

Hasan Ali, according to me
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And finally, PAS shows Dr Hasan Ali the door.

The opinions about him range from those in the rabid anti-Hasan group, a big number of whom could only now see the 'evils' of the Barisan Nasional government, to those who think that Hasan's exit would mean PAS becoming less Islamic in its character and objectives.

Several weeks after my graduation, I joined the PAS organ Harakah and was made in charge of its English section. It was the best of times and the worst of times: it was the peak of the reformasi period and Malaysia's drift into a police state.

It was also a period when over 350,000 copies of Harakah were sold at every edition, just like hot cakes, only better.

One of my first assignments was to interview Hasan, who had then just joined PAS amid much fanfare and jubilation among PAS members.

Pictures of him passing the membership form to then PAS president, the late Fadzil Noor, were splashed almost on every issue of Harakah.

The celebratory mood in PAS was understandable: Hasan was of course a good catch.

His clean shaven image and established reputation as a well-liked motivational speaker were after all a welcome development for a party that had, until then, taken pains to show that it was not the village party that a small clique of self-proclaimed 'liberals' in the mainstream media would depict it to be.

hasan ali umno pas selangor talk quality hotel 300708 01My first impression of Hasan (left) was not far off from the one I had formed about him during the many times he appeared on the government television channel. To begin with, I never had high expectation for a motivational speaker.

This view about motivational speakers is now permanently cemented into my psyche based on a true rags-to-riches story of a friend. This fellow was a miserable failure in his studies and would appear in class only during an examination.

Of course, he never did get his degree. Nowadays, I have been told that he gives motivational talks to students on how to achieve good grades!

Many were stand-up comedians

Hasan of course was more qualified academically than this friend of mine. But much of the content of his talks and speeches have not been reflective of someone who is widely read and recognised as an expert on Islamic subjects.

The same is the case with many of those who followed Hasan's footsteps as Islamic talk show hosts, and who clearly got to establish themselves easier following Hasan's departure from the scene.

One would be forgiven for thinking that many of them were stand-up comedians, except that they are always seated in big bulky chairs, and often with an expensive Islamic calligraphy in the background, sometimes with a scarcely filled shelf containing a set of uniformed volumes supplied by a library contractor.

The last time I heard Hasan was when he became a guest speaker to deliver the Friday khutbah (sermon) at a mosque in Petaling Jaya, in his capacity as the Selangor exco in charge of Islamic affairs.

It was perhaps one of the rare occasions that many in the mosque did not sleep with their eyes open or hands clasped over their faces.

But it was also the first time that a khutbah had turned into a spirited motivational speech - condescending, patronising, lacking substance and littered with slogans of "yes we can!" (something like the theme song from the kiddy programme "Bob the Builder", one may say).

Other than his achievement of not putting people to sleep, he left little else on the congregation.

Then again, this was Hasan in his element. He treats his audience as schoolchildren ready to sit for exams in a few days.

Which brings me back memories of another occasion when I had to listen to him talking, this time at a forum held in a church, about three years after I first interviewed him.

On the following edition of Harakah, I published my own scathing comments criticising Hasan.

Thinking back, it could well have been Hasan's early encounter as a politician with church-going Christians, indeed the church, of which he had been having issues with at present.

The following piece was published in Harakah in January 2002, and sums up my opinion about Hasan, about a decade before the leadership finally decided that he was a liability to the Islamic party:

"These Islamophobic times, to be given an opportunity to address a packed hall full of non-Muslims concerned about the 'Islam factor', is an opportunity that any concerned Muslim would salivate at.

On Jan 4, 2002, that golden opportunity was given to PAS simply for the reason that it represents the only Islamic political entity now left in this country.

First speaker's non-performance

Organised by the Catholic Research Centre, the 'closed door forum' (closed but not shut) held at a hall of a prominent church in Petaling Jaya was participated by PAS vice president Dr Hasan Ali, DAP's Lim Kit Siang, Anuar Razak of the government-sponsored Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM), and moderated by Dr Patricia Martinez, an academician whose speciality is Islam and comparative religion.

Speakers were given 20 minutes each on the topic 'Is Malaysia an Islamic State', reflecting a renewed interest and concern from the non-Muslims about the 'prime ministerial announcement' last September that Malaysia was an Islamic state.

The first speaker, Anuar representing the government or rather Dr Mahathir, read out what seemed to be a standard IKIM-type argument that Malaysia is an Islamic state, that human rights include "petty hawkers' right to do business peacefully" (whatever he was hinting at, it was clearly a case of wrong text at the wrong context), that non-Muslims are free to practice their religions, etcetera.

A jubilant Lim Kit Siang, reeling from the effects of the first speaker's non-performance, continued from where he stopped.

In fact, Lim was later to be the only speaker who really made the forum seem like a forum on 'Is Malaysia an Islamic State?', substantiating his arguments - however ambagious and twisted - with genuine concerns of the non-Muslims.

Lim reiterated the need for a thorough national debate before any announcement is to be made about the ideology of a state.

He explained at length leaning on what he considered as historical evidences of the country's 'secular' ideology and the concerns of non-Muslim vis-a-vis 'Islamic state' - concerns which we all too often hear expressed in non-Muslim newsletters and indoor forums, but continued to be ignored and unexplained by the so-called torch bearers of the Islamic state themselves.

Lim requested clarification about the Islamic state in a simple question: "Is it a state with one man, one vote, one time?" - a sinister attempt to send the message across that an Islamic state will be a totalitarian state.

Hitherto, this nonchalant indifference among Islamic state advocates (such as PAS and Abim) to explain in all honesty the concept of Islamic state is attributed to language and ethno-religious barriers.

From the horse's mouth

Both barriers were cleared when the organisers invited an English-speaking PAS leader to a forum held at a church, in a hall full of what seemed to be practising, at least church-going, Christians and other concerned non-Muslims conscious of the moral decay now reigning in the country.

Now if this is not a wonderful opportunity for PAS, then even having its own television channel would not help the cause of Islam.

It was in this context that PAS' Dr Hasan Ali, known for his articulate speeches and lauded for his 'progressive' image, literally wasted the 20 minutes accorded to him (perhaps to Islam itself) to explain to an audience who are understandably hostile yet all the more anxious to know about the Islamic concept of state, 'right from the horse's mouth'.

Fluent in English and widely-read, Dr Hasan represented a hope in the local political Islam, breaking away from the traditional ceramah, party-political-type image that Umno and PAS are stuck with (and for which much damage was caused to Islamic state vision).

What was essentially a forum on Islam's concept of state and governance turned out to be an English version of a PAS ceramah we often hear amid noisy rattlings of chairs and ventilator fans at the PAS headquarters in Taman Melewar.

Dr Hasan failed to drive home the point of justice in Islam and instead gave instances of his 'personal' experience being treated unfairly despite being elected "in two seats, one parliament, and the other a state seat", as he had taken pains to explain.

He failed to explain - from the Islamic state point of view - why he disagreed that Malaysia was an Islamic state.

Instead, he again burst into an orgy of Umno bashing - the staple diet many PAS leaders survive on - which is irrelevant in a debate that was supposed to be sober and educational.

Hasan then went on complaining about the unfair conduct of students elections at UiTM and UKM - and this to an audience for whom these very institutions create among them anxiety about justice and fairness under an Islamic state.

In the end, the moderator Patricia felt obliged to ask Hasan if he could share PAS' understanding of an Islamic state with the audience.

During question time, the PAS spokesman was thrown another wonderful opportunity to explain the Islamic concept of justice, when a young man asked what he would do with the Bumiputra special rights

given the chance to become prime minister.

More Umno-bashing took place

To this, he merely burst into another of those politicians' jokes ("first of all, I wish I can be the PM"), but this was not followed by a clear explanation of Islam's stand on this Malaysian apartheid - a bane really in greater appreciation of Islam among non-Muslims in this country.

Instead, more Umno-bashing took place. He also stumbled when a member of the audience questioned on Islam's view of apostasy, linking it with the freedom of religious practice.

To this, Hasan gave a schoolchild's reply that it was a rule ordained by God and therefore it was difficult to rationalise. For a while, I thought it was another of his jokes, but it turned out to be his serious reply.

A lady from the audience had later given a better explanation of freedom of religion in Islam, however disagreeable, it was better than telling a people of another faith that it was God's laws and therefore period.

And he again clowned when somebody asked about Islamic laws of inheritance - this effectively exposed the politician's intellectual indolence, and laid bare his inability to answer on such matters.

But perhaps God decided not to disappoint His religion, and a lawyer later explained inheritance in the Islamic law.

It is time that PAS leaders buck up and understand the mood of the country's multi-religious crowd and how fast the Muslims are loosing their grip on the "social contract" they claim to have entered into with the non-Muslims for the political power they seem to have inherited.

Political power in the final analysis depends on economic and intellectual power. Malaysians have matured faster than Umno and PAS leaders have expected.

They have to prepare themselves to face this challenge in a rational way if Islam is to have an abiding influence in this country and the country is to retain its Islamic character.
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