

DAP falls for Umno's 'Allah' trap

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COMMENT The 'Allah' issue has been a classic, extremely effective Umno trap. When this issue reaches headlines, everybody loses, and nobody wins, except for Umno.

I've written about why this is so many times. To summarise quickly: this issue always polarises. 'Polarisation' here means that Malaysians who believe their religion is under siege (this applies to both sides) become increasingly convinced that they are correct.

They then behave as anyone who feels their religion is under siege can be expected to.

For ultra conservative or rigid Muslims, this means turning to Umno. They cannot fully turn to PAS, which is ironically more religious, because it has stated that it is all right for non-Muslims to use 'Allah' (in a way, they also are victim of a trap - but perhaps in a good way).

Many non-Muslims meanwhile, start to feel more and more like they are being oppressed by the majority. Some give up hope on Malaysia, and start looking for the exit sign. This of course, plays right into Umno's hands - it means fewer people who will be here to vote for Pakatan Rakyat.

I get the impression that leaders in the DAP tend to feel a lot of heat about the 'Allah' issue. I imagine a lot of people, Christians especially, are exerting pressure on them to do more about fixing this issue.

Some of those leaders thus start worriedly looking around for ways in which they can be seen to be doing more, or look for a Malay leader who they believe will solve all these problems.

There are a number of major fallacies inherent in this approach that the DAP might do well to disabuse themselves of.

The first is that pouring more fuel into this fire by continuing to actively pursue the 'Allah' issue will be beneficial for Malaysia in the long run.

The second is that Anwar Ibrahim is a saviour of some sort, whose addition of 'state assemblyperson for Kajang' and 'menteri besar of Selangor' to a list of roles - including PKR de facto leader, leader of Pakatan Rakyat, Member of Parliament for Permatang Pauh, and Leader of the Opposition - is an arrival on par with the second coming.

(It is sad incidentally, to see DAP chairperson Karpal Singh reverse his previous stance and encourage an individual to be a member of both the state legislative assembly and Parliament, what more in two far-away states).

Umno trolling

In the 'Allah' issue, Umno-linked forces have demonstrated trolling skills that far surpass those of amateurs on the Internet.

('Trolling' is an Internet term which means purposely antagonising others with the primary intent of provoking a response from the people being antagonised.)

Around New Year's Eve, Umno was feeling the worst heat on issues that really mattered and would really impact their hold on Putrajaya - price hikes that affect every single Malaysian.

A mere two days after the New Year's Eve protest against the price hikes, when public dissatisfaction was probably at its height, the Selangor Islamic Affairs Department (Jais) raided the Bible Society of Malaysia (BSM), and all debate about price hikes practically disappeared.

Whichever Umno lackey conceived this plan deserves a raise.

So now the question is, which son of Ibrahim has or will take a better approach to handling this problem: Anwar or Abdul Khalid?

Anwar makes a half-decent suggestion regarding one way forward in a Malaysiakini interview: 'While the (BSM) continues to await the return of the copies seized, Anwar sees this as a cut-and-dried "administrative" matter.

'This, he said, will be his first stop as MB. "I would say: 'Guarantee that they won't be distributed to Muslims, don't send them to schools and only use them for Christians. I want it in writing.' And then I (would) send them back," he said.'

My first question is: why does Anwar need to be menteri besar for solutions like this to be implemented? Is he so unable to address this issue from where he is as to

justify the upcoming upheaval?

My second question is: do steps like this represent some truly significant advances in resolving the 'Allah' issue and improving inter-religious relations?

I think the prevailing assumption among some DAP leaders is that Anwar will somehow be more vigorous and assertive in handling the likes of Jais.

The questions then become: firstly, will he really? Secondly, even if he would, would that actually be a good thing?

In answering the second question first, let's look to the past. This is not the first time Khalid has had to deal with religious controversies in Selangor.

I recall the controversy regarding whether or not Muslims should be allowed to work in establishments that serve alcohol.

The DAP gang wanted a hardline stance, as did the Muslim hardliners - albeit the opposite one. Khalid took the (unpopular) middle ground, worked to defuse the situation, and no one has brought it up since.

(In the same vein, the 'Allah' issue only tends to explode whenever some newly-engineered controversy occurs. In between, life seems to go on as normal for both Christians and Muslims.)

A similar approach was attempted early this year. Khalid made a statement that Jais raids such as the one on the BSM would require the prior approval of an exco member.

Following this, the Selangor Islamic Affairs Council (Mais) - the body which includes the sultan and to which Jais reports - took out a half-page advertisement in The Star saying that Jais is under absolutely no obligation to seek approval from the state government for any of their investigative activities.

In essence, Mais was saying that we are doing sacred, holy work here, and you Khalid, can go fly a kite.

Did Khalid take umbrage and fire back? To the best of my knowledge, he did what most wise people do when trolled - he simply did not respond.

Stoking vs dousing flames

Surely there are some people who read this as a sign of weakness. These same people are likely to think that the mighty Anwar will take a much harder line and put these fundamentalists back in their place.

This line of reasoning could perhaps benefit from some re-evaluation.

Khalid (left) strikes me as the type of man who always has an endgame in mind. What is the endgame of escalating the fight with Mais?

To begin with, Utusan Malaysia and their like will have a field day. Imagine the headlines: 'Pakatan defies the monarchy', 'Pakatan fails to defend Islam', 'Pakatan has become the puppet of Christians who want to destroy Islam', and so on and so on.

I am not saying we should let fear prevent us from doing what is right, but taking a long view, what really is the right move?

It would barely matter than none of the above would be true, but when the mainstream media has something like a spat between a Pakatan menteri besar and the religious authorities or palace to go on, that issue will dominate the public discourse.

And Pakatan people and their supporters will be spending every hour of every day dancing to the enemy's tune, trying desperately to defend themselves.

While they are doing so, Putrajaya will fade further and further out of Pakatan's reach. The reason for this lies in the most elementary electoral logic.

Pakatan has already won all the urban and all the Chinese-majority seats. What is preventing it from winning Putrajaya is the rural Malay heartland, an area particularly sensitive to the kind of headlines mentioned earlier.

Stoking the flames of the 'Allah' issue would only further alienate this constituency, while popularising Pakatan only in the very seats that they have already won with huge majorities.

Perhaps some DAP leaders feel they would lose their seats if the 'Allah' issue is not resolved satisfactorily.

Once again, this flies in the face of the most basic logic and common sense. In my humble opinion, thinking that the 'Allah' controversy would lead dissatisfied non-Muslim voters to choose BN over Pakatan can only regrettably be described as

unimaginably stupid.

I'm all for a more just resolution to the 'Allah' issue, but I harbour no illusions that it will go away while BN remains in power. If some people think that the way to remove BN from power is to continue getting trolled by the 'Allah' issue, we must probably agree to disagree.

Sociopaths and their manipulations

Anyone who thinks that Anwar does not realise all of this has zero understanding or respect for his keen political acumen.

Politicians of his ilk always have their finger on the pulse (though, in recent times, we can see how their judgement can be clouded by ambition).

There is no way Anwar will fail to realise on which side his bread is buttered, and there is no way I can imagine him doing anything that he feels will put him at a political disadvantage in the constituencies he most desperately needs to win in order to achieve his most prized ambition.

What he is doing here is little different from Azmin Ali (right), who also proudly proclaimed that he would have handled the 'Allah' issue very differently from Khalid.

What Anwar and Azmin are doing here is mere pandering to starry-eyed DAP leaders - offering them false hope that they will be a champion of religious freedoms that urban voters will swoon over.

Sadly, this to me calls to mind sociopaths who prey on unsuspecting women, expertly plying them with the sweetest words while viciously manipulating all their insecurities and most heartfelt yearnings.

Where sociopaths look for sex and the thrill of conquering, others look for the 15 seats and votes that the DAP controls in the Selangor state assembly.

Of course, the 'Allah' issue is unlikely to be the only carrot dangled; but perhaps it would be overly-cynical to paint the DAP with the same brush as some others, whose interest in changing the menteri besar may be more monetary in nature.

I should try to be transparent in my motivations for writing this article. There is nothing to be gained from self-righteous anger towards, or criticism of, the DAP.

I only sometimes wonder if it has truly weighed the cost and benefits (not least in the eyes of its constituents) of being seen as a part of the move to install Anwar as menteri besar. What's worse, everything mentioned so far may only be the tip of the iceberg.

In this regard, Abdul Hadi Awang (left) and PAS have wisely taken a much more careful stance. Unable to reverse Anwar's decision to run in Kajang, they have nonetheless wisely stopped short of openly supporting a change in menteri besar.

I'm sure they are taking into consideration the feelings of the PAS grassroots who may have felt that they have been kept in the dark and unduly pushed around by their smaller, weaker, younger partner for too long.

If all involved are not careful, this entire own-goal affair may spin out of control in a way that may cause more damage by far to Pakatan than any scenario being conjured up by PKR fearmongers.

I know I've written some harsh words, and I always try to be the first to admit that I may be wrong. Thus far though, these are the facts as I see them, and the interpretation that currently makes the most sense to me.

I welcome all critics and people who might disagree, and can only hope we stay productive by focusing on the issues, rather than hubris.

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