

Politics, moderation and the religious elite
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In a criticism of the MCA president's recent statements about Islam in Malaysia, a Malaysian blog made the claim that 'Umno stands for moderation'. This claim can be disputed.

It can be disputed by showing that the state of Malaysia's political and economic democracy, as well as religious orientation, is affected by the dominance of two elite groups, not one as is commonly assumed.

For simplicity we shall refer to them as X and Y. X is the corporate, political/bureaucratic and aristocratic clique. This group is the more familiar of the two. Its constituents are here conflated into one since they normally have secular characteristics and similar goals (wealth accumulation and the perpetuation of their social positions). They also operate in a highly mutualistic manner.

Y, the less obvious elite, is made up of select religious conservatives holding various top bureaucratic positions. The ascendancy of this religious element resulted from their cultivation by group X. This was done to outdo the rise of religious political rivalry without X having to abandon its appearance, at least, of secularity or moderation. Some might call this strategy a form of 'outsourcing' (the process of contracting a job to a third-party).

Having sufficient power, funding and community compliance, Y is able to stand on its own, and it too seeks to perpetuate its position and deference by society. A testable hypothesis would be whether there could be an indoctrination element or effect in the process of Y espousing its official functions, similar to that of the controversial Biro Tatanegara programme.

Y is served by religious departments such as Jais, Jaip and Jakim. Some of these departments attracted international attention in the case of the caning of Muslim women. It is debatable whether such actions can be regarded moderate.

Although descriptively distinct, X and Y interact. They support each other's incumbency and overlook each other's disgraces in the interest of maintaining and furthering collective hegemony. As X relies on Y's authority, Y for its viability also has interest in X's political agenda.

Examples of the latter would be Perak mufti Harussani Zakaria's solicitation of PAS to join forces with Umno for Malay unity and his statement that a 'new constitution' is being drafted to replace the present federal constitution of Malaysia.

In all of this, X and Y manoeuvre delicately to paint a picture of separateness in the public's perception. Following the March 2008 political tsunami, the trio of PKR, DAP and PAS had begun to chip away at the position of group X through the political process.

Group Y had till then not confronted any credible challenge to their position. There had been no serious renegade opposition from amongst their midst or kind. Those with differing views are considered with displeasure.

The rising popularity of Dr Asri Zainul Abidin, a somewhat controversial and reformist Muslim cleric, must have rung alarm bells. He has been known to be critical of the unreasonable authority of religious bureaucracies and their leaders.

One of his positions on Islam is that Muslims should read the Holy Koran themselves and make their own interpretations rather than subjecting themselves to the interpretations of other possibly self-serving individuals.

MP Khalid Samad of the Islamic political party, PAS, has been another thorn in Y's (and thereby X's) side. His objection to the Selangor religious authorities' rigidity and pro-BN bias had struck a nerve. The religious (and civil) bureaucracy should properly be politically independent for there to be real democracy.

As a defensive move in light of these embarrassing developments, Umno, a political party that X is aligned with, has tried to woo Asri and Khalid's party into their fold. This gives away the shared interests of X and Y. This collusion, incidentally, makes meaningful regime change all the more difficult.

Thus while PAS and its more strident youth wing, for all their faults, are slightly more open with their Islamic positions (though not entirely), X has a surreptitious approach that could be harmful not only for religious moderation and pluralism but also for democracy in Malaysia.

In the larger context, some view that this has led to the increasing Islamisation of Malaysia, and across the board; it is argued that DAP's Lim Guan Eng, the chief minister of Penang, is also contributing to the process.

There is a need for both sides of the political fence to come together and agree to a healthier approach to political competition in which such escalation is defused. Past policies must be corrected and a gentler, decidedly moderate religious environment should become the permanent platform.

Religion is no weapon for political games.

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