

## **The Agong's decree on 'Allah'**

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COMMENT It is time Malaysians come together in the spirit of compromise on the use of the name of God. It will not benefit any quarter if we allow this matter to go on further.

The Kedah sultan, who is also the paramount ruler of Malaysia, has decreed that non-Muslims must not use the name of God and we should all close ranks and accept it.

It is now time for the political leadership, from both sides of the divide, to come together and agree on the next course of action. More importantly, to agree on all words that non-Muslims cannot use. Once there is consensus on the matter, we should all move on.

Some will argue that once non-Muslims compromise on the use of the name of God, it will be the end of equal rights in Malaysia. The reality is that if we had a referendum today, the majority will not allow us to use this word and a collection of other words.

There is no use in questioning the motivations or the reasons why the majority of Muslims in this country feel that the name of God should be exclusive to them, as the matter is not a rational one. Religion is not only deeply personal and it trumps reason and logic. So, unless we want to have hell on earth, there is little point in continuing to discuss the matter.

What is most important are clear rules about non-Muslim use of certain words in the Malay language. And, if there are exemptions, in what context these words can be used.

If there are to be no exemptions at all, what are suitable replacement words? As we have no example from Malaysian history of such exclusivist policies, there is no point referring to historical antecedents.

For those non-Muslims whose tradition includes the use of these words in their worship or religious texts, we all have to agree that these conventions will have to be altered.

In a situation where going forward is more important than minority rights, we can either be politically correct and foolish, or be disciplined and real about our current situation.

## Referendum

What is particularly important is that the constitution will have to be amended by two-thirds of MPs to ensure the force of law is guaranteed. There are however five prerequisite conditions:

1. We need to ascertain if there is indeed overwhelming support from Malaysians to restrict the use of the name of God and other words by way of a national referendum. The Election Commission will have to be given special dispensation by Parliament to carry out such a referendum, whose majority decision is final.
2. Parliament will have to agree to repeal or reform any legislation that stands in the way of enforcing the constitutional reforms needed to enable the referendum to take place and then abide by the results.
3. As this is a compromise among the people of Malaysia, we need to alter any federal laws that may also stand in the way of the implementation of the new laws. This may include, among others, governmental practices related to official documents and various human rights- related legislation.

It is also important that all state governments come together to make sure that the list of prohibited words are similar so that non-Muslims do not inadvertently break the law in different states.

Penang, for example, prohibits non-Muslims from using some 40 words while Selangor has 35 words. It is important that all states carry out a national convention in addition to words that cannot be used in the Federal Territories. It is not important to debate the basis for barring the use of words, as that would be really a long-drawn out process. What is important is that these words cannot be used.

Particularly important is ensure that it is possible for Malaysians to continue functioning at an optimal level after these new laws are introduced. In short, Dewan Bahasa and Pustaka may be asked to locate or coin new words to replace the ones non-Muslims are not allowed to use.

If some of the prohibited words can be used in selected contexts only then these words will have to be listed as well and categorised as 'for restricted use only'. This

may take a while but it is better that the government allocates an adequate budget to make sure that the process is comprehensive and carried out in good time.

4. People-to-people consensus will have to be secured. This will be an uphill battle as some non-Muslims are quite used to using the prohibited words. The problem is that while each state has its enactment, it has not been enforced. A piece of law that is not enforced is like no law at all.

So, a massive effort will now have to be done to make sure that some level of compromise is achieved. This may involve scaling down the existing list or finding suitable replacement words for them. Another problem will be to get the non-Muslims organised into a single block as we cannot be consulting every small group or NGO. This may take time and suitable resources will have to be allocated.

5. Like everything else in Malaysia, enforcement is a weak point. Nonetheless, this should not be a problem at all. As the decree comes directly from the Agong, and constitutional reforms would have been achieved transparently and in accordance with a national referendum, Malaysians will generally abide by the new laws.

There may be a few groups who will resist for religious reasons, so the government must be prepared to enforce the laws. With adequate replacement words, there should really be no issue that cannot be resolved.

### National language

However, like all compromises, we will also lose a few things. I fear the national language may suffer as the replacement words we are to coin may be regarded as innovations and may become even more popular than existing words. But there are so many precedents already, including in Putrajaya where words like *presint* has entered Bahasa Malaysia.

Whether or not a national language running on two tiers with prohibited and restricted words will be effective in securing national unity, we must remind ourselves that we are not a 'melting pot' but a mosaic of different ethnic identities coming together to share a nation. In fact, the two-tier system will help perpetuate the mosaic ideal of diversity in unity.

How will this policy affect Malaysia's image as a moderate nation globally is another important question.

Frankly, the world does not care about domestic policy. Just as we really do not care about how North Korea manages its own internal affairs, the world should not

be too concerned about how we secure peace and harmony. If we are going to be led by international standards all the time, what is the point of national independence?

The government should not be shy about these constitutional reforms. In fact, some countries like the UK and France should study how we manage to secure compromises in our multi-ethnic and multi-religious community.

It is important that we close ranks on this matter. We must not allow some words in Bahasa Malaysia to derail national security and multi-ethnic harmony.

Whatever action the government takes, it must be a national decision that cannot be left to individual states to deal with simply because non-Muslims do not come under the prerogative of the state Islamic Affairs Department.

As such, Parliament will have to debate, discuss and decide whether a national referendum is necessary. Working from the majority decision, it will have to carry out the necessary constitutional reforms and prepare national institutions for the implementation of the new laws.

If this is the route Malaysia takes, let us all be prepared for it. As loyal citizens, let us not stand in the way of the royal decree.

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