

COMMENT: Religious freedom the keystone
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Jan 8: The late Tun Abdul Razak once said our enemies are three Cs — communism, corruption and communalism. To fight these enemies, our nation's greatest weapon is our belief in God — religion, but not religious bigotry.

Religion was one of the tools used by the British to defeat the communist guerillas during the Malayan Emergency.

The resettling of thousands of poor migrant Chinese in the rural areas who were communist sympathisers in "new villages", and building hundreds of temples and churches encouraged them to disassociate themselves from the agnostic guerillas by turning to God.

In combating corruption, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said when he became Prime Minister, that he would put the fear of God in the corrupt. But that would have been useless if those who bribed and were being bribed were not God-fearing people, for no God-fearing person would dare deny that bribery was wrong in the eyes of God.

Corruption here is not just about monetary corruption, it can also be corruption of the mind. Religion can also counter corruption of morality and our mores and fight social decadence, especially among the young in the cyberspace.

Hence religion can build within us a strong will against the temptation of corruption.

In a multi-racial, multi-religious and polyglot society like ours, race and religion can easily rear their ugly sides.

They often provoke extreme passions and reactions whenever one community attempts to claim racial and religious superiority.

These are no doubt delicate and touchy issues, but that does not mean that we should not discuss them. Instead of being often the partners that foment communalism, religion can in fact counter it.

So when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi sent out personal Christmas cards to Christian leaders and churches, many quickly saw the benevolence of Islam in him.

It follows that if our children are brought up to be tolerant of others' beliefs from their nursery and primary school days, such attitudes can ultimately help fight any virus of racism and even heal it.

I remember, when I was in primary school in rural Yong Peng, my best friends were Tun Zahari, Zainal and Babu. During recess, we would sit at the verandah of the wooden English primary school and indulge in foolish talk. On Fridays, the Malays would be in their baju Melayu and I would play with their songkok, and they would tell me why they had to wear the songkok on a Friday and its significance.

I also remember, shortly after the communal riots of May 13, how I would hold hands during school assemblies with Tun Zahari, Zainal and Babu, singing "Muhibbah" and "Malaysia Berjaya" and reciting loudly and proudly our national philosophy (Rukun Negara) in which we pledged that our nation would be dedicated, inter alia, to achieving "a greater unity for all her peoples". We also pledged our united efforts to attain this end guided by the following principles:

- Belief in God
- Loyalty to King and country

- Supremacy of the Constitution.
- The rule of law
- Mutual respect and good social behaviour.

It is, therefore, not surprising to see that of the five guiding principles, religion is placed first.

But what has become a matter of concern is that over the years non-Muslims find it increasingly difficult to build their places of worship. This offends Article 11 of the Federal Constitution, which guarantees non-Muslims the freedom to profess and practise their religion, except for propagating their religion to Muslims.

That explains why the Federal Constitution, being the social contract which binds all Malaysians, is listed as the third guiding principle of our national philosophy.

Of course, Malaysians' constitutional right to freedom of religion, as expressly stated in Article 11(5) does not "authorise any act contrary to any general law relating to public order, public health or morality".

The Johor State Constitution promulgated during the reign of the fair and just Sultan Abu Bakar, for example, even has an article in it proclaiming as follows: "All the laws and customs of the country shall be carried out and exercised with justice and fairness by all the Courts of Justice and all Officers and Servants of the State between all the people of the country and the aliens who sojourn and reside under its protection, whether for a season or for a lengthened period, that is to say, without their entertaining in the least degree more sympathy or regard to partiality towards those who profess the religion of the country, namely the Muslim religion, or making any difference between those who are the subjects of the State and those who are not."

In this respect, delaying approvals for the construction of places of worship for those who profess the non-Muslim faith is incompatible with Article 11.

The approval process is often long, in some cases years, for the authorities to approve the conversion of land to religious use as well as building plans for these places of worship.

In some states, such applications first have to be referred to the District Security Committee and then to the State Security Committee for deliberation for reasons of "public order".

The composition of these committees usually comprises entirely those who profess the Muslim faith, with representatives from the Religious Affairs Department.

It is disheartening to note that as Malaysians those who profess non-Muslim faiths should be considered a security threat and that applications for establishing their places of worship have to be referred to the Security Committee.

It is hoped that this perceived ethnocentric approach will cease immediately, and that each State Government will set up a non-Muslim Religious Department to look into the religious issues affecting the non-Muslims.

Applications for the erection of places of worship should be automatically dealt with by this department and the local authorities.

Only if there is sufficient evidence that the intended place of worship will pose a threat to "public order" in a particular location should this be referred to the State Security Committee.

I am sure that the majority of our Muslim brethren will sympathise with our predicament and appreciate

what is written here.

Having seen how Tun Razak animadverted communalism and the role of religion in coming to grips with the three enemies of state, it is hoped that in 2006, the authorities will be more magnanimous in approving places of worship for non-Muslims because a nation which is religious will produce God-fearing people.

After all, where else can one experience the benevolence of Islam, the enlightenment of Buddha, the love of Christ and the good manifestations of the various Hindu deities than in our beloved Malaysia?

So, let us take pride in our religious diversity, which can be a formidable strength of our multi-religious nation in overcoming communism, corruption and most of all, communalism.

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