

Forum to hear Indonesian scholar's take on moderation

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After a contentious week in which a Saudi journalist was deported to face very likely a grim fate back home and the PAS president has declared opposition to the state of Israel as obligatory of Muslims, it must come as welcome relief that the Penang government is organising a panel discussion on 'True Moderation'.

The keynote speaker at the forum, scheduled for this Saturday to commemorate the UN's Inter-religious Harmony Week, will be Din Syamsuddin, chairman of Muhammadiyah, the Indonesian social organisation that is one of the Muslim's world largest with 29 million members.

What Prof Dr Syamsuddin would say would be important for two reasons: he is a respected Islamic scholar from a country whose mainstream religious figures are apt to trod the middle path in the wide spectrum of expression that constitute Islamic belief.

The second reason is that Syamsuddin himself in recent years has hewn to what is considered as more fundamental expressions of the faith which make what he has to say on 'True Moderation', particularly at this juncture, more interesting than would otherwise have been the case.

Prime Minister Najib Razak has positioned himself as an Islamic moderate with his launch last month of the 'Global Movement for Moderation.'

Ipsa facto that would have obliged his government to delay, for a while at least, deportation of young Saudi journalist Hamza Kashgari, alleged author of tweets the religious authorities in his country view as savouring of the sin of sacrilege.

Hamza decamped to Malaysia after fleeing his country following his alleged posting of tweets Saudi authorities consider blasphemous of his religion.

The likely penalty for Hamza's alleged crime is capital punishment which in Saudi Arabia would mean, if found guilty, he will be beheaded, a form of punishment considered barbarous in large parts of the world where any form of capital punishment is viewed as obsolete.

Asri backs deportation

Although local lawyers obtained yesterday a court injunction to stop the deportation of Hamza, it was apparently too late to prevent his return to the custody of Saudi authorities.

The deportation was denounced by PKR vice-president N Surendran and lamented by a slew of Islamic voices, including lawyers and an NGO, the Islamic Renaissance Front.

But a voice that in recent years has held to the middle octaves, that of Islamic preacher Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, backed the deportation of Hamza, in a turn some of his erstwhile supporters who have hailed him as a voice of moderation, would find dispiriting.

Asri's stance on Hamza's (right) deportation and the opinion of PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang on the state of Israel, whose illegitimacy Hadi said imposes an obligation the part of Muslims to oppose it, provide a flashpoint for a vexing medley of issues on which it is not hard to separate orthodox voices from heterodox ones.

All this ought to make his discourse on 'True Moderation' by Din Syamsuddin, who it is bruited would be a candidate in the next Indonesian presidential elections, a matter of considerable interest to observers of a

signal issue of our times: Islam's compatibility with democracy.

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