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`Pahala' and the Pas link

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WHEN Al Arqam was decreed a deviant movement by the National Fatwa Council on Aug 5, 1994, there was not much political opposition.

In fact, even Pas leaders, including its mursyidul aam (spiritual adviser) Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat agreed the movement should be disbanded.

It was was an occasion for much fanfare. First came the convening of the Fatwa Council where all state muftis deliberated on the activities and beliefs of Al Arqam.

Finally, they collectively agreed that Al Arqam had deviated from the teachings of Islam, especially the Sunni path, the official sect of the nation.

Following that, the authorities moved against Al Arqam whose cells were well-positioned throughout the country.

Finally, a month after the clamp-down its leader, Asaari Muhammad, and other key figures were arrested.

Then they were produced in the National Mosque and confessed to their deviant teachings. Most political leaders then likened them to the American Branch Davidian cult led by David Koresh.

The reckoning was swift and decisive. The main commune in Sungai Penchala, just on the outskirts of the posh Taman Tun Dr Ismail in Kuala Lumpur, was closed down and their members were sent for rehabilitation.

Since then, there have been several attempts by some of its members to revive the movement but they have been duly arrested. And with that the efforts died a natural death.

Currently, these former Al Arqam members, including Asaari who is under restricted residence in Country Homes in Rawang, have regrouped in the area.

Operating under the name Rufaqa, these former members continue to lead a commune-style life, albeit in more modern trappings.

Unlike during the pre-ban days, these former Al Arqam members do not seem eager to promote their existence and though still immersing themselves in the intrigues of national politics, they do not seem as cocky as before.

Instead, they portray the image of a group of like-minded people who believe in sharing and living together as one big family and using their numbers to be effective at business.

In their heydays Al Arqam followers believed that they were the ones chosen to change the nation and even the world.

They were then attempting to adopt the lifestyle of Prophet Muhammad and his companions down to the details and believed that Asaari would, when the divine signs were revealed, become the Al Mahdi, the messiah to save the world before doomsday.

There are several Muslim schools of thought about the Al Mahdi, be it in terms of his appearance or the time of his coming.

Some believe that he will come in addition to the second coming of Jesus Christ, providing a respite to the darkening of the cosmic cycle.

Some believe that his reign will end before the second coming of Christ to destroy the Al Masih ad-Dajjal, the Antichrist.

While there is no specific school of thought on the Mahdi, most Muslims accept that he will come near the end of time to correct what is wrong, re-establish the pristine purity of Prophet Muhammad's rule which in

effect will unite all the schools of law and all the sects.

However, due to the ambiguity of the concept of Al Mahdi, several false ones have emerged alongside the many false prophets, mainly self-proclaimed, after the death of the Prophet in 632 AD.

Musaylamah of Yamamah was the first and probably the foremost false prophet to emerge, almost immediately after the death of Prophet Muhammad.

Slain in the battle of Agrabah a year later, Musaylamah claimed to have received divine revelations and managed to lead people from the east-central region of Arabia to rise against Abu Bakar, the Islamic Caliph after the Prophet.

That is the history, past and contemporary.

As such, it is uncanny that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad chose to chastise Pas' Nik Aziz for behaving as if he was God who can determine the pahala if people voted for his party.

Nik Aziz has since clarified that he did not say that those who voted for Pas would go to heaven.

He claimed what he had said was that those who voted for Pas in the 1990 general election would receive the pahala because his party's Government had managed to rid the State of riba (usury) and other vices, including gambling.

Whatever Nik Aziz's point of contention, the fact remains that the whole issue here is about pahala for voting.

It is difficult to determine who should and could receive the pahala but each Malay Muslim is taught that for every good deed performed sincerely, they will be given pahala.

Each pahala they receive will be accounted for after their death during the day of judgment. Those whose pahala outweigh their dosa (sins) will go to heaven. For Malay Muslims, this concept is quite clear.

But the ambiguity is how to go about pursuing these rewards - one is by personal deeds, the other, deeds for the community.

While the personal deeds are how each performs his or her obligations as required by the religion from praying, fasting to the manner they conduct themselves, the deeds to society range from helping neighbours to political participation.

The concept of pahala touched by Nik Aziz concerns the community, in which each Muslim individual has an obligation to ensure that they play their role, no matter how minimal, to ensure the society becomes acceptable in the eyes of God.

With that, even voting becomes a pahala because it can then ensure that the party elected to be the Government is one that can ensure all the sins and vices are removed.

Thus far, Nik Aziz has not strayed from the basics of Islam.

However, when he associated the pahala to voting for Pas which he claimed had rid Kelantan of riba, it becomes a statement which is parochial and to a large degree bigoted.

Whichever way his remarks are interpreted, it means that those who vote for other political parties, in this case Umno, are committing a sin.

With that, he has declared Pas as the party for which Muslims must vote. If they don't they are sinning.

Of course, it can be debated whether it is truly sinful to vote for Umno and whether one is assured of reward for choosing Pas.

Some Umno leaders have argued that while Pas may crow about its Islamisation of Kelantan, the latter has not lifted the people out of poverty, a great sin in the eyes of Islam.

Umno leaders too have pointed out that Nik Aziz has interpreted the concept of Islam from a very narrow viewpoint, like the removal of usury and the implementation of criminal laws like the hudud.

Their point is that Islamic administration is about ensuring the well-being of its followers, and that comes about through development and providing comfort in their daily existence.

Thus, such rigid interpretation of Islam by the likes of Nik Aziz only leads to the misconception that Islam is a regressive religion which regards worldly comforts with indifference and only focuses on pahala for the life hereafter.

These debates aside, it is the declarations of pahala which can be dangerous. For one, for those who take Nik Aziz literally at his word will believe that if it is sinful to vote for Umno, then it is incumbent upon them to destroy it.

This can be done in one of only two ways - either by voting it out or by physically destroying it.

Based on Pas' track record, it can be assumed that it believes in the first process, voting Umno out of power. That is democratic, and it is up to Malay Muslims to evaluate which of the two parties, Umno or Pas, can improve their lot, in this life or after.

However, Pas and Nik Aziz have to accept that when they make such declarations, there are over-zealous Malay Muslims who cannot separate the political powerplay from the religious obligations.

The nation has a history of over-zealous Malay Muslims who have taken the declarations of pahala and dosa literally.

In the late 1970s through the 1980, there was the Kerling temple attack by a group of Muslims who opposed the existence of idols and deities. In 1980, a group of sword-wielding Muslims led by a self-styled Mahdi attacked the Batu Pahat police station.

When the Al-Ma'unah phenomenon came along, the nation was shocked at the revelations of their plans to attacks breweries and temples.

And very much like Al Arqam, the Kumpulan Militan Malaysia members are not confined to ordinary laymen or country bumpkins who lack exposure in terms of academic pursuits.

Of course, their contention is that the existing Governments, including that of Malaysia, should be toppled because they do not observe the narrow interpretations of Islamic administration that is their ideal.

In short, they believe they are doing deeds for the community which will be rewarded with the much sought-after pahala of which Nik Aziz has spoken.

In this context, people who have committed murder and carried out terrorist attacks could also be categorised as having performed deeds deserving of pahala.

The question is, will any Muslim leader come forward and declare that their acts are deserving of pahala? It is doubtful that any will do so.

Simply because it will not give them the political pahala - worldly votes, that is.

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