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Is it fear of God or politics?

AKERINCI community leader in Jambi, Sumatra gave an uncharacteristic reaction when he came up with a rational explanation as to what would have caused the pillar of the village mosque to turn as hot as burning charcoal.

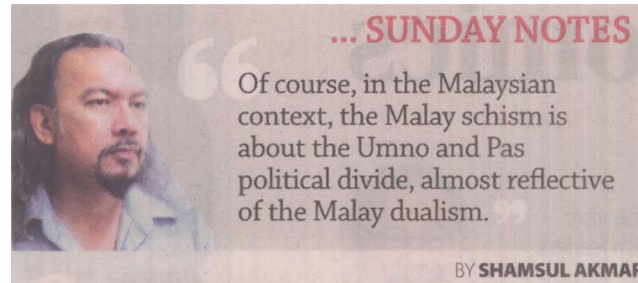
Julizaman said he believed that the pillar and the floor of Koto Tengah's Nurul Ikhwah mosque became hot because of the hot air emitted underground by the nearby Kerinci volcano that had been active of late.

That should put a stop to conjectures that such incidents resulted from God's wrath due to some misdeeds committed by some segments of the Muslim society or their failure to uphold what is commanded.

Malaysia, especially its Malay community, had been subjected to such logic — disasters attributed to the anger of God and threats of *bala* (catastrophes) for failure to implement what is commanded in the Quran and hadith (prophetic traditions).

The opaque viewpoints had seen their ebb and flow in Malaysia—very much linked to the extent of the Malay-Muslim political schism.

The deeper the schism and the more desperate the political battle, the more frequent the need to resort to "fire and brimstone" preaching.



Simply put, it boils down to a political fight based on who ends up in hell or heaven.

Of course, in the Malaysian context, the Malay schism is about the Umno and Pas political divide, almost reflective of the Malay dualism.

However, of late, specifically since the 2008 general election, though the schism is as entrenched as before, the dualism has somewhat become blurred. If Pas in the past had been the force pushing Umno to be more "Islamic" and conservative, the former's nearly unfettered embrace of the opposition coalition and partnering the liberal Parti Keadilan Rakyat and secular DAP, had changed the equation.

In an almost volte-face position, Pas was prepared to drop even its

most sacred Islamic state and hudud laws agenda purely to be accepted and useful in the opposition coalition. It would not have been accepted if it insisted on pursuing its Islamic agenda and neither would it have been effective as the DAP and PKR would be rejected by the non-Malays, their power base.

However, Pas did not arrive at this stage either by chance or design.

The current issue afflicting Pas/DAP relations in Kedah over the Pas state government's move to ban the operations of all entertainment outlets next month during the fasting month is a good example of the issue.

The ban is enforced based on a 1997 State Enactment obviously enacted when the Umno-led Barisan Nasional ruled Kedah.

The enactment was also obviously an attempt by Umno to gain Islamic credentials at that time when Pas was gaining much ground among the Malay Muslims with its unequivocal commitment to the Islamic state and hudud laws agenda. While the Umno/BN state government then may have introduced the enactment, it never had the political will to pursue it given its unique relationship with its partners in the coalition.

It was accepted that Umno may whip up some Islamic credentials it needed but it must not execute them if they affected the non-Malays.

Pas at that time, either did not care about the non-Malay votes given its Malay-centric politics, or it never saw itself as a national political player.

As such, its current decision to in fact be contrarian to its previous existence is actually quite surprising, if not suicidal.

But Pas seems to be quite confident of the support from its followers either from having been able to explain its strategy convincingly to them or that they are fanatical.

While Pas now seems to enjoy the growing confidence of the non-Malays who are anti-Umno, Kedah Pas decided to introduce the ban and as expected, incurred the wrath of its partner, the DAP.

DAP chairman Karpal Singh has, as in the past when dealing with Pas' Islamic agenda, firmly assured the people of Kedah that the party would take all necessary steps to force the Kedah government to withdraw the ban. The question is why did the Pas-led state government decide to pursue the enactment knowing very well that it would create an immediate friction with the DAP?

The DAP, knowing very well that the non-Malay support could be eroded if it slackens on checking Pas' Islamic pursuits, would not have let the ban stand in any way.

Then, there can only be two reasons — firstly, not everyone in Pas is agreeable to the leadership's decision to dilute its struggle for the Islamic agenda and secondly that they are aware they are losing out to Umno in securing the rural Malay voters due to the dilution.

With that, Pas will not be an equal, let alone a leading partner in the opposition coalition, ending up only delivering the Malay votes from their supporters in seats contested by the DAP and PKR.

However, another reason that may have escaped Kedah Pas when it wanted to implement the ban was its fear of the wrath of God. Or could it very well be because of that?