

**Poverty knows no race, unity knows no religion**  
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In an article for the Centre for Policy Initiatives, I highlighted the conflict between PAS's religious ideology and conditioning and the pluralist vision of a unified Malaysian society that they, as part of Pakatan Rakyat, should be committed to.

The fact is that the mode of Islamic politics in Malaysia thwarts all effort towards encouraging the religious pluralism that Malaysia is about.

Despite its 'PAS For All' slogan, this Islamic party has still not addressed this basic matter. The omission is curiously glaring. As it is with the currently dominant religious bureaucracy and elite, so with the PAS bandwagon of leaders and followers, Nik Aziz and all. We continue to be led along a path of social conditioning that quite simply perpetuates religious chauvinism.

There is a lack the willingness or courage to energetically espouse an Islam that is concordant with the times and settings, with a highly multicultural, multi-religious environment, where it is conceded that there are multiple paths to a common spirituality and this diversity is celebrated. It is not as if Islam has no tradition of religious pluralism.

Be forewarned that the rigidly doctrinal approach to Islam will turn to bite us back in the future if left to be. Religious supremacy could well replace racial supremacy. This is a pitfall that the former Indonesian president and respected ulama Gus Dur sought to steer his country away from.

In Malaysia, the constabulary welcomes extremists who lodge police reports against journalists who speak of a painful reality. The Muslim community keeps silent. Safer to refuse to reason, discuss or debate.

Insofar as racial supremacy is concerned, PAS's MP Khalid Samad should be commended for taking a consistent lead in battering that which is ethically indefensible. He defends a proposal to relinquish the giving of discounts to wealthy Malays for home purchases as a move to improve competitiveness and investor confidence.

Khalid questioned how this would help the poor and maintained that 'PAS and its allies in the opposition bloc shared the view that discounts for high-end properties do not help the poor Malays, being beyond their budget; and only served to enrich wealthy Malays'.

According to DAP's Tunku Abdul Aziz, such discounts are an abuse of the New Economic Policy (NEP). He issues a reminder that nothing in the Federal Constitution accords discounts for rich Malays to purchase multi-million dollar houses. And yet for the proposer, MP Tony Pua, a bullet in the mail.

Objectors fail to see that the amount of these discounts, if instead appropriated for a special fund for the poor, could have a more beneficial societal effect than otherwise. The very rich are likely to hoard away excess sums of money or purchase inessential wants as their essential needs have been satisfied.

For the poor, aid such as affordable housing could mean a world of a difference, one between a contented stomach and desperation.

Khalid Samad also notes that 'poverty in the country knows no race'. Indeed so. Poverty afflicts all, even though the racial proportions may vary by place and in the absolute. Some may have wondered if a Chinese ever goes hungry in Malaysia.

But read in The Star, for example, of the widowed Malaysian Chinese mother who does without to feed her four children an oats beverage at breakfast, often their only meal for the entire day. The urgency and pain felt by the afflicted, whether a destitute Malay, Indian, Chinese or Orang Asli is no different — it is equally acute and degrading.

In the face of such race-blind poverty, a government, civil bureaucracy or NGO that chooses to prioritise poverty relief by race can only be described as heartless and racist. To proffer an excuse that there isn't enough money to go around would be despicable.

Here a country that rakes in an amount of taxes that allows its government to be so prodigal as to allocate a dozen billion ringgit a year (close to 2 percent of national income or 6 percent of the 2010 government budget) for the Prime Minister's department alone, a department that is one of the least aligned with the public purpose.

Considering just the haemorrhagic wastages and leakages that occur in public finance and resource management it is clear that there is more than enough for all. And yet perversely the rich are fed at the public trough from which the poor are sorrily kept out.

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