

**The tale of two MPs**  
**Malaysiakini.com**  
**Aug 28, 2008**  
**Helen Ang**

Newly-minted Yang Berhormat for Permatang Pauh, Anwar Ibrahim, reinvigorated the 'multi-racialism' call in his by-election campaign last week. The Umno candidate whom Anwar trounced on Tuesday, Arif Shah Omar Shah, is multi-lingual and speaks Mandarin.  
MCPX

permatang pauh by election 260808 arif shah vote 03Does Arif drink Chinese tea? Use chopsticks? Observe filial piety, respect his elders and remember his ancestors? If yes, he could technically become a Chinese under the Malaysia Boleh artificial construct of race ... if we inverse (the illogic of) Malaysia's forced religio-cultural markers where its majority race are locked within an identity fence due to intense politicking on the bumiputera plank.

The Federal Constitution defines an individual as Malay if he is Muslim, habitually speaks Malay and practises Malay culture. In Bolehland, an Indian can become Malay if he converts to Islam. Dr Mahathir Mohamed's grandfather was Indian, thereby endowing Dr M's father an Indian lineage, no? Instead, the illustrious grandson made himself the ultra Umnoputera.

An academic and researcher, Gary Rawnsley of the University of Nottingham, writes that "an internally-cohesive authoritarian regime always has the option of holding on to power through exercising its coercive power even in the face of overwhelming internal and external domestic pressure in Myanmar, for example, and in Malaysia in the late 1990s."

Dr Mahathir successfully weathered Anwar's Reformasi Round One a decade ago. The ex-premier recently commented in retrospect, "the Chinese electorate ensured that I got the 2/3 majority in 1999".

The Chinese electorate kept Dr M in power, and consequently Anwar remaining imprisoned and in political wilderness until his stunning comeback.

The Chinese community who supported BN deserves the 22 vintage Mahathir years, an administration that was 'internally cohesive', as Rawnsley describes, in vouchsafing Ketuanan Melayu. Exercise of coercive power by Umno administrations (both Dr M and now his successor's) has had the side effect of empowering the Islamist state apparatus. If today, the Christian flock – particularly Chinese – were to complain of religious repression, then they are only reaping what they've sown.

holy churches 291106 01However, my heart goes out to other victims of the tragicomic BN power play, the outcast Malays who do not wish to be Muslim. If Lina Joy is a Zen Buddhist or a follower of Zoroaster, she is still Malay in my book. Nevertheless, if Malaysia really wants to nitpick, this topsy-turvy, flag upside-down country could technically away strip her skin colour, or un-Malay her for being Christian.

The more strenuously the duplicitous ruling regime is challenged by People Power, the more desperately they sabre-rattle their Ketuanan Melayu jingoism. To his credit, Anwar has eschewed this retrogressive communitarian tack and even in Permatang Pauh where the constituency has almost 70% Malay voters. He has stood by and is still standing on his pluralistic platform.

## **Friction grows**

Not too long ago in Penang, there was a groundbreaking court verdict permitting a Chinese woman – who converted, becoming Siti Fatimah Abdullah for the sake of marriage – to leave Islam by default. However, a Malay who is born Muslim is not likely to be given the same leeway.

I cannot think of any self-professed 'democratic' state, unless this country considers itself a theocracy, where there is similarly such a stringent interference in its citizen's choice and practice of religion like here in Malaysia, with the exception of perhaps Israel.

Tell me now, which other democratic country in the world brings the full force of the law to bear upon a man for freedom of conscience? Does Ireland mandate that an Irish must be Catholic and nothing else? Does Thailand regulate Thais to observe strictly the tenets of Buddhism?

religion malaysia 070306 buddhist temple Frankly, Malaysia does not give two hoots if its Indian elects to dance nude in open worship during solar eclipse or its Chinese bows in ritual prayer to Sunflower Deity. The up close and personal state intervention pertains only to its Malay-Muslim, and such rigorous religious policing surely carries a strong element of politicking.

The siege mentality of the Malay willing to believe Islam could be under threat only shows up the insecurity of his race. There are many, many more Malaysians converting to Islam – for reasons noble or ignoble – than there is the very small handful desiring to leave Islam. In terms of sheer numbers, the Malaysian ummah is more than secure. Yet the Muslim extremists and chauvinists would pillory, if not outright issue death threats, against apostates.

Recently, PKR MP Zulkifli Nordin was one of the ringleaders where some narrow-minded Muslims disrupted the Bar Council forum titled Conversion to Islam: Article 121(1a) of the Federal Constitution: Subashini and Shamala Revisited. The protesters forcibly caused the shutting down of a legitimate public discussion. The forum was to address ancillary issues facing non-Muslims caught between the separate jurisdictions of civil and syariah laws arising from the conversion of a spouse or family member.

And police impotence in failing to control the reportedly 300-strong mob is perhaps deliberate apathy.

## **Wag the dog**

Clearly, it was a case of the tail wagging the dog. If the bigots got away with that sort of intimidation against legal eagles, just imagine how an ordinary Malay who is a closet Christian (or Hindu or Buddhist) lives his everyday life. These Malays underground are under tremendous societal pressure, not to mention fear of action by the authorities, such as being thrown into a faith rehab centre.

What reason can there be for someone – a Malay – living in our modern world to hide his religious affiliation? Malaysia in Year 2008 is worse than Europe's Dark Ages in this regard. A Malay apostate is no threat to internal security and there is no need to call for ISA to be used on the person simply for his reluctance to practise the Malaysia-approved brand of

Islam (the Shiite and Sufi strains are not approved here), or if he sees himself as an agnostic.

muslim girl in prayer 080405In fact, brought up in a Muslim home as most Malays would be, an apostate's adult decision on the matter of personal faith is hardly one taken lightly. Those born-Malays stand to lose many bumiputera privileges for gaining a faith of their own freewill, or to otherwise attain freedom from professing faith (be irreligious). For this, I cannot see them as anything other than principled and possessing moral courage.

The reality is that Malays in Lina Joy's position already have to negotiate fraught relations with their families because of the social opprobrium that comes with the territory of rejecting the stranglehold of state-imposed religion. Furthermore, if the Malay is not seen as outwardly Muslim, they are misfits in many spheres of life, and can forget about rising high up the career ladder in a civil service soaked in Malay-Muslim culture.

Malaysia's Lina Joys live uneasily on the margins due to their genuine convictions. They do not disturb anyone, and certainly do not threaten Islam just by opting out. Instead it is their Article 11 right to faith freedom that is threatened by the Muslim rabble rousers. Civil society has to enable a solution for Malays, who so choose, to exit Islam quietly and without fuss; it is their human right to believe or disbelieve in God – in private and in peace.

NOTE:

I have written to PKR to urge that disciplinary action be taken against its MP for Kulim-Bandar Baru, Zulkifli Nordin who is a lawyer. For more info on Zulkifli, please click to People's Parliament's posting. I urge that you register a complaint against Zulkifli too, whose case is now being investigated by the party. You can address your e-mail to PKR sec-gen Datuk Salehuddin Hashim at [salehuddin.hashim@keadilanrakyat.org](mailto:salehuddin.hashim@keadilanrakyat.org)

My mail to him below:

"Dear Datuk Saleh,

Zulkifli Nordin's behaviour at the Bar Council forum 'Conversion to Islam' is unacceptable and must be censured. His bigotry is not aligned with the aspirations of your party and the visionary direction espoused by PKR advisor Anwar Ibrahim. Therefore Zulkifli's continued political participation under the PKR banner is detrimental to your party interests and to garnering Anak Bangsa Malaysia voter support.

I urge that the PKR disciplinary committee take action against Zulkifli as well as drop him from contesting the by-election, should his seat soon fall vacant because of legal developments, or otherwise drop Zulkifli from your list of candidates for Parliament in the next general election.

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.  
Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/88731>