

'Racism and fanaticism' exploited in Malaysia for politics, Asri tells WSJ

The Malaysian Insider

August 23, 2011

By Clara Chooi

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 23 — Muslim scholar Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin took a swipe at Malaysia's religious authorities in a recent Wall Street Journal (WSJ) interview, claiming that "racism and extreme religious fanaticism" are often used to protect certain political interests.

The former Perlis Mufti, who was recently placed on a terror watch list for Wahhabism, told the influential newspaper that the authorities here needed to be more open-minded, adding that the term "Wahhabi" was recklessly used in Malaysia as a derogatory term to slander others.

"Religious authorities in Malaysia should be more open-minded. Their attitude is to force others to think in only one way, and that is not the attitude of a civilised people," he said, according to an excerpt of the interview found on WSJ's website yesterday.

He lamented that Malaysia's more progressive Muslims were "marginalised" by the conservatives who controlled the religious institutions in government, and accused the administration of fearing criticism from the former group.

While Asri insisted that he was not a follower of Wahhabism, he noted that the teaching had its own distinctive contribution for Muslim societies across the globe.

"If 'Wahhabi' means inviting people to be fanatical, rigid, stern, uncompromising, and the like, I oppose it. (But) There are also a lot of sound and relevant opinions among them. However, even if we disagree with their views, that doesn't mean we can accuse them of terrorism," he said.

Asri was first linked to Wahhabism and the terrorists group Jemaah Islamiah (JI) early last year, along with PAS President Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, former Perlis menteri besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim dan Perlis Mufti Juanda Jaya.

Last month, the National Security Council (NSC) ordered religious authorities to monitor Wahhabism in the country, placing influential former Asri, Juanda and over 40 young Umno ulamas. Putrajaya, however, later agreed that Wahhabism is not a threat to national security.

"In Malaysia, the word 'Wahhabi' is quite a mysterious term. Many use the term or slander others by it, without a clue about its meaning.

"In some places, a person is accused of being a Wahhabi for disagreeing with superstitious rituals and beliefs.... When people begin to criticise the practices, they simply say, 'you are Wahhabi'," Asri told WSJ.

He defended his position on Islam, pointing out that the religion blesses everyone regardless of race or religion and that any other interpretation that leads to "injustice, oppression, hostility to other people, ignorance, caste systems in society, racism and fanaticism that doesn't respect the rights of others" should be rejected.

"Islam must be described as a religion of love for others, with a respect for rights, respect for knowledge, rejecting superstition and basing all practices on real arguments," he said, when pointed out that his interpretation of Islam has often been linked to Wahhabism.

Asri said Malaysia's Muslim society needs "tajdid", which he defined as the restoration of Islam's original look and the innovation of certain elements to fulfil "contemporary needs".

"A lot of the contemporary issues we are encountering these days were not known in the past. To ensure a continuous survival of society, various new opinions are required.

"The opinions of preceding theologians may not be wrong, but may have expired due to changes in time and circumstance," he said.

The Malaysian Insider

Copyright© 2011 The Malaysian Insider

Source: <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/racism-and-fanaticism-exploited-in-malaysia-for-politics-asri-tells-wsj/>