

## **PAS' welfare state goal is debatable**

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COMMENT The comments that emanated from Umno on the outcome of the PAS elections last weekend yet again demonstrated that when it comes to a discussion of ideas, their commentary is bereft.

Its crappy tone hit a nadir when Dr Mahathir Mohamad speculated that the person most elated with the results of the PAS elections would be DAP chairperson Karpal Singh.

Trust Mahathir to squeeze the soft underbelly of DAP-PAS relations by dredging up a remark made by Karpal in the prelude to the 1999 general elections - that Malaysia could only become an Islamic state over his dead body - to remind voters of how far PAS had now come in abandoning its Islamic state goal to appease the secularists in DAP.

In a long career politicians are allowed a rash comment or two, provided the person apologises as Karpal did.

Nobody can remember if Mahathir had apologised for his "We will shoot them" remark in reference to the boatloads of Vietnamese refugees who landed on Terengganu beaches in the late 1970s; neither can anybody recall if Mahathir had recanted his claim that Anwar Ibrahim's infamous black eye was self-inflicted.

In Mahathir's conception of political villainy, everyone else except him can be frozen in the error one has committed even if apologies have been tendered for the mistake.

PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang's apparent substitution of a 'welfare state' for his party's Islamic state agenda in his policy address at the party's muktamar last week was remarkable for reason of its admission that in the Quran, there are verses on the welfare for Muslims under Islamic rule, but no mention of an Islamic state.

Some years ago this aspect was highlighted by the late Indonesian leader, Abdulrahman Wahid, who in explaining his stand against the creation of an Islamic state, said there was no such concept in the Quran.

With his pedigree in Quranic exegesis - in 1926, his grandfather founded the Nadhatul Ulama, the Muslim world's largest social organisation - Wahid's explanation was seen as a major contribution towards demystifying the concept.

Now that the PAS president has said essentially the same thing, the admission can be taken to be another step towards stripping the subject of its mystique.

Not that this would be terribly useful in cooling the ardour of fervent Muslims for an Islamic state.

In religious matters, the absence of scriptural support is no guarantee that a belief, once it has taken hold, would not endure.

Still, Hadi Awang's supplanting of 'welfare state' for 'Islamic state' is a timely circumlocution given that a general election is close and the issue of an Islamic state would certainly be resurrected by Umno-BN as a useful stick with which to beat the opposition Pakatan Rakyat over its head.

Umno can be counted on to take the hypocritical tack in its criticism of PAS: that the latter has abandoned its principles, never mind that Umno's Muslims care nothing for that goal, though support for syariah is an Islamic obligation and a state founded on syariah qualifies to be called Islamic.

**Welfare state for the rich**

Even when Umno takes the less pretentious route and claims, as did its deputy president Muhyiddin Yassin, that PAS' welfare state goal has already been become a reality under Umno rule, the criticism is stupefying.

Under Umno-BN rule, Malaysia can be considered a welfare state for the politically well-connected and the already well-heeled.

If it could be said that Malaysia is a welfare state, it is so in much the same way that China is a communist state: in the one, there are state provisions for the wealthy, while in the other there is a capitalistic economic system for the elites and communist ideological controls for all.

A better entry point to the debate on the welfare state goal of PAS would be whether such a state is viable given what has happened to the concept of the welfare state over the last six decades of world history.

The notion of a welfare state has not worn well in recent world economic history though it must be said that the opposite – a rapacious capitalistic system – has brought catastrophic consequences in recent years to several countries in the west.

Needless to say, there are useful points for debate on the PAS switch to a welfare state but you won't suspect that from the rash of Umno's commentary on the change.

You will hear a lot about PAS' motive for the switch but virtually nothing about the viability or relevance of the welfare state concept. As ever, shadows matter more than substance.

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