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## Combining worldly and religious needs

By Idros Ismail

THE Johor religious education system embodies much of what Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi advocates in Islam Hadhari. IDROS ISMAIL checks out why and how the model could lay the foundations to the realisation of a moderate and progressive form of the religion.

SYSTEM - that's the operative word. In the "Johor model", there is policy, there is structure, and there is direction.

The system works because there is supervision and control. Order prevails. Underpinning all that, there is an all-round will and determination to make it work.

The Johor Islamic education system is all that. After 86 years of tinkering and tweaking, it has evolved into a model to be envied by other States. It is in stark contrast to the unregulated, poorly equipped pondok schools and Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR) systems privately run and - inadequately - funded in certain other States.

The Government has cause to be concerned over how these schools are run. Other than the quality of education provided, there are concerns that they are fertile grounds for spawning narrow religious and political persuasions.

This phenomenon was evident when action was taken to absorb a total of 21,040 students from the country's 266 SAR into the national schools. Even Johor was not spared, as 1,614 students were affected.

The unregulated sprouting of the SARs and their "dubious" teachings has led to the freezing of monetary grants by the Government in October 2002 amidst calls for a better alternative.

The call to emulate the Johor model came two years ago from no less a personage than former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed.

Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman has since been on the road to explain to other State leaders what the system in Johor is all about with the view that it will eventually be emulated nationally.

If adopted, the model could become an implement for the propagation of Islam Hadhari - that which espouses moderation, tolerance and progress - frequently propounded by the Prime Minister in the recent past.

It could negate the mistaken notion held by some Muslims that Islam is only for the hereafter and incompatible with development and modernity.

Johor has disproved the notion. It is one of the most progressive States in the country, yet retains a high Islamic consciousness, with little of the militant tendencies in tow.

The backdrop to the Johor model was set as far back as 1918 during the reign of Sultan Ibrahim. His farsightedness saw all pondok schools (which had existed at the turn of the 20th century) taken in under the State administration to become the Sekolah Quran and subsequently the Sekolah Kitab in 1920.

In 1923, the schools were formalised to become the foundation of what is now the religious education system in Johor administered by the State Religious Department.

Current director, Datuk Dr Ibrahim Endan, credits the visionary founder of modern Johor, Sultan Abu Bakar, for the success, and his successor, Sultan Ibrahim.

"They had a vision for religious education. They understood the need to combine worldly and religious needs," says Ibrahim.

"Government officers shared that vision too. The State leaders and

administrators realised the importance of Islam in the lives of the citizens, and yet be progressive."

He thinks the progressive outlook developed because of Johor's close proximity to Singapore, which even then was a thriving port with traders from all parts of the globe, including Islamic missionaries from the Arab world. It helped the people of Johor form a worldview of events rather than being closed and insular.

Access to the religious schools has never been a problem. There are now 537 religious schools directly administered and fully funded by the State.

It is distributed all over the eight districts in Johor - in towns, villages, plantations and FELDA schemes, even some in remote islands off the Johor coast.

As Ibrahim puts it: "There's no need for individuals to set up private religious schools. We've got it all covered in Johor."

The curriculum is set by the religious department and teachers receive formal training in teacher's training colleges up to diploma level. In fact, the State has a special programme for in-service teachers to obtain their diplomas.

They are vetted by the department before being appointed to their posts. Staff strength at present stands at 3,142. More is needed.

In addition to the State religious schools, there are 23 SARs still operating. Although run autonomously, they are regulated and supervised by the State religious department and furthermore, the State assists them with annual financial grants.

The difference between a SAR and the regular religious schools is only insofar as the greater emphasis placed on proficiency in the Arabic language.

"The SARs are to all intents and purposes part of the State religious education system," says Ibrahim. "We have to help them, especially in terms of funds and teachers. We cannot leave them helpless."

Ibrahim stresses that the religious department has representatives in the school board to ensure that State religious education policies and curricula are strictly adhered to.

Whilst the general emphasis is on the matter of faith and belief, there is no room for religious extremism to take root because of the close monitoring.

"Other than the State enactments, it's because of the established regulatory structure that there is far less likelihood of miscreant teachers imposing their own agendas on the pupils," says Ibrahim.

Students receive six years of basic Islamic knowledge from Standard One to Six, covering such diverse subjects as tauhid (the science on the unity of God), fiqh (jurisprudence), akhlak (good conduct), muamalat (Islamic commerce) and munakahat (family law).

These are in addition to the traditional lessons in Quran reading and interpretations and practise of the Jawi script. In this regard, Johor can justifiably claim to have the highest Jawi literacy rate in the country.

The subject matter sets the tone of the religious education process that is not inconsistent with worldly progress and development.

Students can enrol for another year in the Special Class for more substantial knowledge, after which they can proceed to the Maahad school, which is the pre-university level. The Maahad school in Johor has a twinning programme with the renowned Al-Azhar University in Cairo.

The clamour for religious education in Johor is such that the Government is hard pressed to build new facilities to keep up with the demand.

According to Ibrahim, the State needs another 80 schools just to meet current demand. At a construction cost of about RM1.2 million per school, it's easy to see why the State is balking.

To meet the overwhelming demand, single-session national schools have now been temporarily used until such time when the State can afford to build more religious schools.

And the State just can't afford to build more and more. This, in spite of the fact that the religious sector, next to development works, receives the highest budget allocation.

Ibrahim reveals that the sector receives about RM150 million annually from the State, of which RM87 million is for religious education alone. The large amount is necessary as the system is heavily subsidised by the State, which sees it as a "fardhu kifayah (community obligation).

To offset somewhat the huge financial outlay, new housing schemes of more than a thousand population are required to provide religious school reserves in their planning.

Why the greater demand for religious education?

Ibrahim thinks Johor has always been awake to Islamic consciousness, and not born out of the Islamic revivalism of the 1970s. For most Johor people, Islamic education is a matter of course to complement the national education stream.

"Parents voluntarily submit their children to the religious schools. It's a successful time-tested system. Demand has always been high.

"In the past, parents were afraid that the religious stream would not get their children anywhere in the world. But they now realise that is not so. On the contrary, they feel that their children should be armed with strong religious and spiritual values as safeguards in the real world."

In any case, he adds, formal education at the national school is not compromised because children attend the morning or afternoon religious schools. Religious education is seen by Muslim parents as a necessary part of a holistic education path.

"And parents in Johor are not worried that their children will be led wayward by elements with nefarious intents. The system ensures that."

(END)