

From the ashes of fires lit by racist politicians
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How should Malaysia respond to this spate of cowardly attacks on places of worship? What is the way forward? Decent, reasonable Malaysians are divided in their views.

Some Christian spokesmen want peace at all cost. They entreat the Catholic weekly *Herald*, to 'turn the other cheek', and to stop using the word 'Allah' in its Bahasa Malaysia section, even though Sabah and Sarawak Christians have used the word for generations.



This gives rise to a troubling thought. The editor of *Herald*, Father Andrew Lawrence (*left*) and other Malaysians like him (Muslim and non-Muslim alike) have stuck their necks out, in a collective attempt to build a plural, inclusive nation.

These courageous Malaysians refuse to nod their heads in rhythm to the jarring 1Malaysia tune. One people, one nation, one leader? We have heard all that before.

It seems perfectly all right to turn one's own cheek when struck, but would it not be somewhat presumptuous to instruct other people to take abuse and look the other way?

At any rate, Christian moral teachings can hardly be boiled down to this single statement, 'turn the other cheek', interpreted identically in all possible situations. The history of Christianity is full of defiant rebels as well as stoic hermits - and pragmatic men of the world.

There are, of course, the usual diatribes urging retaliation: 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'. This is stupid. Any violent response by Christians would be wrong, and would play straight into the hands of the Umno warlords.

Who stands to gain the most?

The *New York Times* quoted Pakatan Rakyat *de facto* leader Anwar Ibrahim as saying: "This is the last hope - to incite racial and religious sentiments to cling to power...since the disastrous defeat in the March 2008 general election, they have been fanning this."

Many observers say Umno has behaved shamefully, in tacitly supporting protests against the Dec 31, 2009 Kuala Lumpur High Court decision, that overturned the Home Ministry's ban on the use of the word 'Allah' by *Herald*.

Who stands to gain the most from this conflict? Umno's very existence hangs in the balance. Survival depends on the Malay vote. We should not be surprised that Umno is straining every sinew to achieve 'Malay unity', since the split in the Malay vote helped put Pakatan in power in five states initially.

Umno's chieftains must have calculated that the prospective gain it stands to make from championing 'Malay solidarity' against some imagined, bogus threat from Malay-educated Christians, might outweigh any loss in support from non-Muslim voters.



After all, the politics of race is the politics of 'counting heads', as *Malaysiakini* columnist Sim Kwang Yang has pointed out. Malays make up 60 percent of the population and wield even greater influence in elections, thanks to Umno-friendly constituency gerrymandering, and a disproportionate rural vote weightage.

Umno appears to have discounted the political voice of Sabah and Sarawak Christians, who make up 47 percent of the population in the two states. Indeed, Sarawak and Sabah ministers kept eerily silent over the use of 'Allah', before the firebombs.

Even after the attacks, they could say nothing more than meaningless platitudes. According to the *Borneo Post*, Federal minister Peter Chin, ignoring the High Court's decision, urged Sarawakians "to let Prime Minister Najib handle the use of the word 'Allah' by Christians...We need to cool down and let the PM deal with the matter. He has said he has ways to resolve the matter".

The authoritarian control exerted by the Sabah and Sarawak governments, and the RTM domination of information arriving at scattered rural communities, are powerful tools indeed. The deep-rooted tradition of buying votes from an impoverished population may also soothe any fears of a backlash in the coming elections.

Umno's history of brinkmanship

Many Malaysians are concerned that the vandalism of churches may turn out to be another racial 'crisis' manufactured in preparation for a crackdown to allow a strongman to consolidate power.

These incidents have littered our political history, from the May 13 massacres that swept Najib Abdul Razak's father to power in 1969, to the rabid protests against Chinese schools (led by Najib as Umno Youth leader) in 1987, that preceded Mahathir's *Operasi Lalang*.



A local commentator speculates that Umno might use the religious unrest created by the church attacks to declare emergency law in Selangor, the eye of the storm. The first three attacks on churches certainly appeared to be planned and coordinated.

If Umno could seize power, it would then achieve its publicly declared ambition of taking back Perak and Selangor, two of the wealthiest states in the federation.

It remains clear that the hysteria surrounding the use of the word 'Allah' is a political, and not a religious, issue. In December 2007, the Home Ministry sent a fax to Lawrence, reversing its earlier decision to ban the use of the word 'Allah' in *Herald*.

This fax preceded the 12th general election by four months. The Home Ministry, run at the time by Umno's Syed Hamid Albar (*left*), saw nothing wrong in the use of the word 'Allah' by the Catholic newspaper. Two years later, we have come full circle.

It is conceivable that Umno has simply returned to form. Revoking an unjust ban did not appear to help it win votes in 2008, so it has now turned to a tried and tested monologue of hatred and bad faith.



The recent wave of racial venom emanating from *Utusan Malaysia* and its allies, protests against a Hindu temple using a severed cow's head, and now the defacement of Christian churches, may be seen as Umno's latest experiment in 're-branding', to distinguish itself from less racist parties like the PKR and PAS.

When politicians play with fire, other people's fingers get burnt.

A way forward

In order to move forward, we must reverse and oppose the damage done to our national fabric. Malaysians' refusal to take the bait and stage a violent response is laudable, and crucial.

Rejecting racist parties will be our way forward. Rebuilding crippled institutions, including the judiciary and the police, is another important step.

Over the years, Umno has shown the same disdain for the courts as the hackers who recently hacked the Malaysian judiciary's website, and threatened the nation's judges over the High Court's decision. (The police, as usual, are still investigating.)

National reform can only begin if Sabah and Sarawak Barisan Nasional, Umno's loyal supporters, are defeated in elections. Pakatan's clumsy efforts to gain support in these states will not succeed unless it commits resources at the community and grassroots level.

Pakatan will have to buckle down to earn trust and spread information, previously denied, to the rural populations. And finally, a genuine, concerted effort at inter-faith dialogue can bridge the gaps between religions. PKR and PAS have begun this difficult task with Christian groups.

Only if we move together on this path, can we hope that something worthwhile will rise from the ashes of these fires lit by racist politicians.

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