

The deceivers, the believers and the faithful

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But still I have to say, you play with matches you get burned - Vincent Vega (Pulp Fiction)

COMMENT The most interesting twist so far of this post-Bersih 3.0 ongoing tale is the subversion of Umno's continued use of Islam as a fear mongering tool to divide Malaysians.

Except now, their own weapon is being used against them, with PAS coming out as the moderate Islamic party powered by populist (Muslim and non-Muslim) appeal. Every time the propaganda organs of Umno spew their particular brand of Islam, PAS has to say or do very little except wait for the kudos from the expected section of an extremely partisan public.

In the old days, Umno played the bait-and-switch game, on the one hand, demonising PAS as an Islamic mullah inspired religious entity hell bent on turning Malaysia into some sort of greater Caliphate and in the other, carrying out its own Arabisation/Islamisation programme that effectively decimated all levels of the government, education and social services, turning them into 'Malay/Muslim' entities which were merely reflections of Umno hegemony.

PAS in those days were Quran-thumping firebrand preachers disinterested in the multicultural/religious nature of Malaysian society insofar as it conflicted with their own interpretations of the holy text.

Those were the days when they, unfettered by the so-called moderate (and politically savvy) 'Erdogans' and when they were not playing into Umno's hand by graciously shooting themselves in the foot, their hidden more benign interactions with non-Muslims (in Kelantan for instance) was buried deep in whispered anecdotal evidence because of the subservience of a mainstream press and the lack of any sustained form of information dissemination - no Internet folks.

Moderate face of Islam

With the emergence of PKR, Anwar Ibrahim's 'third way' and the rise of the alternative online media, a few kinks had to be ironed out before any form of mutually beneficial opposition pact could be conceived.

The results of pre-2008 general elections demonstrated this was a far trickier proposition for Pakatan Rakyat, hampered by the feel-good atmosphere of a post-Mahathir retirement and the slumber years of the Abdullah Ahmad Badawi regime. Just as the DAP had to shed its 'chauvinistic' image, PAS had to shed its fundamentalist reputation in favour of a more inclusiveness 'secular' perspective.

The main criticism coming from Umno and its component party mouthpieces is the tenuous ties that bind Pakatan, the consequence of which make them 'unsuitable' to run the country.

It must drive MCA crazy that the more they sound the 'Islamic' peril cry against the DAP, the more it seems to make those Chinese - who have made the pragmatic decision to back the opposition - to support Pakatan even more and label the MCA as a bigoted chauvinistic party intent on dividing Malaysians along racial/religious lines.

And let's not forget the head scratching which is going in Umno. Every time *Utusan Malaysia* attempts to slanderously question PAS' Islamic credentials, the results have been counter productive.

The run-up to PAS' internal elections was a badly managed psych war by *Utusan* on behalf of Umno which resulted in the emergence of the so-called Erdogans as custodians for the time being of PAS. This no doubt warmed the hearts of Pakatan supporters hoping for a moderate face of Islam and had the hawks in Umno screeching in dismay.

What Umno's incompetence has managed to achieve is that any rational discussion on the role of Islam in this country's future has been distorted by partisan rhetoric and the regime's own history of religious malfeasances.

But more importantly for Pakatan supporters and non-partisan skeptics, it has become impossible to rationally discuss PAS' commitment to the inclusive more secular ethos of Pakatan.

Big Bad Extremist Muslim wolf

So far Pakatan has managed to do extremely well in allowing Umno to play the Big Bad Extremist Muslim wolf, all the while putting PAS' own Islamic preoccupations in the back-burner.

In situations where a unified Pakatan response has been warranted against perceived Islamic 'interference', the response has been muted. In communities where PAS has had some influence, there have always been some simmering tensions.

The banning of the sale of alcohol for instance started of as a PAS misstep and then turned into a 'Umno said, PAS said' debacle. The fact that this was resolved by Pakatan is a hopeful sign that contentious issues can be worked out amicably, but there are long-term questions that have to be asked.

And let's not forget the issue of caning for those unlucky Muslims consuming alcohol which has never been satisfactorily addressed by PAS. The issue of marginalised groups such as the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community or the 'cultural distortion' of Orang Asli communities for instance has been sidelined for the 'greater good' of claiming Putrajaya.

I've said this before and I'll say it again, it looks as if we are heading into "separate but equal" territory which should play well for most Pakatan supporters, but is detrimental to a truly Malaysian identity.

Furthermore, the National Fatwa Council's edict on demonstrations is rather strange considering the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Tahrir Square rallies which the Brotherhood claimed

was mandated by God.

Of course, Hosni Mubarak's state-sanctioned imams always made pronouncements that favoured his 'ruling party', so perhaps there is some commonality between Egypt and Malaysia, after all. Saudi Arabia's response to the Arab Spring was a crackdown on dissidents (mostly in their words, "extremist provocateurs") and grant generous "windfalls" to the public totalling billions of dollars.

And so far the going has been good for Pakatan. Where once PAS Youth were a feared bunch perceived as destabilising the social multicultural/religious fabric of Malaysian society with their protest against anything deemed unIslamic, now its Amal security unit lads are looked upon as heroes fulfilling the role of maintaining the peace in large demonstrations or public-speaking events, a role the police seem to have abdicated.

I have many PAS friends, who believe in the democratic process but who believe that the 'Islamic struggle' has been sidelined. They fear speaking up since they would be labeled as Umno stooges.

Understand now that I disagree with the aims of these PAS friends of mine, but my point here is that what Umno has done is merely create an atmosphere where the more fundamentalist impulses of PAS is submerged by the feel-good rhetoric of Pakatan.

Revival of the ISA

When former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad called for people to give a large mandate to PM Najib Razak so the dreaded ISA would be revived so that communists would not be allowed to return to the country and (this is the hilarious part) "a religious extremist party" would be halted.

Question: Would the ISA be used to ban Ibrahim Ali or is he not considered a religious extremist?

With the likes of Perkasa and Pekida running about "defending Islam" without any sanctions from the government, PAS is coming out smelling like roses, all the while nobody questioning their commitment to Islam or how they will navigate the tumultuous waters of a post-Umno era. In other words, nobody is really interested in discovering if the thorns in these roses has been clipped.

The sight of Tok Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat (pictured in a yellow shirt) 'disagreeing' with the National Fatwa Council is further evidence that the religious psych war carried out by Umno is having contrary results.

Nobody remembers the more 'dodgy' religious edicts that have come from PAS. The benign visage of Tok Guru has become the symbol of a kinder gentler PAS and Pakatan supporters continuously bombarded by the malfeasances of Umno and the religious bigotry that the regime perpetuates through its outsourced thugs are more than willing to conveniently forget that at the

end of the day, PAS - a religious party - is the backbone of Pakatan.

This should not be construed as a fear-mongering comment piece on PAS (indeed in many of my articles, I have been rather sympathetic to this particular political party) but rather a reminder that we should not be lulled into forgetting that Islam, and who ever controls it in Malaysia, will have a profound effect on how we evolve as a society.

If we don't learn how to ask the difficult questions now, don't be surprised when we get the simple answers regardless of who we vote for. Or as Tariq Ramadan reminds us, "If there is a smoke, there is a fire, the saying goes. That is quite true, but one should find what the fire is, and who lit it."

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