

Must Kit Siang convert to Islam to be the DPM?
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OPINION The conflict between the liberal and conservative elements of Malaysian politics has spun off another sticky controversy.

No sooner had Anwar Ibrahim suggested that a non-Malay like Lim Kit Siang could be appointed Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) under Pakatan Rakyat's rule than were we greeted with Nik Abdul Aziz's insistence that a non-Malay aspirant must be a "pious Muslim".

It is as if this is the new rule-of-thumb for transcending the Malay–non-Malay problem and sieving out the brightest and most competent candidates for top governmental positions: Muslim, you're in (well, almost; declare devoutness), non-Muslim, you're out (but try again next time with a fitting name).

This condition may of course sound plausible to some. Riding on the back of the argument that Islam is the true way, they might argue that the staunch Muslim leader is of unsurpassable virtue and ability.

But can we tell whether an opinion or commandment is good or correct just by personal conviction or faith alone?

Whether they come from PAS or PERKASA, it is only fair that partisan views be properly examined under the microscope of reason. Are they credible, reasonable? Have alternative propositions and scenarios been considered? Respect for authority or fear of the unknown should not prevent us from carrying out this sort of analysis.

In this article we will give the condition that a Malaysian DPM must be Muslim a run for its money.

Only a Muslim DPM: what is the basis?

(a) Is there an implicit or explicit rule that calls for the PM or DPM to be a Muslim? The Federal Constitution has nothing to say on this and we have yet to hear a squeak from the pontificators of the "social contract".

(b) What are some of the desirable ingredients of a good Malaysian leader? Competence; diligence; incorruptibility; trustworthiness; fairness; truthfulness; diplomacy; respect and acceptance for the diversity of cultures, languages and beliefs; vision. Do these attributes belong exclusively to a pious Muslim?

Are non-Muslims or moderate Muslims devoid of these attributes? Consider the following quadrant:

From the above, it is obvious that Muslims and non-Muslims alike could possess attributes befitting good leaders and administrators. So we have Lim Guan Eng and Nik Aziz on the left-hand side of the quadrant. Pious Muslim scholars like Dr. Asri could still lack the attributes and worldly wisdom desired of a good leader and this could apply also to pious

Christian reverends (the right-hand side of the quadrant).

Note that a non-Muslim or moderate Muslim leader may be happy to subscribe to the universal values and ideals found in Islam as well as those found in other religions or systems of thought. However, a pious and dogmatic religious leader, whatever his religion, could be quite biased. He might reject the broader values that apply to all humans if it lies outside the domain of his particular religion (as in the case of the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights versus the religion-specific alternative Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam).

(c) Would a change of religion produce a good or bad leader? Suppose that Lim Kit Siang converts to Islam today. Would he acquire extraordinary skills, insight, discipline or appreciation for the religion that he did not have yesterday? Is he incapable of acquiring these without converting? Likewise if a Muslim DPM leaves Islam tomorrow, would he not serve as well as he does today, or would his non-Muslim status automatically invalidate him as a DPM?

To be fastidious: do non-Muslims not pray enough to cleanse the spirit or for "clarity of mind" or for receiving "administrative inspiration"? Observe that the Hindus pray daily, the Buddhists meditate and those who are not religious have recourse to reflection and thought (Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore is an atheist).

(d) Is a God-fearing leader always a better leader? Nik Aziz commented that a non-Muslim who is fearful of God is nobler than a Malay who indulges in corruption and oppression and that without the fear of God one is worthless.

Now how exactly is a God-fearing person nobler ("noble" means having an exalted moral or mental character)? If a presumably God-fearing person (say, a Syariah Court judge) indulges in vice (entertains female companions in a nightclub), is he still noble or does he become unfit to carry out his official duties?

What guarantee is there that a God-fearing leader will always be bold and fair in his decision-making, such as in relation to non-believers in his society?

What about a leader who is not God-fearing (indeed, in his courage he fears no one) but instead deliberates and acts purely out of the love of God; is he less worthy as a leader? How about a leader who leads out of love, truth and justice's own sakes, and not because of God?

(e) If we accept that it is desirable to have a leader who values piety, what would Nik Aziz have to say about Gandhi who believed that "our innermost prayer should be [that] a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim, a Christian a better Christian"? Would Nik Aziz be in favour of such a Hindu becoming the DPM?

(f) Are non-Muslims plainly incapable of running a modern democratic government like Malaysia's? TIME Magazine surveyed leading thinkers and inquired them about who they thought were history's great leaders. Among the widely cited names were Abraham Lincoln, Gandhi and Muhammad. If they were around now and are Malaysian citizens, would the non-Muslim Lincoln and Gandhi be deemed unsuitable candidates for the deputy premiership?

Where does the 'Muslim-only' mentality come from?

We've seen that the "must-be-a-Muslim" argument can be disputed. Why then does a respected leader like Nik Aziz believe that only a Muslim can take up certain government posts? Why do Malaysians not question this view? Speculated below are some possible reasons.

(i) Ignorance: A lack of awareness or knowledge of world cultures, religions and wisdom apart from the Islamic. When even Prime Minister Najib Razak is unaware of the fact that concepts of justice, good governance, property rights and social responsibility were developed and codified centuries before Islam (e.g., the laws of Hammurabi circa 1700 B.C. and the Indian treatise on governance, the Arthashastra, around 4 B.C.), how could we expect the masses to think beyond the level of "all that is good and just and right must have sprung from Islam and only an Islamic leader can be a good ruler"?

(ii) Chauvinism: The belief that one's own religion is superior and that this religion and its history is therefore the best guide for good leadership. This results in problems with accepting that a non-Muslim could be an exemplary leader, or acknowledging that other sources of wisdom too contain valuable lessons for leadership, or recognising that good values are also found in other religions (the "Ketuanan Islam" attitude). It has been argued that ideology is the reason why any appointment of a non-Muslim PM or DPM would be opposed by PAS (as it might obstruct their Islamic State ideal).

(iii) Self-interest: Islamic politicians are likely to oppose the election of a non-Muslim top leader for fear that their influence and opportunities in government and the solemn adulation they are accustomed to might be eroded. Muslim politicians who accept a non-Muslim leader sometimes remain silent for fear of backlash from the more pious factions of their political associations. National religious institutions and their influential officials might also fear that their usual authority could be questioned or "subjected to reason". There might be paranoia that Islam's status as the country's official religion will come under threat.

(iv) Fear of public opinion: Political leaders or ordinary persons might find it difficult to say that they accept a non-Muslim leader because of image issues. They might fear being ostracised if their acceptance might be construed by their community as an approval of non-Islamic values and ideals.

(v) Insecurity: As a Muslim convert would most likely be subsumed into the Malay community and adopt its customs, it might be believed that this new Malay and Muslim would not betray the interests of his or her new-found race or religion.

To conclude

From the preceding it appears that there are no convincing grounds to the argument that only a Muslim can be Malaysia's DPM. The Federal Constitution does not stipulate that the DPM, or even the PM, must be Muslim. Nik Aziz must explain his comment that the DPM appointment should not contradict "the conditions stipulated in the national policy and Islamic policy" — what specific conditions in which specific policies was he referring to?

It has been conveyed here that resistance to the idea of a non-Muslim DPM could arise from a wide set of causes. In addition to those mentioned, there could be technical reasons that preclude the appointment of a non-Muslim PM, such as in cases where the majority of parliamentary seats is won by a political party whose leader is Malay-Muslim. But no such circumstance hinders a non-Muslim from filling the DPM position.

Clearly the rakyat must be encouraged to boldly subject policies and proclamations to reason. How else could they be made to see that a non-Muslim DPM can in principle be at least as capable as a pious Muslim DPM? If pious Muslim leaders themselves strangle reason and keep the citizenry in the shadows of ignorance, what moral claim do they have to leadership themselves?

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