

Moderation, the Saudi way

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Is PAS' ultra conservative dream for Malaysia out of step with what's happening in the Arab world?

FOR a person born and raised in Malaysia, there should be no reason for me to fear Islam.

As a typical Malaysian of my generation, I grew up with the religion and Muslim classmates and friends. The azan call to prayer is as familiar to me as any Muslim.

I wrote in my Jan 29, 2014 column why the sound of it was special to me. When my second daughter was born, we lived in a house that was very near the neighbourhood mosque. She would wake up to suckle at the same time as the azan.

To me, the clear melodic call of the muezzin before the break of dawn was a comforting sound and, knowing it was a recitation to Muslims to offer their own prayers, it reminded me to also offer thanks for my own heavenly blessing nestled in my arms.

The Islam I grew up with, as I remember it, was tolerant and inclusive. It didn't make me feel as if I was an inconvenient pork-eating Chinese Christian, and worse, a threat to my Muslim-majority nation.

But as our nation matured, that narrative changed. Despite having no evidence to prove that Islam was under threat, certain ultra-Malay politicians and their ilk have repeatedly brandished that threat as if it were real and hence the need to protect the faith and ummat against the immigrant races, especially the Chinese.

During the recent general election, former prime minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin took it further by claiming Pakatan Harapan was an "agent of Jews and Christians" who were out to colonise Malaysia.

So now there was an addition to the 3Cs (Chinese, Christians and communists) threat to Malay and Muslim rights - Jews!

Over the years, we have wit-

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nessed far too many Muslim versus non-Muslim interest skirmishes. One of the most contentious issues dating back more than a decade is the legal battle over the use of Allah by Christians, especially bumiputra Christians in Sabah and Sarawak.

The High Court finally ruled in March last year that it was unconstitutional to ban Christians from using the word, but the landmark decision went under-reported during the time when the nation was in the grip of the Covid-19 pandemic.

A more recent controversy that got non-Muslim Malaysians shaking their heads was the Timah whiskey kerfuffle. The accusation was that the name of the homegrown award-winning brew was the shortened name of Prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatimah and could cause confusion (as usual), despite the company's explanation that "timah" is the Malay word for tin.

Add on PAS' objection to all sorts of things, including cinemas and concerts by international artistes because they "encourage hedonism and were not in line with the norms and values of Muslim life in Malaysia", and the unfortunate outcome is to depict the religion as rigid and a killjoy.

Even though peninsular Malays are the overwhelmingly dominant

race in the government, armed forces, teaching profession, and government-linked corporations, years of Malay versus non-Malay brainwashing has led to wariness and suspicion on both sides.

This, however, is a peculiar peninsular Malaysia malaise.

By all accounts, Muslims in Sabah and Sarawak do not seem to have the same concerns of needing to protect the religion and save its believers from being confused and led astray by other religions.

With the rise of the Islamic State a.k.a. IS, ISIS, ISIL or Daesh, hard-line religious extremists were further emboldened in their bid to impose a restrictive code of conduct and behaviour on Muslim women in countries like Malaysia, Pakistan and Indonesia.

Fortunately, the Umno-led Barisan Nasional government took a very strong stand to fight against IS, clearly rejecting its brutal and violent methods.

But Umno did not reject IS' stated desire to impose syariah and hudud under its 21st century caliphate. The party overrode its non-Muslim Barisan partners and supported the highly controversial RU355, PAS' Private Member's Bill to amend the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 355.

It's been five years since the Bill was withdrawn, but it is not dead. In September last year, then Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob said Putrajaya was drafting amendments to the Act to increase the power of the syariah courts. This was when PAS was in his Cabinet.

And so the chasm between Muslims and non-Muslims continues to widen.

The 15th General Election only made things worse. Pakatan painted a scary picture of PAS as

Malaysia's Taliban extremists while Perikatan Nasional fuelled the notion that Pakatan's partner DAP, if voted in, would undermine Malay-Muslims and Islam.

But what is the truth? After all, non-Muslims living in PAS-controlled states like Kelantan and Terengganu seem to be doing fine and have not been discriminated against to the point of being forced to flee the states.

Interestingly, the tourist attraction of the reclining Buddha at Wat Photivihan is in Tumpat, Kelantan.

Malays living in Pakatan-governed states have not fared poorly either, nor have their rights denied or undermined. This is especially so in Penang, a state that is actually thriving under DAP rule since 2008.

Yet, non-Muslims fear that any opening for PAS-led policies and objectives would lead ultimately to the floodgates opening to Malaysia becoming like Afghanistan.

That seemed to be how Sabah and Sarawak view PAS, and want to keep the party out of their states and Putrajaya.

But PAS and its Muslim conservative allies could very well be out of step with what's happening in the wider Muslim world.

Apart from Afghanistan where the Taliban government is practically erasing women from society with decrees that ban them from going to school, public parks and gyms, require their faces to be covered in public, and limit the number of days they can go shopping (and only with a male relative), elsewhere ultra-conservatism seems to be waning.

After more than 30 years of Islamist rule, in 2020, Sudan moved to become a secular state, separating religion from the State; outlawing female genital mutilation; and

abolishing the apostasy law, which carried the death penalty, its alcohol ban on non-Muslims and public flogging.

In Iran, since the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini who died after being arrested in Teheran for violating the republic's strict dress code for women, the country has been plunged into unrest and protests not seen since the Iranian Revolution.

Some political scholars see it as the beginning of the end of the Islamic Republic with the Iranian people seeking a complete regime change and in its place, a secular democracy.

Saudi Arabia's powerful crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, told the *Guardian* that he intends to return the country to "moderate Islam" that would empower citizens and lure investors.

To him, the ultra-conservative state had been "not normal" because "What happened in the last 30 years is not Saudi Arabia. What happened in the region in the last 30 years is not the Middle East. After the Iranian revolution in 1979, people wanted to copy this model in different countries, one of them is Saudi Arabia. We didn't know how to deal with it. And the problem spread all over the world. Now is the time to get rid of it."

And in its place, he said, Saudi Arabia would be "simply reverting to what we followed - a moderate Islam open to the world and all religions. Seventy per cent of the Saudis are younger than 30, honestly we won't waste 30 years of our life combating extremist thoughts, we will destroy them now and immediately".

So how about Malaysia doing the same?

The views expressed here are the writer's own.