

Under Najib, Malaysia not a progressive society for religion, says Asia watcher
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A long-time Asia watcher has panned Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak (pic), noting that Malaysia under his watch was not a progressive society as reflected in the rise of religious jingoism.

Zoher Abdoolcarim, writing in the latest issue of Time magazine, said that the crackdown on Shia Muslims in the country and the ban on Christians using the word Allah were undermining a largely peaceful status quo.

In the article titled "Losing Faith", the writer recalled interviewing Najib in 1984 in a hotel suite in Kuala Lumpur.

"At the time, Malaysia was a sleepy, mainly agriculture-based economy just in its second decade of industrialisation. I remember thinking that the British-educated Najib could one day lead Malaysia and enable its transition from tradition to modernity.

"I was right on one count – Najib is today Prime Minister – but wrong on the other. Under his watch, Malaysia is no progressive society, especially on a critical front for the nation: religion," noted Zoher.

Despite its size, Malaysia has always been important more so than Indonesia or Turkey because "it is a study in how a country can or cannot reconcile Islam with the contemporary age".

The challenge has been greater for Malaysia because of different ethnic groups. But while friction exists between Muslims and non-Muslims, the system had worked, said Zoher.

"That system is now under strain," he added, noting that in recent months, Umno had become more strident about its brand of Islam.

This can be seen in calls by a few Umno leaders for Sunni Islam to be enshrined as the state religion following the arrest of two Shia Muslims for possessing books on Shia Islam. Zoher also drew attention to objections to Christians using the word Allah, although he noted such usage has long been common.

"The Malaysian authorities say they are trying to pre-empt religious tension. But, if anything, they are undermining a largely peaceful status quo," he wrote.

Yet it was not like this in the early days of the Najib era. When he came to power in 2009, the prime minister had "introduced changes that made Malaysia more open".

He has back-tracked since to appease Umno conservatives, many of whom want him out. But religious jingoism is a bigger sin than political calculation, because how a society treats its "other" reveals its core, Zoher wrote.

He concluded his essay with some words of advice.

"Those who would impose their dogma might heed these words from the Quran: 'There is no compulsion in religion', and 'Whatever you may differ about is for God to judge'." – March 2, 2014.

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