

Race, Religious Uproar: The Buck Stops With Najib, Says Law Expert
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By Elizabeth Zachariah

Malaysia's future now looks worrying with escalating hate speech and religious animosity and the prime minister's silence is not helping, says a constitutional law expert.

Calling on Datuk Seri Najib Razak to end his silence and condemn any attempts to destroy the Malaysian social fabric and national stability, Emeritus Professor Datuk Dr Shad Saleem Faruqi said: "I am worried".

Shad, from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), was expressing his concerns about the future of Malaysia if religion bashing continued to fester in the multi-racial country of 30 million people.

"I am worried about the closing of our minds. From both sides of the divide, there is an unwillingness to see issues from the other's perspective."

But Shad also said "there is always hope" for Malaysia, reiterating his previous optimism that the "madness" in Malaysia would not last, warning, however, that it could take an "explosion" for the people to learn.

He was commenting on racial and religious issues stemming from a tussle between the Catholic Church and Putrajaya over the use of the word "Allah", which Putrajaya insists is exclusively for Muslims.

These include the January raid of the Bible Society of Malaysia and seizure of 321 Bibles in Bahasa Malaysia and Iban containing the word "Allah", the fire-bombing of the Church of the Assumption in Penang and last year's call by Perkasa's Datuk Ibrahim Ali on Muslims to burn the Alkitab.

"I am worried about the future of the nation. I am worried about how Sabah and Sarawak may be alienated by all this.

"I am worried about what may happen to the economy if there is a continuous outflow of talent and capital. I am worried about Malaysia's peace and stability," Shad, who is also UiTM's legal adviser, told The Malaysian Insider.

He said he was not sure if the prime minister could put a stop to the issues, but said Putrajaya should at least make a stand.

"I do not agree with the silence. There should not be silence. I agree that he (Najib) should make a stand.

"I have even written about it... that Putrajaya must not delay and immediately, strongly and verbally condemn hate speech. They must condemn those who want this country to burn for their own personal benefit," said Shad.

What has had happened, the professor said, was that the leaders' personal perceptions were "not being translated" because of their political agenda.

"The government of the day has to cater to its constituency. PM Najib has tried reaching out to the communities – he lifted the Emergency Act, repealed the Internal Security Act.

"But somehow, there was a rebuff from the voters in last year's election. This is the problem with democratic elections – the numbers matter," he added.

The dilemma of democracy was that often times, politicians cannot do what was right because it may not be popular and may not win you votes, Shad said.

"What we are witnessing in Malaysia are populist policies. These are policies that have wide support but are not necessarily good for the future or in line with justice."

The country, he added, was going through the "pangs of democracy", with the expansion of freedom of speech and human rights.

"We are an emerging democracy. It takes roots, freedom of speech expands, human rights become more pronounced, views are being expressed and sadly, they are often expressed in ways that are hurtful to others."

Shad said Malaysia should be worried about being placed on a watch list for its limitation on freedom of religion by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

In the report released last week, the commission placed Malaysia on Tier 2 along with countries like Afghanistan, Cuba, Indonesia, Laos, Russia and Turkey.

"It is something we should be concerned about. Sadly, perceptions of people are important especially if you want to promote international trade, tourism, provide leadership in the Global Movement of Moderates (GMM), OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conference) and to third world countries," said Shad, who was previously involved in drafting documents, including the KL Declaration to Criminalise War and for the UN on Protection for Places of Worship.

"We need political leadership that is prepared to say, 'Look this will not be permitted'.

On the seminar on the use of the word "Allah" and Christology on Tuesday, Shad said the belittling and dissecting of other faiths should not be condoned.

"Although I was not there, I want to say that I was taught that 'to you, your religion, to me, mine'.

"I do not condone this but I have to say that this happens to Islam, too. We are also demonised, dissected and vilified."

The seminar, organised by UiTM, warned Muslims against the threat of Christianisation and belittled the Bible for containing "tales".

However, despite the worrying issues taking helm in the country now, Shad reiterated that "there is always hope" for Malaysia.

"We need political leadership that is prepared to say, 'Look this will not be permitted'.

"I don't see why history must move in a single line or in one direction. I believe things can change with leadership," he said, naming Youth and Sports Minister Khairy Jamaluddin and Tourism Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Aziz as the more courageous leaders in the government.

"In my lifetime, I have seen the Northern Ireland problem resolved, race divisions in the US tackled in 1964 with the Civil Rights Act. In my lifetime, I saw South Africa taking its direction."

He was referring to Northern Ireland's 30-year violence between its nationalist community (Catholics) and unionist community (Protestants) during which 3,254 people were killed and South Africa's apartheid regime.

Shad has also written extensively on legal issues and human rights, and is the author of several books, including "Human Rights, Globalisation and the Asian Economic Crisis" and "Islam, International Law and the War against Terrorism ". – May 9, 2014.

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