

25/06/2004

Enriching citizenship

By Rozi Ali

HOW do Malaysians define our constitutional scheme and what is our understanding of citizenship? ROZI ALI argues that citizenship must come with the right to engage in public discourse.

RELIGION and politics have always mixed in the Malaysian polity. This was seen in the Dewan Rakyat recently. Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang questioned former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's declaration of Malaysia as an Islamic state and the practice of appointing Muslims to head the Federal Government.

It triggered a volley of reactions. But the intersection of religion and politics is among the few aspects of Malaysian political life that tend to generate fatuous obfuscation. In the flurry of words, only two reactions stood out.

Level-headed as usual, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak pointed to the Federal Constitution. Part of Article 3 declares Islam the official state religion and guarantees religious freedom.

Reproaching Lim for stirring up a non-issue, Najib said it was a long-standing convention that the head of the Barisan Nasional is chosen to lead the Federal Government so long as the BN wins a general election. For Malaysians, it is a non-issue and there is no dispute about it, he asserted.

Throwing the ball into Lim's court, Dr Mahathir said if Lim thinks Malaysia is not an Islamic state, then he should define it.

He clarified that he had made the declaration on the basis that the majority of people are Muslims and Islam is the official religion.

Although the Constitution declares no such presumption, he explained that the head of government's office is naturally held by a Muslim because Muslims form the majority.

The debate gives an interesting snapshot of Malaysian political life. It is a narrative about the nation's ongoing search of its sense of self or nationhood.

Ultimately, it is about democracy - about the defining elements of our constitutional scheme and our understanding of citizenship.

The concern here is not with a party's definition of an Islamic state or whether Article 3 implies Islamic sovereignty. The debate on these or the prime minister's religious identity is a non-issue.

The crux of the matter is that at some point - if not now, later - there will always be groups across the political spectrum which are compelled to calibrate their interest in this debate as the stakes are high. The question is how we, Malaysians, see such a discourse.

Can we relate it, without misgivings over each other's intent and hysteria, to the endless task of constructing a Malaysian civil society, which entails the balancing of political visions and the renegotiating of the contours of rules for public life?

The questions that must have struck our forefathers, such as how the political order and our political life can be made to embody mutual respect among divergent religious views, continue to be replayed in many forms.

They will find space in public discourse. But this depends on how far we understand the concept of citizenship. As scholar Elizabeth Jelin has argued, the concept of citizenship implies power and conflict - namely a struggle about who can participate in the process of defining common

problems and how they are to be faced.

After 47 years of Independence, we should be able to move towards the ideal of civic friendship on all the issues that concern the polity.

Some segments in society are not ready for it but unless we are willing to invest the idea of citizenship with the right to engage in a public discourse, then we won't be able to give our constitutional democracy a sufficiently civic dimension.

The social contract entered by our forefathers on the democratic, secular, multi-religious country with Islam as the state religion and the Constitution contains, in many ways, doses of liberalism. But in the twists and turns and transformations of a nation, there have been illiberal currents.

Such currents prevent many from articulating their concerns. And we seem content to let that be. In doing so, we unwittingly allow the conservatives the monopoly on the moral discourse. And once the public square is left half naked, ultra-conservatives and extremists walk in where moderates and liberals fear to tread.

No doubt, there are risks in widening the space for public discourse. But if we restrict our thinking about political life to an exclusively legalistic language, as embodied in the sedition law and other similar legislation, we find ourselves confined to an unacceptably narrow horizon of moral and social experience.

What we need most are alternative political vocabularies that pose a radical challenge to the reigning vocabulary seen in Pas' Islamic state or its other political cause célèbre, the hudud; the competing visions of what constitutes an Islamic state; Bangsa Malaysia and other legal contraptions that automatically clams one's desire to be devoted to the public weal or prevent the Malaysian polity from being self-critical.

There are some who, like Stephen Daedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, feel that when the soul of a man is born in this country, there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight.

You talk to me of nationality, language, religion, I shall try to fly by those nets.

If only we could persuade them that nationality, upon which the political concept of citizenship rests, language and religion are not entrapments but indispensable elements that serve to enrich, not stifle, the civic dimension in our society.

(END)