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Bringing Islam Hadhari into the mainstream

By Rose Ismail

THE first official document on Islam Hadhari is expected to be launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi early next month. ROSE ISMAIL gets a sneak preview of this intriguing concept.

ISLAM Hadhari will require a complete change in outlook. It will demand that every Muslim view the religion in a progressive, expansive and inclusive way.

Civilisational Islam, as the term has been translated, will encourage Muslims to pay as much attention to the here and now, as they do the hereafter.

It has been crafted to go beyond labels and symbols, to focus on contemporary developments and to acknowledge the contributions of all Malaysians.

As Tan Sri Hamid Othman explains, the labourer who fixes broken pipes, the rubber tapper who begins tapping before dawn, the engineer who constructs a dam, the doctor who cares for her patients and the cashier who does his work with integrity are all good people and, if they are Muslims, such honest and diligent efforts would make them good Muslims as well.

Such people do more for Islam than those who pray relentlessly in the mosque each day, says Hamid, who is the Prime Minister's religious affairs adviser.

In the same way, he adds, if Cordova is acknowledged by Muslims as a symbol of Islam's past architectural glory, then KLCC should also be seen as a significant achievement by a Muslim country today.

This shift in approach would be viewed suspiciously by literalists - those who take the Quran and Hadith in the most literal sense - but it is likely to open new vistas and opportunities for those yearning to make Islam relevant to contemporary times.

"Why do we confine our readings and discussions of the Quran to what was done in Yemen during the Prophet's time?" asks Hamid.

"Six kilometres of waterways - as stated in the Quran - was clearly a huge endeavour then but we now have 250km of waterways crisscrossing the state of Kedah. We have a dam which supplies a third of the State.

"Aren't these major achievements made by Muslims as well?"

Hamid knows that it will not be easy to persuade people to believe that such developments are linked to Islam.

As one political activist points out: "Malaysian-Muslims are among the most conservative and orthodox in the Islamic world.

"We have a wide range of choices but our ulama tend to adopt the strictest and sometimes, the most restrictive position on most matters."

A broader perspective on Islam is more readily acceptable in Iran, Indonesia and Egypt where intense intellectual discussions on Islam take place.

In this country, discussions are often thwarted because of the fear of going astray. Tangible matters are also seen as "worldly" and, therefore, transient and unimportant.

"How do we impress upon Muslims that God enjoins them to prepare for the afterlife and, at the same time, do their best in this world, for the living, for all of humankind?"

In the last few years, Hamid, encouraged by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Abdullah, travelled the world to consult scholars on how to link Islam to

progress and development.

After much discussion both here and abroad, Abdullah finally introduced Islam Hadhari in 2002.

Because it was done without fanfare, it was almost ignored until a week before the general election when the Prime Minister fleshed it out before an audience of 25,000.

Today, some political analysts say Barisan Nasional's election victory was due to Abdullah's integrity as a leader and his vision of Islam which fired the imagination of many.

Of course, Pas has ridiculed the concept as half-baked. The Opposition party claims that Islam Hadhari is a new religion. Their leaders have poked fun at the wrong usage of "hadhari" (civilisation).

Unperturbed, Hamid says the word was co-opted for local usage. Hence, Arabic grammar is not an issue.

More importantly, he says, Islam Hadhari re-orientates the way Muslims look at themselves, their faith and others.

Therefore, devotion to God is not just praying five times a day: it also means that you don't cheat, take bribes, slander others and persecute those different from you.

Hamid stresses that Islam Hadhari does not, in any way, tamper with the substance of Islam although there is growing acknowledgement that life has changed considerably since the time of the Prophet.

Essentially, this means that problems affecting the ummah should now be handled differently.

By extension, this would also mean that in worldly matters, interpretations can change.

What appears to be most refreshing about Islam Hadhari is that it allows contemporary Muslims to move forward.

For instance, if Pas is urging Malaysian-Muslims to support the setting up of an Islamic state, Islam Hadhari is likely to allow for a position where such a state need not be formally forged as long as values and principles are compatible with Islam.

This is an interesting take on the issue and one which may pull the rug from under Pas' feet.

If Malaysian-Muslims accept Islam Hadhari, it would not just be a coup for the Umno-led Government; it could also widen the space for more voices to contribute to the kind of Islam we want in this country.

One political leader who is confident that Muslims will support the new approach is Datuk Wan Ahmad Farid Wan Salleh, political secretary to the Minister of Home Affairs.

"Pas says that until and unless we set up an Islamic state, we will never be good Muslims.

"Does this mean that if you live in England or Russia, you can't be a good Muslim? There are five million Muslims in France. Are they all bad?"

Wan Farid, who practised law for many years before joining politics, says Pas wants more laws to be implemented to rid society of negative and destructive elements "but you can't transform society by legal means alone.

"People must see the bigger picture, they must understand that there is more to Islam than its laws."

He believes that with Islam Hadhari, the Islamic state idea espoused by Pas will slowly meander into oblivion.

But before this happens, the new approach should be publicly debated. Until now, this has not happened.

Thus far, discussions have only involved a select number of scholars, politicians and senior government officials.

Workshops have also been conducted, largely with government servants,

but what is being taught is not known.

Women's groups, non-Muslims and Muslims who are not in the Azharite camp (those who studied in Cairo's Al Azhar university) have all been excluded from the discussions - which may not be the best strategy to take as the new approach must be accessible to and accepted by all.

Because so little is known about Islam Hadhari, many non-Muslims are naturally anxious about it, as are women who have not always enjoyed the status and rights which they have under Islam.

Hamid gives the assurance that Muslims and non-Muslims have equal status, shared rights and responsibilities under Islam Hadhari.

Women, Wan Farid adds, will also play as important a role as men. There are plans, for instance, to appoint women Syariah judges soon.

But the proof in the pudding is in the eating.

How would authorities, under the new approach, have handled the Shamala Sathiyaseelan case where her two young children were converted to Islam without her knowledge?

Would the courts have dealt with the case involving four individuals who renounced Islam differently? Would Muslims have treated them less harshly, especially when one of them died upon release from prison?

And where would hudud fit in this new scheme of things?

Islam Hadhari does not reject hudud, says Hamid, but neither can such laws be implemented at this point in time.

Political scientist Dr Chandra Muzaffar, a little uncertain about the Islam Hadhari concept because he believes Islam should not have epithets or labels, wonders whether it is even necessary to deal with hudud.

"Hudud is a segment of the Syariah which focuses on strengthening the ethical foundation of society," he says.

"Instead of looking at specific laws and getting ourselves into a knot over jurisprudential arguments, let's concentrate on Syariah goals which ensure social justice for all.

"Syariah is 80 per cent fiqh (jurisprudence) and the root meaning of this is 'to think' - which we don't.

"Malaysia must have brave leaders who say don't be trapped by fiqh because the medieval approach was meant for medieval times."

For the new concept to work, Chandra says there must be a shift in emphasis from rituals and symbols to the substance of the faith. And this must begin in schools and taken right up to the university level.

Another important element would be to prevent the media from promoting a stereotypical and often simplistic approach to Islam.

Chandra also believes that examples of good Muslims would help. These should be individuals who are faithful to Islamic practices, and are outstanding as teachers, engineers and doctors.

Finally, he says, Muslims must know that being Islamic means recognising and respecting the rights of other communities and individuals.

"Right now, there is no country that does this adequately.

But Hamid, more hopeful than most, is confident that Islam Hadhari will work.

"We have been practising it since Independence and today, after much effort, we can stand on our own feet. This is what civilisational Islam is about."

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