

Yet, a century and 62 years later, it continues to be repeated. Prophet Muhammad was a man of God in a time of violence. He never picked up a sword until he was 55. After battle, he forgave his enemies.

Had Jesus Christ lived longer, he might have had to resort to the armed defence of his faith, as his followers subsequently did in his name.

It would be tempting to ignore Falwell and his ilk. But we can't, because the extremist Christian Right has found the ear of the president himself. Today, it is not the fabled Jewish lobby but the American Protestant sects that are waving the flag of Zion, the supposed betrayers of Christ.

Extremism will always be shoved to the fringes by a broad centre. It

gets a leg up when there is no one strong enough to lead a moderate majority, as is the case with Bush. It could also be the case here, which is why the Prime Minister's admonition at the Gerakan delegates' assembly last weekend must not fall on deaf ears, no matter how many times he has repeated it.

Somewhere in Pas, there is an exact mirror image of Falwell. There are parody quizzes on the Internet in which quotes are lifted from the preacher-politician and you are asked to guess whether they came from him or Osama bin Laden.

And not just in Pas. There are potential if not actual Falwells among the extremists of all colours in the Malaysian mosaic - linguistic, cultural, racial. Woe betide the country should any of its moderate leaders be weak enough to co-opt the extremists in order to hold his ground.

No leader in the BN (more so in Umno) should waver against the increasing extremist onslaught, especially on the terrain of education, which is aimed to benefit all. Pas' political Islam is intolerant of anyone who dares raise his reservations about its logic and application.

All I ask is that Umno and BN leaders not wilt before the forces of division and bigotry - otherwise they will have forfeited their right to lead. Learn - nothing to be ashamed of - from a neighbouring country on how it deals with extremists, communalists and language zealots. We may compromise on the details, but never on the principle.

For Heaven's sake, don't let Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad be the only one fighting the language zealots and religious bigots. Rally behind him or be prepared to be hanged separately.

With apologies to Shakespeare: "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the extremist flood, leads to misfortune."