

01/08/2004

A balanced approach that is Islam Hadhari

By Hisham Harun

SO much has been said and yet so little is known about Islam Hadhari. HISHAM HARUN met Datuk Dr Abdullah Md Zin, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Religious Affairs), to talk about civilisational Islam, as the concept has been translated as. The personable Member of Parliament for Besut, charged with implementing and promoting the concept, has obviously done his homework. This month, the official document which gives a fuller meaning of Islam Hadhari, will be released to Malaysians.

Q: What is Islam Hadhari?

A: Islam Hadhari offers a rational, sensible and progressive view of the religion. It is a comprehensive approach to development.

Q: Why this approach to Islam?

A: When we talk about Islam, there is always the tendency to link it to the past, to the Prophet's time. But Islam Hadhari includes the present as well.

Yet, it does not stray from the fundamentals of the Quran and Sunnah (sayings of the Prophet).

It emphasises wisdom, practicality and harmony. It encourages wasatiyah or a balanced approach to life.

We are seeking to produce individuals who are spiritually and intellectually strong, who are economically independent and self-reliant, with vision and the ability to face today's challenges.

Q: Why didn't we think of this earlier?

A: We have actually been practising it since Merdeka. Even during Tun Razak's time, emphasis was given to development. Under Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, this policy was continued.

Q: There seems to be some scepticism about the approach. Where is it coming from?

A: Pas is saying Islam Hadhari is a new religion or school of thought, offering misleading teachings of the Quran and Sunnah. They claim it is not authentic Islam as it aims to add new elements to the religion.

They say Barisan Nasional is promoting a false understanding of the religion.

Islam Hadhari is just an approach. It connotes advancement and progression.

The concept encourages flexibility and practicality which we already practise.

For instance, we follow the Shafie school of thought in most areas but in some sectors like finance and banking, we adopt elements from other schools of thought. This is permissible in Islam.

In Shafie, zakat or tithe can only be paid in bags of rice. In the Hanafi school of thought, it is more lenient. We can replace rice with money which is so much easier.

Q: Is moderation a feature of Islam Hadhari?

A: Wasatiyah or a balanced approach to life would be a more precise way to describe Islam Hadhari. Moderation, on the other hand, could connote hastiness to the point of neglecting traditions. Islamic scholars tend to shy away from using the word "moderate" because it can be manipulated and exploited by external influences.

In the same way, scholars are cautious about the word modern which they associate with Western civilisation.

The word progressive could also be used to define Islam Hadhari but

wasatiyah is preferable.

Q: Do you consider yourself a moderate Muslim?

A: I am but I am moderate within the traditionalist mould. I consider myself very open but at a Quran reading competition, I am not comfortable with participants who sway too much when reciting the Quran.

But, if it's a modern nasyid group, I don't see it wrong in them moving to the music.

Q: How would you categorise Muslims here?

A: Malaysian Muslims tend to be divided into two groups: the conservatives and those who are moderate, and sometimes too liberal.

Q: Is there a place for women in Islam Hadhari?

A: Women have a place but right now there are some Syariah judges who are too inflexible and old-fashioned. I would like them to be more professional in their handling of cases involving women.

Q: Can such mindsets be changed?

A: There will be courses conducted by the Syariah Judicial Department to introduce Islam Hadhari to them. There is no point promoting it if the Syariah officers themselves do not understand it.

Unfortunately, we have some trainers saying that Islam Hadhari does not follow any school of thought.

So intensive training must take place.

We will get university lecturers to help explain the concept. The Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia (Jakim) will be the secretariat and will organise courses, workshops and seminars.

There will also be consultations and discussions held by public universities. The Friday sermon will also be used to explain the approach.

Q: The first official document on Islam Hadhari is about to be launched. Could you tell us more about it?

A: We are waiting for the Prime Minister to give us a date. It is a 60-page document. The first draft was done by Jakim and I went through the second.

For the final draft, a group of scientists, professionals and Islamic scholars was gathered to give their views.

The essence was agreed to by all and some amendments were made.

It is now with Pak Lah who is going through it carefully.

Q: Can you give us more details on the book?

A: Firstly, we explain the rationale behind the approach. This is because a lot of Muslims still subscribe to the belief that Islam is confined to rituals like prayers and performing the haj and umrah. They find it difficult to accept that social and cultural advancement are part and parcel of the religion.

For instance, there are people who say that my 27 years as professor in Islamic studies have now been sullied by my involvement in politics. But it all depends on the individual and his intentions.

I spend my weekends in my constituency in Jertih. I try to help those who come to see me. I do not participate in money politics.

The book also highlights that Muslims lag behind others in this country.

Islam Hadhari impresses upon Muslims to seek knowledge of this world and the hereafter.

The third point is that Muslims must take Islam as a complete way of life.

The book also details the approach needed in education, the economy, good governance in administration and management, cleanliness, efficiency, ethics and humility, science and technology, agriculture and culture.

Q: How will the book be distributed?

A: It will first be given to the ministries, followed by federal departments, government agencies and the civil servants.

MCA has requested a Chinese version to better understand the concept. We will also produce English and Arabic versions which will be distributed free.

Q: What will happen after the book is launched?

A: We will form panels to develop the concept further. The first three will be on the economy, education and culture. Other panels will be formed later.

Q: Will the panels comprise only Islamic scholars?

A: Professionals and scholars in the respective fields will also sit on these panels. In the area of science and technology, for instance, we will definitely have scientists sitting on the panel.

Economists will be invited to be members of the panel on economy.

In fact, even when we were putting the book together, experts in various non-religious areas were asked for their views.

Q: With Islam Hadhari, do we need to amend the constitution to declare Malaysia an Islamic state?

A: It isn't necessary. Our constitution is complete. We do not need to declare Malaysia an Islamic nation as 65 per cent of the population is Muslim. We lead the OIC (Organisation of the Islamic Conference). All these indicate that we are a Muslim country.

You also see this clearly in the implementation of religious laws by States which do not go against the Federal Constitution.

The Government is also able to allocate funds for all Islamic activities. This enables Jakim (Islamic Religious Council) to do its work.

The existence of the Islamic Council and the Rulers Council also underscores the fact that we are an Islamic country.

There are countries which boldly declare their Islamic status in their constitutions but fail to live up to it.

We are comfortable in our current situation. Islam is the official religion and non-Muslims have freedom to practise their religion.

Q: What is the status of hudud in Islam Hadhari?

A: Muslims must believe in hudud but the enforcement can be postponed or delayed to suit social conditions.

Even during the Prophet's days, hudud was implemented much later, after the people were sufficiently educated.

Economic factors should also be considered. If there is no stability, Islamic thinkers say hudud cannot be implemented.

This is why wasatiyah is critical.

Q: Who are more resistant to the concept: Pas or non-Muslims?

A: Pas just wants to demolish the concept by saying it is a new school of thought or religion, while non-Muslims are concerned that it will bring about a more extreme Islam.

MCA has said the concept is good but is worried that it may be wrongly handled. We will make sure this does not happen.

As I said, Islam Hadhari is about the creation of a progressive, civilised and tolerant society. We believe in the sharing of power and in religious freedom.

There is no compulsion in religion. During the Prophet's time, there were Jews, Christians and pagans living alongside Muslims in Medina.

In many countries such as Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, even after 100 years of Islamic rule, there are still many Christians - an indication of how tolerant Islam is.

Q: Are there any questions in Parliament on Islam Hadhari?

A: Many. From Pas to Barisan backbenchers. Pas merely wants to attack the concept but the backbenchers want details on the implementation.

Q: What is the difference between Islam Hadhari and political Islam?

A: Islam Hadhari works from bottom up, from the villages and in a

systematic way. Political Islam, which is practised by Pas, works the opposite way. From top down. Often it leads to nowhere. This was how Ayatollah Khomeini ruled and where did it take the country?

Q: Is the Islam Hadhari approach used anywhere else?

A: There have been discussions about this but we are the first to implement it. Sudan, where there is religious strife, is very interested. So is Indonesia.

We are hoping to disseminate this to Muslims in southern Thailand soon.

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