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Keep politics out of the mosque

SURRENDER to the Almighty is a precondition of religious faith. At the mosque (and churches and temples), congregants prostrate en masse to the glory of God, leaving the sin of doubt behind. Ritualised assemblies are ready-made for indoctrination, opening up minds to spiritual growth by a wilful suspension of disbelief. For any religion, fellowship is central to worship and community. For Pas, mosques provide captive audiences for its political opportunism and the human putty for its quasi-religious conversion.

Inside the sanctity of the mosque, Pas extremists and fanatics of all kinds can prey on Muslim illiteracy and ignorance and exploit the Islamic tradition of command and obedience. It offers the ideal bully pulpit, from which silver-tongued preachers can freely mix up ideology with devotion, politics with religion, myth with fact, truth with slanderous fiction. For Pas, ceramahs might be good for a bit of political theatre. But at mosques, surau and madrasah, the process of brainwashing can be engineered up from its nuts and bolts.

Without the validation of the mosque, Islamic radicals could hardly have been able to rise above the level of the street-corner soapbox. To them, control of the physical institution of prayer is the Waterloo of their cause. Pas has used the mosque, religious schools and Islamic Studies departments at the universities to spread its gospel from its earliest days, and continues to try hard to usurp the leadership of grassroots congregations throughout the country.

The battle for control has been taken to desperate lengths. It had led to split congregations with two imams divided by a curtain. Two Fridays ago in Terengganu, a Pas leader got into an absurd tussle to lead a prayer which included the Prime Minister.

Such levels of pettiness - although the likelihood of violence is not funny - make critics crow. They lambast political Islam for being about submission, not emancipation. Certainly, the extremists have never quailed from demonstrating that Islam is about power, not faith. The episode at the Losong Haji Mat Shafie Mosque was no more than an attempt to show Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who's the boss in the State, never mind the mockery it made of the solemnity of the occasion or the laughing stock it made of the Muslims.

Since Islam is governed by the State, in Pas-ruled Kelantan and Terengganu the administration of religion has been subverted to keep Pas in power. Through the means of the mosque, Pas ideologues use fear to annul free democratic choice. Fear underpins Terengganu Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang's hudud. Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat's sermonising is poison-tipped to get his listeners into a funk. Pas leaders "anthropomorphise" God, reducing Him to a human tyrant driven by vengefulness and hate, the better to stampede Muslims into finding safety in their arms.

For the vast majority of believers, Islam is a faith of peace and social justice, moving its adherents to worship God, obey His laws, and be socially responsible. A fantastic distortion of the simplicity and purity of Islam is required to transform God's humble servants into His potentially violent soldiers or dumbstruck Pas voters. Radicals cannot do this by stump speeches alone. They need the institutional authority of the mosque.

Politics must be kept out of the mosques if they are not to be desecrated by ulteriorly-motivated zealotry. Contrary to its critics, political Islam - through social action, individual morality and corporate ethics - can be, and often is, highly beneficial. In a democracy, the impact of religion is most telling when it leads to personal piety and self-improvement. Politics is a matter of choice, and the institutions of worship as well as those of education must neutrally encourage this freedom, not banish it.