

Manufacturing of the fear culture
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COMMENT Fear has been the primary weapon for social and economical cohesion in Malaysia, and religion or more accurately Islam has been the 'keris' - either sheathed or unsheathed - that has reminded us of our place in the natural order of the BN-constructed reality.

The politically-motivated acquittal of Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim on his politically-motivated charges has brought on the real possibility of a new era of government comprised of a contentious group of political, racial, social, economical, but most importantly, religious interests.

NONE If it truly is to be a Malaysia for all Malaysians regardless of race or religion, we have to understand Islam and why we have come to fear it. And we are not alone.

All over the world there is a deep undercurrent of discontent when it comes to Islam and this cannot be merely dismissed as the angst induced by right-wing or nationalistic propaganda. I say "we" because I am not merely referring to non-Muslims but also to Muslims.

If the non-Muslim fears to speak out when his or her rights are trampled on for fear of the repercussions, so it is for the Muslim who fears to speak out in case he is labelled a traitor to his religion or worse.

Fear is the commonality and it binds believer and non-believer alike.

BN's social engineering

A fear culture is about control. It takes shape in a variety of forms depending on the impetus of its makers, be it ideological, social or religious. In Malaysia, where Islam is the dominant method of controlling the population and discourse, it is the majority Malays who are under the most pressure from the state.

NONE And it is with them that the future of this country rests. The fear culture needs for large swathes of the population to be fearful of the 'other'. It needs for them to be ignorant of the state's own malfeasances.

It uses the instruments at its disposal - education and the media - to inculcate a culture of distrust that serves its own agenda. It does this by conflating race and religion and it has done an extremely good job of giving shape to the fears of a large population of Malays.

The fact that the discourse in Malaysia is always dominated by race and religion is testament to how effective the ruling regime has been in carrying out its various social engineering programmes.

When I was a young naval officer, I wrote a paper comparing the May 13 riots to a Christmas party if ever Malays fought among themselves for control of their community and the destiny of Malaysia.

The problem is that the term 'Malay' itself has become meaningless with the introduction of constitutionally created Malays to bolster the voting power of the ruling Umno regime. What this has done is to introduce 'foreign' cultural elements that are both myopic and outward looking into mainstream Malay society, and of course Islamic discourse.

NONE If ever there is an eventual showdown between Umno and the Anwar-led dissidents, it would involve more than just 'authentic' Malays but rather a whole range of diverse Muslim informed ethnic groups vying for control over, what has been championed as Malay rights, and in the end, control of this nation.

Religion and race which were wilfully conflated will become the Pandora's Box that plunges this country into communal violence.

If the tide of bigotry and governmental malfeasance is not stemmed, we will go the route of the failed state and be confined to the trash can of history.

Non-Malays willing participants

What of the role of the 'other' in this fear culture? We non-Malays and non-Muslims have been cast in the role of victims in this culture and we have passionately embraced this role never realising that it was with our consent that this reality has taken root over the years.

We have been willing participants as our rights have been eroded, our various faiths mocked. We have colluded in the denunciation of those who have chosen the more difficult non-mainstream road of dissenting against the established order that we wholeheartedly embraced.

It matters not to me if this system is merely a relic from our colonial history or that the established racial divisions a cunning ploy of our colonial master. What matters to me is how we (ab)used the system in the name of racial and religious integration when it was anything but.

umno 57th general assembly day three 151106 hisham and keris Early arguments about being grateful for being allowed to live here have given way to more sophisticated 'racialist' concepts of Ketuanan Melayu and the need to defend Islam against interlopers.

History has been reshaped to fit the narrative of the Malays as being benevolent hosts and later imperiled bumiputeras.

We willingly shaped this country into what it is today and we are repulsed by our own creation. My concern has never been for the urban Christians who flock to houses of worship who nurture their consumerist instincts and pastors who are bestowed great wealth by parishioners in the guise of divine blessing.

It is not for the temple priests who bathe themselves in gold and charge the faithful in coin for the benevolence of a thousand different gods.

My concern is for the people whose religion has been mocked and their faith disenfranchised. The indigenous people whose choice of religion makes them targets for they dare wonder off the religious reservations imposed on them.

It's for the 'poor' churches and temples which are destroyed and whose worshipers are intimidated when they do their god's work, servicing communities who don't share the same faith as them.

The Brutuses among us

For far too long, many non-Muslims who were in a position to vocalise the distress of others, at the inequality that surrounded them, did nothing but pray to their gods for their own self-enrichment, conveniently leaving politics to 'others'.

Now it seems they have discovered their courage and the full force of the state's fear instruments have been deployed against them.

Suddenly, issues which were subservient to consumerist desires have become important but because they have been apathetic to the needs of their own communities, they have neither the skill nor the fortitude to combat these forces.

So they look either for divine guidance or to other more seasoned veterans to fight their battles for them, ironically the same disenfranchised religious groups who have been articulating their fears for years.

By their omissions, the non-Malays have not only done a disservice to their own communities but we have done a greater disservice to the Malay community.

Our silence and complicity all these years has empowered the more radical Islamic elements (and disenfranchised the more moderate ones) who have always been against the corrupt practices of the state.

And the state's more militant response in its Islamic social engineering programmes was to counter the lack of Islamic credentials arguments promulgated by the ever changing Islamic party.

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings.

Dismantling BN's fear culture

If we are to have faith in Pakatan Rakyat, then they must convince voters of any race or religion that they are willing to break the culture of fear that the BN has cultivated over the years.

NONEAs the alliance with the sole Islamic party - PAS - a party in the midst of vicious internal political infighting between moderate and fundamentalist impulses, and with PKR beholden to said parties influence and ground-level reach, it is incumbent on Pakatan to demonstrate that they can balance the religious needs of their most strident members without resorting to the old ways of Umno.

What Pakatan has going for it is both its strength and weakness. The DAP which has been labelled 'racist' and 'anti-Muslim' has been on the just side of the religious debate since the slow creep of Islamisation through the decades. However, they have effectively been cut off from a rural Muslim population that views them as both a foreign influence, intent on usurping their Malay sovereignty and a threat to their religion.

Furthermore, the so-called urban Muslim intelligentsia beholden to Umno for obvious reasons continues to demonise any form of egalitarian discourse emanating from the DAP.

The recent high-profile inclusion of two Umno stalwarts into the DAP is a good sign, but one wonders how this will eventually turn out considering the enormous pressure placed upon Muslims and their role in the public discourse.

But I take great comfort in the intellectual premise articulated by slain Islamic scholar Farag Foda who said, "There is quite a big difference between the Islamic religion and an Islamic state. Criticising an Islamic state does not mean deviating from Islam.

"One may find much to say about or object to in an Islamic state, even in its greatest days. But one can only bow reverentially, adoringly and faithfully when one talks about the Islamic faith."

Open and honest national discourse

I, like many others, wonder of the shape of things to come when an emboldened PAS steps into the power vacuum left by a defeated BN.

This fear culture perpetuated by Umno (and at times PAS) using Islam, manifests in many forms and its main aim has always been to separate the various ethnic groups in the hope of replaying the old Roman game (and perfected by the British) of divide and conquer.

If we are to become an authentic Malaysian culture, we must be able to have open and honest discourse unclouded by the confections bestowed upon us by the powers-that-be.

If this fear culture is to be dismantled, the first place to start is the way how the state influences public discourse. It is an established practice when it comes to the discourse of human rights or any variety thereof; non-Muslims are constantly reminded that any issue concerning Islam remains the sole province of Muslims.

islam religion muslim mosque 1This way the dissenting opinion (which is based on a religious or secular framework) is subservient to the notion that the non-Muslim concern is incompatible with Islam and therefore incompatible to the welfare of his fellow Malay Malaysian.

The non-Muslim is rejected as a participant in the national discourse and what he becomes is an interloper interfering with Islam.

This interference is violently rejected by Muslims, or at least the Umno-influenced ones, because to do otherwise is to acknowledge the commonality of the various ethnic groups in Malaysia. So, the non-Muslim dutifully accepts that some rights don't apply to Muslims, and this is expressed in one form or another by the various non-Malay component parties of the BN.

The question here is how does the BN claim to be for all Malaysians, when there are different roles attributed to each ethnic group and the welfare of each is dependent on different sets of criteria determined not by principle but by the ruling Umno regime?

The vocal cheerleaders

There is an almost malicious side to this equation in that the state tactically supports pressure groups created to enforce not only the dogma of the religious interpretations of the state but also to control the discourse through threats and intimidation.

In this way, Umno gets to control how the discourse is framed and the role non-Muslim/Malays play in it.

newspaper headlines on the 19th of august 2004The states apparatus - be it the media, law enforcement or the judiciary - act as vocal cheerleaders for those so-called non-governmental pressure groups, whose agenda it is to enforce the will of the ruling coalition by reminding non-Muslims that they here by the magnanimity of a certain segment of the ruling Malay population.

Understand now, when I say this new government should influence the nature of public discourse, I merely mean that their influence should only extend to encouraging a plurality of voices and sanctioning those who would use threats of violence or intimidation to silence differing opinions.

By doing this, what the state is doing is creating an environment where different groups regardless of race or religion band together to express an opinion without fearing repercussions for speaking out against a state-enforced doctrine.

In other words, Malaysians in spite of race or religion are forced to articulate their views either in solidarity with members of different ethnic groups or religions (discovering common ground) or find their views rejected by the mainstream population.

Furthermore, any form of rhetoric that says that Islam needs to be defended should be dismissed by the state and should not be in any way part of the state's reform agenda. The state should treat all religions equally, while recognising that Islam is the official religion.

The so-called defenders of the Islamic faith are in reality the most virulent of bigots conflating the issues of race and culture and instigating an ignorant population into fearing that their way of life is under attack and needs defending. These groups or individuals should only be sanctioned if their conduct becomes seditious or they become a very real threat to public safety.

This extends to anti-Christian statements from government-funded scholars or from government-funded institutions.

What is to be done to move forward

It's time to abolish the BTN (Biro Tatanegara) courses. This has been an instrument of indoctrination for the civil service and graduates to instill fear of the 'other' and to create a subculture which assumes that they are tools of the government and not that the government is a tool of the people.

The BTN course not only distorts the teachings of Islam but furthered perpetuates the myth that the Malay community, and by extension Islam is under siege.

Disempower government-funded agencies from issuing statements deemed to be anti-communitarian in nature based on religion, such as when religious bodies issue statements proclaiming that Muslims should not attend non-Muslim activities. Reinterpret the roles of these religious bodies as government organs that foster interfaith communication and inter-ethnic goodwill.

And lastly, religious conversion and the consequences of it - once and for all, make it clear that there is separation between the civil and Syariah Courts and in the case of conversions involving non-Malays, the proper avenue for such cases is the civil courts and not the Syariah Courts.

The Syariah Courts have been used by Muslim converts for their own agendas, making a mockery of Islamic jurisprudence which further alienates and fosters a climate of fear in a vital section of the Malaysian public.

NONEI realise that these suggestions are merely wishful thinking but if there is a serious attempt to implement them then perhaps one day, we will wake up to a new dawn, one not in the fear culture where a politician like DAP leader Lim Guan Eng does not have to say that no member of his political party ever wishes to be the next prime minister of the country he or she was born in, as if such an aspiration should be beyond the expectation of non-Malay citizens.

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