Anwar's intervention frees conversion debate from bind
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COMMENT Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim has set the cat among the pigeons in the debate on the tabled amendments to the Administration of Islamic Law (Federal territories) Act 2013 by citing anecdotal evidence of how the Prophet of Islam decided a matter of similar import.

The thrust of the amendments allow for the unilateral conversion of a minor by a parent or guardian, a move critics say is contrary to the federal constitution and infringes the right to gender equality.

Since the tabling of the amendments in Parliament a week ago, the matter has threatened to cleave the debating public into non-Muslim (opposed to the amendments) and Muslim (for it) halves, a division that is now scrambled by Anwar's disclosure of a vignette that purports to depict Prophet Muhammad as not in favour of unilateral conversions.

NONESince Islamic law is configured out of Quranic percepts and the sayings and traditions of the Prophet, the anecdote adduced by Anwar constitutes a fresh and enlightening information that prevents the congealing of the divisive debate over the amendments around two antithetical (Muslim and non-Muslim) poles.

The citation by the Pakatan Rakyat leader is grist for the validity of the dictum of Immanuel Kant that humanity progresses through intellectual and moral insight more than by any other usufruct.

It also furnishes proof of the soundness of Aristotle's criterion for political leadership: the ability to deploy persuasive reasons for the assumption of a stance - fitting reminders, no doubt, to those among the Pakatan crowd, especially from the PAS quarter, who doubt Anwar's qualifications to lead.

Prior to Anwar's intervention, the debate over the amendments was headed for a dispiriting denouement.

This was that the discourse would arrive at the point where if conventional morality holds that it is wrong to convert a minor on the say-so of a single parent and, if Quranic percepts aver that it is alright, then it is morality that is mistaken, not the Islamic theology.

This denouement has been averted by dint of Anwar's demarche.

Otherwise, the matter was headed for a stalemated tug-of-war between the muddle that was the government position, made worse by Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's prevarications, and the secular reasoning of the Bar Council, the council representing non-Muslim religions (MCCBHST) and assorted religious spokespersons.

A repeat of the 'Allah' issue

Along this track, a wholly unedifying spectacle was in prospect, with the stage set for a resolution of the issue, in all probability, through Islamic triumphalism - the imposition of the Islamic position.

With that prospect forestalled, the debate awaits the formulation of the Pakatan position which Anwar said would be configured out of the consensual wisdom of the coalition's partners.

It is hoped that when that position is made, it will be void of the volatility that the Pakatan position on the 'Allah' issue - formulated three and a half years ago after much intra-coalition consultation and which collapsed in a muddle earlier this year - turned out to the detriment of the opposition and the glee of Umno-BN.

For that to take place the Pakatan formulation has to make the twain of Islamic theology and secular reason meet, an arduous proposition at best.

If they pull it off, it would be another boost to the case for their election as a government.

It would not be far-fetched to suggest that Umno has introduced this Islamic bill at this juncture when it is seeks to check its slumping popularity to gain from any wrangle that develops between Muslims and non-Muslims over the issues entailed in its passage or non-passage.

Seeking partisan political advantage from religious issues is often a hazardous undertaking; what can seem like a ladder can just as soon turn out to be a cliff.

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