

Malay youth feel religion over-politicised
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KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 16 — While surveys show a growing trend of younger Malays identifying with their faith more than their race, many nevertheless feel that religion has been politicised and should be a personal matter.

The trend towards a stronger identification with religion could also pose new challenges for political parties as analysts say that it could reflect higher levels idealism and dissatisfaction with current affairs in this demographic group, many of whom will be voting for the first time.

A comprehensive survey on young Malaysian Muslims in 2010 showed that some four-fifths are concerned over Islamic radicalism in politics, and more than 70 per cent were concerned about corruption and lack of freedom of expression.

Azlee Nor Mahmud: Islam should not be used for political agendas. — Picture by Farhan Darwis

Azlee Nor Mahmud, 25 who works in Shah Alam, said that Islam has been politicised and some parties tried to use it for their own political agenda.

"This should not happen," he told The Malaysian Insider which conducted a street poll on the issue last week.

Engineering student and registered voter Wan Djawad, 23, said religion should be a personal matter.

"I want the government to respect, truly respect individuality," he said. "Race, religion should be something personal. It should not be forced upon, but guided to those who are ready to receive it. I believe that people need to be treated as an individual."

Apostasy appeared to remain a matter of concern among many of the more conservative younger Malays but some however added that it should be a private matter.

Ipoh-born Muhammad Farid Zainuddin, 25, who now lives in Selangor's capital, Shah Alam, said he felt that apostasy was a threat but it nevertheless was a personal issue.

"It is up to the individual, if the person's faith is strong, apostasy would not be a problem because they would hold fast to their religion," he said.

Wan Djawad: Government should respect the individual — religion is something personal. Many Malays also felt that not only religion but also race was being politicised which was not helpful to the cause of unity.

Rashaad Ali, 23, said what mattered most was that the practices and needs of each religion refrained from oppressing others.

He also suggested that race-based political parties were impeding the cause of national unity.

"I'm not a fan of race-based politics; I find there to be something intrinsically wrong in political parties being formed along racial lines," said Rashaad, who plans to vote in the coming general election due to his desire to affect change.

"If we're truly a single Malaysian country, then politicians wouldn't find the need to constantly use the words 'Malay', 'Chinese' and 'Indian' when referring to any section of the country's population, as mere mention of these ethnicities is an admission of racial divide and an exacerbation of differences."

Muhammad Farid Zainuddin: If personal faith is strong, apostasy would not be a problem. — Picture by Farhan Darwis

Ahmad Syafiq, 23, a recent graduate and first-time voter, said religion was a bigger deal to him than race.

"Religion is a huge matter for me, but race matters less for who I am, although I'll never forget my roots," he said. "I never liked race-based politics as it is impeding our ability to live in harmony with many different races in Malaysia."

He said that while he appreciated the government's efforts in trying to promote harmony through 1 Malaysia, leaders from both sides of the political divide "must walk the talk to show that they are not just talk with no action."

For some Malays, the use of Islam for political agendas has led to divisions in the Malay community and amounted to a threat to the unity of the community.

Mohd Abdul Wahid Rosmat, 26, a warehouse worker in Sekinchan, Selangor, felt that the result of religion being used in politics was that Malays were being split.

"Islam in Malaysia has been politicised," he said. "The result being Malays are split into different political tribes. The Malays should differentiate between politics and race as Malays are now not united."

Ibrahim Suffian, head of opinion research firm Merdeka Center, said that surveys conducted by the centre show that younger Malays seem to be more inclined towards their faith.

Rashaad: Something wrong with race-based political parties. — Picture by Lisa J. Ariffin
He said it was not clear if it was something deep-seated among the youth or just something they felt was politically correct to say.

"Where is it coming from, I suspect a social bias," he said.

Suffian said this inclination for religion could affect the outcome of the next election.

"The youth have higher levels of idealism which could play a role in their vote," he said.

The report on the survey on Muslim youths conducted by Merdeka Center for the German Goethe Institut concluded that while the apparent social conservatism might be a cause of concern among observers who support a liberal democratic society, Malaysia's Muslim youths are socially more diverse than meets the eye.

Ahmad: Religion is a huge matter but race matters less.

"Taken as a whole, the findings show both authoritatively conservative and liberally democratic trends among Muslim youngsters — which may possibly be due to the obvious juxtaposition of pressure and freedom young Muslims grow up with in Malaysia," said the report.

Wan Saiful Wan Jan, chief executive of the Institute of Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), said that the apparent trend of growing religious identification among the youth could be the way they are expressing concern about the current state of affairs.

"Maybe they are expressing dissatisfaction and the only recourse is to go back to religion," he said.

He said however that it would be difficult to assess the impact of the trend on the next election.

Any religious conservatism would also likely not be able to find an outlet, said Wan Saiful, as Malaysia lacks a true conservative party, with PAS now seen as the more Islamic but moderate party and Umno the more Malay-centric party but with moderate leaders.

"The conservatism might not come out in an election," he said.

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