

Reject extremism: Is Najib walking the talk at home?
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COMMENT It is all very well for Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak to say that 'the moderates' should 'reclaim the agenda for peace and pragmatism', in his maiden speech at the United Nations General Assembly. But shouldn't he be cleaning up his own backyard first?

He maintained that all faiths needed 'to work together' and that extremists 'held the world hostage with their bigotry and bias'. He suggested that "we must choose moderation over extremism".

Ten days earlier, Najib had already lectured to us about extremism. But his message then was vague and non-committal.

At the 65th session at the UN headquarters in New York on Sept 27, Najib expanded his views on extremism and said, "We must urgently reclaim the centre and the moral high ground that has been usurped from us. We must choose negotiations over confrontation. We must choose to work together and not against each other. And we must give this effort utmost priority for time is not on our side."

Why dare tell the world to reject extremism, when at home, he refuses to censure the 'extremists'? If he cannot even act in his own territory, then he shouldn't be patronising others on the world stage.

Najib said the real issue "is not between Muslims and non-Muslims but between the moderates and extremists of all religions, be it Islam, Christianity or Judaism. Across all religions, we have inadvertently allowed the ugly voices of the periphery to drown out the many voices of reason and common sense."

He praised the efforts of some American Evangelical Christians who prevented the threatened burning of the Quran: "This is a clear example of what can be achieved when moderates in each faith stand up to the extremists who are trying to hijack the universal values of our religions."

So why are his reactions and responses very muted when it comes to the religious intolerance by Muslims at home?

Many people will recall the ugly scenes popularly dubbed 'the cow-head' incidents or the incendiary reaction of Malaysian Muslims with the use of the word "Allah".

Why can he not interfere and propose that laws dealing with issues of 'conversion', be it conversion to Islam (eg. automatic conversion of minors) or conversion from Islam (persecution of various individuals for apostasy) are fair, just and speedily executed rather than allowed to drag on causing those who are affected, including their families, added trauma?

Najib commended both President Barack Obama and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg for supporting Cordoba House, a mosque and multi-faith community centre, which will be built near the site of the World Trade Centre.

He said, ""We must support the objectives of the Cordoba Initiative, an organisation that focuses on promoting peace, understanding and moderation, both between Muslims and non-Muslims and within the Muslim communities."

And yet at home, state governments are slow to give their approvals for the construction of churches or temples despite the federal government's ruling that non-Muslims have a right to worship.

It has not gone unnoticed how churches of old in Malaysia, built at a time of greater interaction and before the creeping tide of fundamentalism, have more character, exhibit greater architectural definition and look less like shop-lots or factories.

Najib says that Malaysians observe the various religious and cultural celebrations of the various religions.

So what? That is nothing new as other nations do too. Moreover, Malaysians just love any excuse to have a good time. Many are well aware that one slip by the non-Muslims is enough to make the Muslims cry out that they are 'offended', their religious sensitivities bruised - an escalation in tension is the result.

Najib boasted about how he had "introduced a philosophy known as 1Malaysia. . .to bring all people together in a just and harmonious relationship" and "we celebrate our multi-ethnic and multi-religious society for strategic strength and harmony".

Again, we note his reticence in spelling out who he was referring to, when he lashed out against the forces of extremism at home.

The levels of aggression and intolerance shown by some Malays towards non-Malays and non-Muslims have risen. When Malays who make racial slurs go unchecked, Najib is not practicing what he preaches.

He may defend his '1Malaysia' concept, but he cannot excuse the terrible religious intolerance of the holier-than-thou Muslims who have no qualms about disrespecting people of other faiths.

Perhaps Najib is trying to touch too many bases at one time. He is trying to appeal to the moderates at home but then, he refuses to punish those extremist politicians, religious leaders and individuals in a responsible position, who revel in stoking racial and religious disharmony.

Part of the problem is that members of his cabinet have their own, conflicting views of 1Malaysia. Another part of the problem is how the former Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad is egging on the Malay extremists. Najib appears unwilling to condemn their inflammatory views.

Malaysians would prefer he restored racial and religious stability at home rather than try and take centre stage at the UN before putting his own house in order.

Rhetorically, Najib is correct. But by refusing to name and shame whom he considers extremists, his views about rejecting extremism run hollow. Until he comes down hard on those who harm our country, he will only make a mockery of the '1Malaysia' concept. The cost in human and economic terms will remain high. Therefore, Najib's domestic challenge to tackle extremism must be more focused.

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