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RAISED eyebrows and cynical chuckles greeted the Malaysia Madani concept when it was first announced in January by the then one-month old unity government.

Arguably it was received with more cynicism than the ruling party brands that preceded it such as Keluarga Malaysia, Prihatin, and 1Malaysia, mostly because it is a foreign-sounding acronym.

People joked online that they had to Google the term to learn what it stood for whereas the previous brands were self-explanatory common Bahasa Malaysia terms.

But Madani is uniquely significant to the current administration not just because it is meant to encapsulate the unity government's values but because of the unique shape of the government itself.

It is only the second time in Malaysian history that Malaysians have a government that wants to break away from the racial politics that has long ruled our lives. The first government that did this lasted only 22 months in office.

Sunday Star spoke to political scientists, sociologists, and Islamist activists about how the concept reflects the administration's aims of dealing with the current landscape of polarised partisan politics and rising religious conservatism.

Scholars from think tank Institut Darul Ehsan, who were involved with Anwar in developing the Madani concept, also spoke about the challenges they faced in making the idea understood among ordinary Malaysians. They explain how Malaysia Madani aims to provide an alternative to Ketuanan Melayu-Muslim (Malay-Muslim supremacy), the ideology that has dominated Malaysian politics for six decades.

Madani, they say, is key to achieving the Bangsa Malaysia ideal that has evaded previous governments, and to provide a measure of stability for the administration.

Why Madani? Why not something simpler?

Political scientist Prof Wong Chin Huat of Sunway University says that the Madani concept provides an alternative model of ethnic relations that is rooted in Islamic concepts but that is different than the Malay-Muslim supremacist world view that is still popular in the community.

"To supersede the ethnocentric Muslim-Infidel (Kafir) dichotomy which emerged and expanded amidst the expansion of Muslim empires, progressive Islamists and Muslim democrats invite Muslims to revisit the first Muslim-dominated polity - the multireligious city state of Madinah. Prophet Mohamad was both the head of religion for the Muslim majority and the head of state for all citizens of Madinah, including the ethnic minorities of Jews and Christians.

"In the last decade, inclusive Muslim opinion leaders argued that all citizens, regardless of faith, in a modern nation state are citizens and the term kafir should not apply anymore. The Madani narrative is a continuity of this inclusive reasoning."



New concept: The awareness among Muslims and non-Muslim on what Malaysia Madani constitutes, and its six values, is still low, but studies show that only a minority actually reject it. — YAP CHEE HONG/The Star

Six months on, is Malaysia Madani catching on?

Experts say it's been a tough sell but the future of Bangsa Malaysia will depend on its success.



Malaysia Madani is critical for nurturing better inclusivity and relations between all Malaysians, regardless of ethnicity or faith. - ZHAFARAN NASIB/The Star

The term Madani is close to Anwar, says Khairul Ariffin Munir of Institut Darul Ehsan.

"He talked about building a Madani society starting in the 1970s. He had a big convention on the Madani society in 1996.

"The origin of word is Arabic but it has already been accepted into Bahasa Malaysia and is in the Kamus Dewan. Madani means mentally, spiritually and materially developed. It relates to building a society."

So it's only aimed at Malay Muslims?

Anthropologist Prof Sarjit Singh Gill of Universiti Putra Malaysia says that "Malaysia Madani" is

critical for nurturing better inclusivity and relations between all Malaysians, regardless of ethnicity or faith.

"I believe the Malaysia Madani concept has the potential to strengthen our Bangsa Malaysia identity. The Prime Minister has frequently pointed out that the core of the Madani philosophy is trust and courtesy, which are essential for nation-building.

"I believe that the Malaysian government would prioritise ethnic relations, emphasising unity in diversity. When we talk about unity in diversity, we must walk the talk and embrace diversity so that our multiethnic communities can work and live in harmony.

Prof Sarjit adds that the con-

cept's Arabic and Islamist roots would also not be alien to non-Muslim Malaysians as they have been exposed to similar ideas in the past, such as Islam Hadhari, which was promoted by fifth Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

"We already had Islam Hadhari, which focuses on civilisational Islam. Malaysia Madani, I believe, is to develop a progressive Malaysian civilisation that is focused on truth, justice, and inclusion.

"I am optimistic that Malaysians will embrace the Madani concept or approach to rebuild a Bangsa Malaysia identity. What we need is engagement with other stakeholders."

Is it catching on after six months among Muslims or non-Muslims?

Khairul Ariffin says that while the awareness among Muslims and non-Muslims of what Madani constitutes, and its six values, is still low but only a minority actually reject it.

"Our surveys among all communities found that the percentage of those who support it and those who are unsure or don't know about it are about the same. About 40% and 40%. Those who reject it are about 15%.

"Those who support Madani did so because of the prime minister's actions and decisions, such as the one about helping rice farmers, small time grow-



Khairul Ariffin: Madani means mentally, spiritually and materially developed. It relates to building a society.'



Prof Sarjit: 'Religious and political extremism must be taken seriously since they reflect negatively on the country's image around the world.'



Prof Wong: 'For Madani to be appealing, it has to be framed as a strategy against a threat.'



Hundreds thronged the Malaysia Madani Raya open house in Alor Setar, but how many really understand the concept? - Bernama



'Malaysia Madani' was launched at the Putrajaya International Convention Centre in January. - Bernama

ers, and entrepreneurs.

"Those who are not sure are divided into two camps - those who don't understand and those who are adopting a wait-and-see attitude because they want to see what comes out of it. What is positive here is that not many are rejecting it. If they don't like it, they would say so.

"Among Muslims, they understand Madani when we link it to the early society of Islam in Madinah. For non-Muslims they want to wait and see how Madani is translated into policy," he notes.

The vagueness of the concept remains an issue, says Prof Wong.

"Madani is not effectively explained and spread to the wider population, let alone non-Muslims. Not to the extent of Vision 2020. It has just become the synonym or pronoun for the Anwar government.

"For most non-Muslims I observed, it is something benign, entailing sustainability and compassion, but few probably would tie this to innovation.

"Also, it is unlikely the non-Muslims see the deeper meaning that Madani is based on the prin-

ciple of citizenship derived from the Madinah model to transcend the Muslim and non-Muslim divide."

So can it be an alternative to Ketuanan Melayu-Muslim?

Madani first needs to be "weaponised", says Prof Wong.

"In a highly kiasu society where the two main communities are highly jealous of each other, a narrative of moderation may be healthy but would not appear sexy or authentic.

"For Madani to be appealing, it has to be framed as a strategy against a threat. The government cannot tell nationalist Malay-Muslims who have decided that they are under threat to believe otherwise, but it can agree with their insecurity and anxiety by redirecting them to identity-blind threats like climate change, AI-induced job loss, with 'sustainability', 'compassion' and 'innovation'," he explains.

"The government needs to 'weaponise' Madani to rally both Muslims and non-Muslims against some common threats.

The original Madani model of multicultural and multireligious co-existence worked because they too faced common threats. For now, Madani is too soft to steal the market from 'Ketuanan Melayu-Islam'".

So what if it fails to catch on - life goes on, right?

When Pakatan Harapan came to power in 2018, the Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad administration was besieged almost immediately by racist allegations that affected its support among Malay Muslims.

The political instability of these incitements eventually contributed to the downfall of Dr Mahathir's government in February 2020. Anwar's administration is currently experiencing the same turbulence from conservative Malay Muslim Oppo-

sition parties, and questions remain about how long it will last.

"In the past, the political strategy has been to use a culture of fear," says Khairul Ariffin.

"In Malaysia, because we are segmented according to race and religion, the culture of fear is easy to use to gain support. Madani can help neutralise that culture of fear for the government. But it takes time to explain the policy and to get people to understand it."

"Also, Madani is being supported by the unity government whose popular support among Malays in the 15th General Election was neck-and-neck with Perikatan Nasional [Opposition] parties. So the unity government does have a lot of support from Malays.

"What is important is the government cannot stop educating

the public on what Madani means."

Prof Sarjit stresses it is crucial for the unity government to counter religious and political extremism in the country.

"The unity government must address the challenges of religious and political extremism that threaten the identity of the Bangsa Malaysia. These, I believe, are the primary concerns of the non-Muslim communities.

"Religious and political extremism must be taken seriously since they reflect negatively on the country's image around the world.

"Political leaders must be more accountable, have more integrity, set a good example for society, and focus on nation-building.

"We have all the existing laws in place to keep racism and religious extremism from spreading throughout the country," he says.