

Gov't complicit in rumour mongering
Malaysiakini.com
May 14, 2011

I believe many of the problems that arise can be nipped in the bud if the government practices a policy of 'zero-tolerance' of conduct that is subversive of the country's racial and religious harmony and acts, without fear or favour to quell the potential threats and make those responsible accountable.

The latest allegation that Christians are trying to make Christianity the official religion of Malaysia is not only absurd but insane. There is no motive for the allegation than one motivated by scaremongering and utter irresponsibility.

While I believe in freedom of speech, incitement to hatred is a different matter and unless society is protected from those who say untrue things about others and damage their reputation and cause social unrest, trouble brews. The troublemakers should be taken to task along with those who act on such false allegations and spread the false rumour.

A few days ago many Egyptians were killed when a false rumour was spread that a Christian woman who wanted to convert to Islam was being held in a Coptic Christian Church. An angry mob torched the church and violence between the Coptics and muslims ensued. Soldiers were brought in to quell the riot which saw both sides hurling rocks at each other.

In contrast only months before, Christians and Muslims stood hand in hand against a repressive government and that resulted in the downfall of Hosni Mubarrak.

Some reports allege subversive elements were involved in spreading the false rumour. In Malaysia Umno secretary-general Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor stressed the importance of verifying third-party information and admitted that the recent Christian-state controversy was ill advised, according to Malaysiakini.

But it is not the first time nor will it be the last time this government was ill-advised, and unless it acts swiftly to quash all false rumours and make those who originate them and spread the poison accountable, expect more of such morally reprehensible conduct.

A strict policy of rumour-quashing was adopted during the days of Konfrontasi and Emergency where rumour-mongering was taken seriously by the government, and citizens who indulged in spreading false rumours were arrested by the police and dealt with accordingly.

A false rumour of a religious nature in Malaysia has a sting to it because it touches the people's sensitive nerve and psyche, especially those of the Muslim faith, some of whom it seems falsely think that mob violence is the only defence of their religion.

Fuelled by ignoble political motives the fire can spread wildly and people run amok and hurt others and damage property. It is a proven fact we have seen from the incident of torched churches over the Allah issue and the cow's head incident.

The former Perak mufti caused a stir in front of a Catholic Church in Ipoh when he spread the false rumour that Muslim children were to be baptized there. A false rumour of conversions to Christianity has almost become routine and those who spread the rumour are not taken to task.

Religious extremist groups falsely accuse Christians of besieging them when they are merely asking for their Constitutional rights to be recognised to right previous wrongs. Those who make false allegations are unworthy of Islam and should take a long hard look at themselves because making slander against another is a serious sin in Islam. You can't be serious about your religion by acting against its teachings and that includes everyone - Muslim or non-Muslim alike.

The government has not reined in the offending newspaper that appears to be fanning racial and religious animosity with its unverified reports. Such misplaced tolerance makes the government culpable if anything untoward results from all the false rumour-mongering and instigating by irresponsible and subversive media reports.

The idea that Christians want a Christian state is as silly as saying that Mickey Mouse wants to become the next American president. It is absurd. Christians hardly ever get involved in politics vis a vis Muslims let alone think of Malaysia becoming a Christian state.

What next?

The truth is Christians have long separated church from state and unlike Islam, Christianity does not need official status to exist and exert its influence. The Kingdom of God to the Christians is not of this world, not about political power, but a spiritual concern. In fact if Muslims stop believing the lies they are told about Christianity and other religions they may have nothing to fear and will find much common ground for an upright society among people of different faiths. After all who wants to live in a corrupt and unfair society?

Christians are more concerned for Malaysia becoming a righteous state than a Christian one. They are more concerned that the government is not corrupt or unfair than having a Christian flag fly over Putrajaya. Many Christians in politics may yet be the salt of the earth if they can stay true to their Lord's teachings and love and care for the needs of all Malaysians especially those among the rural and urban poor and remain incorruptible by the prevalent moral evil. It is all about personal piety not political coercion.

That is why Christians can be found working with anyone who subscribes to right conduct and even those who are corrupt because they believe that ultimately each one of us will give an account to God, notwithstanding they support civil governments and politicians that practise good governance. Otherwise they will have to leave this planet if they cannot live in an imperfect world and try to change everything to suit themselves. They subscribe to the idea of 'live and let live' and that they are to love the sinner while hating the sin.

For this reason Christians are instructed to pray for all governments and all those in authority so that those God-ordained institutions can carry out their work to ensure peace in society. Ironically if the critics of Christianity think they believe in a false God why do they worry that their prayers will be answered? Why should they even try to control prayer?

The safeguard against religious misunderstanding is more openness among the diverse religions and above all the recognition that people will switch in and out of religions according to their whims and fancy and personal needs. God decides who gets to Heaven, not political parties, mosques, churches or temples or any self-appointed defenders of religion who do more harm than good to society by their unreasonable demands and unfounded fears.

If God does not strike anyone down for not believing in him, why should anyone try to play God and coerce others to comply with their dictates? Islam does not teach coercion and no other religion does either, but rascals and troublemakers that make up the fanatics will impose their will on others and go about it forcefully. They think that religion is like a mafia gang that imposes its will through force, often destructive. We have seen such unrest abroad not only between Muslims and non-Muslims but Muslims themselves. These people give their religion a bad name.

The safeguard against false rumours is the truth and leaders who promote it. If a religious leader is incapable of playing the gatekeeper of peace and harmony by not creating false rumours or allowing them to spread, but instead will quash all falsehood and irresponsible conduct that creates social unrest, he is morally unfit to lead. Unless you have leaders of impeccable character in religious roles, you are really courting disaster when the unscrupulous fan the flames of religious fanaticism and hatred.

Until there is openness about religions and Malaysians are made to understand other people's religions they will be victims of ignorance and false rumours. Religion need not be divisive if people understand their own religion as well as those of others. To love is of God, to hate is of the devil, to understand is the privilege of being human.

Spreading false and malicious rumours must be considered a serious crime but the failure of the government to quash the rumours and bring those culpable to account is reason why some people even dare to produce and distribute a fabricated sex video to destroy a high profile politician, and why the stirrers get away with it every time.

As a saying goes, 'unless a wrongdoer is punished quickly, other troublemakers will be emboldened to do more wrongs.' Wrongdoers will do wrong but it is worse when those responsible for safeguarding our peace appear complicit by their failure to act against the wrongdoers. The government must act decisively or be damned for its sin of omission.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd
<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/164135>