

21/09/2003

Blueprint we'll never see

Rose Ismail

HAVE we become victims of a tactical tease? At the close of the 49th Pas Muktamar last week, the party declared that until it takes over the country, its blueprint on the Islamic state will not be revealed.

For those of us who have been waiting for such details, this is a terrible let-down.

If the party is hoping to package its vision of a utopian society based on Islamic law without giving Malaysians the low-down well beforehand, this is an indication of how poorly Pas relates to the people.

Since most Malaysians are, as Pas leaders often say, ill-equipped to understand such complex issues, we must now wait until the party takes federal control before the exact shape and fit of the Islamic state is made known.

In the meantime, it is assumed that we will accept the party's sincerity on the matter.

To do otherwise would be to question the party's raison d'etre which has been cleverly fused with the religion.

Even so, Pas president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang would not want us to jump to the conclusion that the party is nudging Malaysians along a one-way path towards theocratic rule.

Already, Senator Hassan Shukri's unexpected elevation to the post of deputy president has set off worrying debates on the strength of the ulama class in Pas, a development which may drive away potential supporters.

The party would also not want Malaysians to compare Pas' model with existing examples of failed or vulnerable Islamic states, all of which it has publicly kept at arm's length.

For instance, at the start of the Iranian Revolution 24 years ago, Pas was enthused by the creation of an Islamic state. These days, the party scarcely acknowledges the unending power struggle between the ultraconservative ulama and the reformist thinkers and leaders of that society.

So learning from all sides, the party is making every effort to take all Malaysians into consideration in its version of the Islamic state.

In fact, these days, the party has become so malleable that it can easily be accused of being power-centric instead of God-centric.

Obviously, there is some realisation that branding is necessary to attract both Muslims and non-Muslims because the party now uses contemporary marketing tools to reach out to potential customer-followers.

Of course, it doesn't always work. Occasionally, assurances made by party leaders will be blotched by chance remarks alluding to a dark future, especially for non-Muslims.

For instance, in Singapore recently, Pas research director Dzulkefly Ahmad told journalists that imposing Islamic law at the federal level was "academic" because only 57 per cent of Malaysians are Muslim.

This means that the votes of the substantial minority would give them considerable clout.

Then, rather disquietingly, he added that Muslims were expected to form more than 70 per cent of the population by 2020.

What does this mean? That rules change according to the numbers? That as the number of non-Muslims shrink in relation to the majority, they will have a smaller say in matters affecting their lives?

All this needs to be addressed carefully. The pun may seem unforgivable

but surely Pas knows that the devil hides in the details.

Indeed, could this be yet another reason why the blueprint is still under wraps?

In their attempts to explain, the leaders were inevitably vague.

Vice-president Datuk Mustafa Ali said certain details concerning the administration could only be obtained after the party comes to power.

Hadi, who was just as oblique, said Pas' version was different from that of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's, hence there was no necessity to issue a memorandum on the Islamic state.

The Prime Minister had, in September 2001, pulled the rug from under Pas' feet by declaring Malaysia an Islamic state. Soon after, this was endorsed by the Barisan Nasional.

Noting the efforts made on almost every tier - economic, social, political - many respectable foreign Islamic scholars have also publicly acknowledged Malaysia an Islamic state.

Quite naturally, Hadi has never been impressed by all this and has made cutting remarks to effect.

But in his closing comments at the muktamar, he did urge the people to read up on Islamic states to get "a clear picture of the real concept of the Islamic state".

This is indeed useful advice and one which we should not ignore.

For it is in the reading that we will discover many versions of Islamic states; that there is no ideal state; that there will never be one interpretation of Islamic laws; and, that neither the Syariah nor the juristic doctrine of Muslim scholars provides a specific pattern for the constitution of an Islamic state.

So herein lies more reasons why the blueprint did not materialise.

Besides, to do so would be to lay bare all the uncertainties, which Pas cannot afford to reveal at this crucial stage of its political struggle.

And, to do so would mean that there will be nothing left to show, to hold out on and to tantalise and tease the people with.

Unveiling the blueprint now would also mean exposing Pas to the embarrassing risk of having the document ripped apart by critics, detractors and adversaries.

It may also cause consternation and conflict among allies within the party and in other opposition parties and among prospective supporters.

As a keen Pas observer and sociologist says, Pas must keep the blueprint a secret because "the indeterminacy, the uncertainty is a key part of their political appeal, the basis of interest among their supporters: why people will want to keep listening to them and paying attention to them".

Besides, keeping the blueprint just beyond the reach of the people means it will always stay in the news.

At the practical level, Pas would also want to work on the blueprint slowly, to see how it can be realised, to see what they can get away with and what they can't.

If assurances are given now, says the sociologist, Pas may not want "to renounce any measures or options that might actually prove feasible or possible when or if ever they get into a position to try things out later".

So, perhaps, without realising it, some of us may have been made victims of a tactical tease.