

**Processing Malay unity dialogue**  
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Rather interestingly, in the last few weeks there has been talk about dialogues. First, there were two articles in MCPX

The Star about an ISIS sponsored Forum on Muslim-Christian Dialogue in the history of Islamic Civilisation.

islam malaysia muslim men in prayer makmum 070207The talk was delivered by Syed Farid Alatas - the oldest son of the late Syed Hussain Alatas. He is an Associate Professor and head of Malay Studies Department in Singapore. It was an excellent and educational lesson for most of us who attended. An equally excellent summary by Shaila Koshy can be found in The Sunday Star copy of July 20.

Most recently, there was another discussion of another kind which is labeled as a so-called dialogue between Umno and PAS.

In fact the Umno president confirmed that three meetings were held "for the sake of Malay and Muslim unity." My good friend and university colleague, Shahrir Abdul Samad was quoted in the media as saying, why cannot the DAP leaders understand that a dialogue is simply that; a process without an unintended or specific outcome.

My counter question to Shahrir is: was that what was in the minds and hearts of the initiators of these so-called dialogues? Or, as PAS Youth wing questions, were there already some ulterior motives in that first meeting?

nik aziz interview in kota bharu 120608 02Further what to think of Tok Nik Aziz (pic) saying that he cannot trust UMNO anymore? If so, what dialogue?

Therefore, allow me to borrow the definition and articulation used by Syed Farid Alatas on the nature and qualities of a traditional Islamic understanding of such dialogues. He said there are three distinct characteristics or principles.

The first is that they recognise multicultural origins of all civilisations. Even if we accept that the Malay civilisation as one, it then becomes imperative that both UMNO and PAS must accept this principle as their multicultural starting points of their origins for the dialogue. Thereby, without getting into the political dimension of such dialogues, my question to both Umno and PAS is: do you accept the very multi-cultural dimension of the dialogue, as pronounced by Syed Farid?

Consequently then, does Malay unity exclude Malaysian unity, as Uncle Kit has already also asked or enquired? Or, does such Malay unity exclude, for example Indian Muslim unity or Chinese Muslim unity?

Or, can all such dialogue operate and agree that the Federal Constitution already defines our national framework for unity; as proven and tested over a 50-year old multiculturalism in Malaysia? If so, can we just get on with the task of administering this nation towards such unity? Why colour the issues?

## **Inter-religious encounters**

The second principle articulated and propounded by Syed Farid was the Islamic history of having inter-religious encounters. What then is the equivalent of this within Umno or PAS?

Has Umno ever bothered or ventured to “cross-boundaries of their faith” to explore the other religious traditions within Malaysia? In fact, the rather unfortunate recent history in Malaysia has been an attitude of anti-inter-religious encounters stance.

missionary school 241207 churchMy family experience in Sungai Petani is very telling. When we lived in Kampung Raja in the 60’s, my father - as a local community leader - was among the first to donate a stand fan for the mosque built in our community.

40 years later, the Mar Thoma Community in Sungai Petani built their very first and own community centre in Sungai Layar; which also serves as a place of worship for their congregation.

One day, totally unbeknown to anyone, it was 80% burnt down by some irresponsible people throwing in a Molotov cocktail. At this time in Malaysia, many other places of worship have been burnt. Does this speak well of “inter-religious encounters?”

But, then again, to be fair to the facts of what actually happened, the PAS representative in the locality visited and reviewed the burnt down premises; and consequently communicated their sincere concerns for the unfortunate event. This is an example to inter-religious encounter, and the PAS not Umno representatives, were the first to respond to the tragedy.

Finally, nevertheless, the Mahathir Government donated RM100000 to rebuild the premises. And at the “reopening tea-party, the then Umno MP for Sungai Petani Mahathir Khir did the soft-relaunch and even walked through the rebuilt facility almost to communicate to the neighbourhood community present that you can walk into the Christian place of worship and nothing bad will happen to you.

Or, how many of our Umno and PAS representatives today can be like Ahmad Khalid Abdul Samad who is willing to walk into a Church in Shah Alam to have a sincere dialogue with the parishioners over their issues and concerns; even if before the General Elections?

Finally, the third principle is showing respect for and understanding the view-point of the other.

The moot question here is not how many non-Muslim or non-Christian friends of other ethnicities we each have. To really listen and hear the other, one must truly respect the other. How can you respect the other, if you are not even willing to be entertained within the others’ home, or even when they specially cater halal food and host you for their festivities? Respect does not mean fear but love.

## **Perfect love**

muslim islam malays 250806 waitingPerfect love can cast out all fear. Do we know how to listen to the other? Do we know the questions to ask of the other? Do we have the courage to engage the other? The other is always another! The truth is that to even shake hands with the other; one needs to be confident about who one is. If one is unsure who one is; in cultural

or psychological or spiritual terms, it becomes the source of an identity crisis of confidence. Then it becomes difficult to reach out to meet and greet the other.

Let alone, try to understand and appreciate the other. If we cannot, then it will be very difficult to "understand" the view-point of the other. And without such a desire to suspend ones own values and be willing to hear the other's views and values; no true dialogue is possible.

The larger question therefore in any dialogue is: for whom do the bells finally toll? Why does anyone want to host or have a dialogue? If it is not to have a better understanding of the issues and problems; and to listen to the other side of the story, there will be no true and sincere dialogue.

I am therefore sorry to hear that Abdullah Badawi and the initiators were proud to say that they had three secret meetings.

That to me, it is even worse; if dialogue cannot be held within an open and honest framework, may I suggest that that it may not be a serious dialogue but more like a meeting of a secret society. But, one should ask oneself, why are such secret society meetings ever needed? Dialogues are truly designed for mutual respect, edification and listening to the other. Usually most such dialogues can be open and transparent; even if only limited among the initiated.

But dialogues are different from secret negotiations. To me, as an external observer, the Umno-PAS meetings do not sound like a traditional Islamic Dialogue, based on Syed Farid's principles. For if they were, actually there is no shame in even asking the non-Muslim communities to join in. They could learn from the observations and deliberations about the real issues facing; first Malay unity and then also Malaysian unity.

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