

Religious raids in Pakatan states calculated?
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COMMENT Sometimes I feel silly repeating things. Other times, it feels like some things bear repeating; or at least, perhaps it is worthwhile noting how current developments keep reinforcing certain theories about what is going on.

In the last few weeks, we have seen the state religious authorities of both Selangor and Penang interrupt sacred rites, in the name of religious policing. In both cases, the chief participant of a wedding and a funeral were said to be Muslims, to the surprise and shock of everyone around them.

I am still personally perplexed as to why religious authorities would want to claim as their own individuals who have very obviously never practiced said religion, but the central point of this article is that all that is besides the point. I think there has been no shortage of people decrying the injustice of this and so on.

I think it was a tweet from Hannah Yeoh (photo) I happened to see which asked whether it is a coincidence that these things seem to happen with a disproportionate frequency in Pakatan Rakyat-run states. I'm going to guess that it is not.

Trolling

The thing about racial and religious issues is the manner in which they make it sound like it is one entire group of people against another. When firebrands talk about Malays versus Chinese, Muslims versus Christians or what not, they love to make it sound as if it were every single Malay versus every single Chinese or some such thing.

This is ludicrous, of course. I would be willing to bet that the vast majority of Muslims in this country think it is not right to interrupt a wedding or a funeral on account of a records glitch, or mix-up in paperwork. Surely the contents of one's soul are more important than the contents of their identity card.

In the heat of the moment, and with our sensationalist-crazy media, it's easy for emotions to run high, and for things to get heated up. In fact, I suspect the real instigators of these issues are counting on exactly that.

As an aside, I have often opined that if no media reported what Perkasa or Isma said, would anyone care what they did? Do they have some massive grassroots movement that spreads throughout the country or something? Not in the least. All they have is knowing exactly what to say in order to get into the headlines - a very useful skill.

Coming back to the question of instigators. Among the religious authorities, I am sure there are a handful of zealots who truly believe that their drastic actions are rooted in some sort of divine struggle.

I daresay though, that such people are not the ones calling the shots. I think the hidden hands have a much simpler motive: social division and discontent.

These hidden hands know full well how the public will react to such raids, and view the social division and tension that follows not as a side effect, but as the actual end goal and primary motivation of their actions. To their minds, this tension is absolutely necessary to further their own selfish political goals.

While acknowledging that the real movers remain hidden, it is also interesting to note that whenever we talk about a religious raid, we always talk about nameless zealots and bigots.

I get the impression that no one knows the names of say the boss of Jais or JAIPP, or who was the officer who approved the raids. Even though they may be mostly pawns, perhaps if we talked about them by name instead of others, they may think twice before embarking on actions that put them in bad light.

Dividing for selfish reasons

In Selangor and Penang, the tension these raids create is doubly useful because it also results in discontent towards the Pakatan Rakyat state governments.

In Selangor for instant, Jais' chain of command has long been the subject of dispute, as they are part of the Selangor state government, but essentially answer to the sultan, rather than directly to the menteri besar.

Said menteri besar has gone on record saying that the actions of Jais are an embarrassment. The state government of Penang has made similar comments, and offered the family affected legal aid, which if I'm not mistaken means something along the lines of the state government helping someone take legal action against one of their own government departments.

These are the lengths to which Pakatan Rakyat state governments have gone to try and distance themselves from the actions of these semi-autonomous bodies.

Nevertheless, there are still many in the public who have expressed great discontent with the purported failure of these state governments to rein in these religious authorities.

To my mind, the chances of Selangor or Penang under its current leadership falling to Barisan Nasional are minimal. So much electoral evidence points to this. Yet, it seems like the hidden instigators of these raids are willing to tear the country apart, just to stir up a little public discontent, even if it does not result in significant political change.

Of course, this also fulfils the other goal of trying to make urban non-Muslims - who form a big part of the growing anti-BN sentiment in the country - so uncomfortable that talk of giving up and migrating becomes more and more rife. After all, the fewer malcontent Malaysians there are left in the country, the fewer people there will be left to vote against BN.

On hudud, civil society takes different approach

So we have again in Malaysia that age old story of people ripping up social fabric, and rending asunder peoples who would otherwise live in peace and harmony, if not for the relentless stream of politicians who pit them against one another for their own personal gain.

Most of the instances when hudud is brought up follows a similar pattern: politicians playing up an issue to make themselves heroes, while achieving little of practical value, and increasing social tensions.

In the case of hudud however, it has been nice to see of late ordinary Malaysians trying to say enough is enough, and rejecting this confrontational approach in favour of a more dialogue oriented method of resolving this conflict.

It seems that more and more civil society actors are organising talks featuring speakers on both sides of the debate. One piece written by Wong Chin Huat was quite interesting, inviting opponents of hudud to go beyond the usual angry, superficial rhetoric, and try to debate the issue at a much deeper level, by asking very specific and detail oriented questions about possible challenges to implementing hudud law on the ground, at a day-to-day level.

(Also, it sounds like we will soon see the issue of hudud being debated in the Selangor state assembly. A gutsy move, again by Hannah Yeoh - let's hope that cool heads will prevail.)

In such efforts, we see once again that there are always mature Malaysians who are willing to stand up and fight against the forces that divide us. It will always be difficult, because it is often easier to fan flames than it is to put them out, but I don't doubt that there will be always good Malaysians who will be willing to try, regardless of the odds.