

COMMENT | Not wrong to be conservative, or anything else either

Malaysiakini

24 September 2023

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COMMENT | A Syariah lawyer friend of mine whom I've known for a long time (who had always been a social commentator in the scene and then decided to become a politician in the last 2022 Johor state election, but lost), once said to me that there is nothing wrong with being conservative.

He said it in an interview for a news feature story I was doing about LGBT issues in Malaysia. This was so long ago, probably more than 15 years ago.

I was fairly young then and the perspectives I held were very passionate to me. So passionate that I sometimes (or maybe all the time!) made the mistake of seeing that my perspectives were the only correct ones.

This is not to say that I don't think being passionate about one's opinions is wrong. It's good. How else can we take action, right? But it shouldn't be so blind that we get blocked from seeing and trying to understand other perspectives.

Now, my Syariah lawyer friend said it in response to questions about the

treatment of homosexuals in Malaysia.

His explanation was that it doesn't matter what people's personal opinions are about homosexuality. They can agree or disagree. They can believe that homosexuality is sinful or not.

What does matter is that there should not be any compulsion towards homosexuals on those opinions and beliefs. Basically, there should be no compulsion to force homosexuals to believe what they don't.

In a conservative society, there will be certain values that will be upheld. For example, religious practices could be more obvious, and public displays of affection could be something slightly less obvious or acceptable (whether the hetero or homo kind).

Of course, there are other conservative political values involving financial and economic aspects but I'm trying to simplify things a little bit for the sake of this discussion.

Whereas in a more liberal society, other values would be upheld. For example, individualism would be stressed, certain individual rights and expressiveness are more acceptable, etc.

And again, of course, there are other liberal political values that involve more than just personal living that will exist. But as I said, let's keep things simple for the sake of having this discussion.

PM walking a tightrope

It is obvious that a society like Malaysia is a conservative one. It is so conservative that many behaviours that would not necessarily be considered liberal by the actual definition of the term "liberal" are still seen as extremely liberal.

Like for example, just being outspoken! Believe me, I am constantly labelled liberal just for stating opinions that I believe in. But then again, I did write a book titled 'Liberal, Malay and Malaysian' before (which can be found at major bookstores around Malaysia!).

I think you can get what I am trying to avert already here. I watched Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's interview with Christiane Amanpour on CNN yesterday.

Anwar really does come across as a good leader in the eyes of the international community. He does the right things, says the right things, reacts the right way, and acts the right way. His entire New York trip to attend and speak at the United

Nations General Assembly was perfect in that sense.

But then you see how he struggles when Amanpour puts forth the issue of LGBT in Malaysia. Anwar answers the question as best as he can but you can also see the struggle of wanting to be progressive and open yet also concerned with his understanding of how to represent conservative Malaysia to the international community.

Basically, he says that Malaysia does not accept LGBT but strongly believes that there should be no harassment towards the community.

Look, I have to be honest and say that I somewhat understand his situation. In his entirety, Anwar represents progressiveness, reform, and change. For many, this means that whatever progress and reform he represents needs to come immediately once he is in power.

But is it as easy as that? As much as we want to believe that Anwar is in power, he did not come into power very easily.

For one, remember that it was more or less a hung Parliament after the general election last year. Anwar had to negotiate outside of his coalition in order to form the current “unity government”.

That should already be the biggest indicator that there will be challenges to governing the country. It means that the country is pretty much equally divided and polarised politically. So, a leader in this situation needs to be sensitive and delicate in order to be a good leader.

And of course, we cannot deny the fact that Malaysia is overall a conservative society. Although we have many Malaysians who can be considered liberal and progressive, the majority of Malaysians are overwhelmingly conservative.

When that is the situation, we have to be realistic and cannot expect the country to suddenly turn 180 degrees and become the most liberal state in the world. Heck, even Anwar and his team have said time and time again that isn't their objective anyway.

Listening to each other

Now, with all this being said, I am not defending Anwar in any way. All I am saying is that I understand why he answered or reacted in that way. I also understand that there will be criticism against what he said, and this criticism can be from both sides.

The liberals and progressives will say that he is a cop-out while the conservatives will accuse him of being LGBT-friendly. That's just how it is and how it is going to

be, and that is definitely okay.

Change is happening. Although it isn't immediate, it is happening and it can't be denied. So, what is important now is that discourse and discussion must happen.

This is about more than just LGBT issues. It is about every single change and progress we want for Malaysia, from corruption to better race relations.

The different groups with different beliefs and opinions need to listen to each other and try to understand where each one is coming from in order to move forward.

It is because of this that I still remember what my Syariah lawyer friend said that it is not wrong to be conservative. It also means that it is not wrong to be anything else. We can all live together, progress, and develop to be the best that Malaysia can be.

But for that to happen, we need to be civil and mature when it comes to discourse and discussion about how we want to progress. We can have aggressive and passionate pushes for progress, and we can also have calmer and steadier ones.

It all, and we all, have a role in improving Malaysia.

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Source: <https://www.malysiakini.com/columns/680332>