

Old Malaysian Issues Are New, Again
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Controversy over the use of “Allah” by non-Muslims has religious – and political – underpinnings.

Malaysia’s inability to settle longstanding issues that go to the core of the country’s make-up, following last year’s controversial election, is leading to a fresh crisis within a government found badly wanting over its ability to deal with race and creed, the economy and leadership of the country.

Central to the latest bout of unrest is former autocratic Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. His persistent dabbling in politics and his own United Malays National Organization (UMNO) through firebrand Islamic nationalists has sullied relations within his own ranks.

As chief patron of Perkasa – a non-government Malay supremacy organization – Mahathir has also won his country unwanted comparisons with Pakistan and apartheid-era South Africa.

Perkasa, with its preference for Sharia law, has also been touted as a potential political party to contest the next election. An electoral challenge would pit Perkasa in direct competition with UMNO.

Perkasa claims 420,000 paid up members and about 60 percent of these are also thought to be members of UMNO. Lim Guan Eng, of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), describes Perkasa – which also wants a ban on Malay-language bibles – as UMNO’s alter-ego.

But Mahathir’s strategy has been two-pronged. He has focused his attacks on UMNO, which leads the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition in government, while backing Perkasa and its long running push to ban the use of the word “Allah” by non-Muslims.

His motives are as racially charged as they are politically motivated. Underpinning Mahathir’s remaining political ambitions are the guiding of his son Mukhriz into the top job and shoring up his own legacy and that of his family, which profited handsomely from his 22 years in office.

His target audience is Muslim hardliners who have relished a court ruling in October banning Christian use of the word “Allah.”

According to Mahathir only Christians in East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak are allowed to use important Muslim words, “but they don’t need to do so in the peninsula because Bahasa Malaysia is not in use daily by Christians here. All those who use Bahasa Malaysia are Muslims.”

“It was never used in Bibles, be it in any language,” Mahathir, who stepped down as prime minister in 2003, recently told reporters.

Malaysia’s political hierarchy has always yearned for a position of influence in the Islamic world, particularly through the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). But the silly debate over the use of this word is anachronistic, facile and costing Malaysia what limited credibility it brings to the international stage. Even in the Middle East this argument has no grounds.

Factually Mahathir is also wrong. Early European bibles were known at times to use the word “Allah” as opposed to “God” when referring to an era when many people spoke Aramaic anyway. A Dutch-Malay-Latin dictionary published in 1631 uses the word Allah for God.

But being correct or serving the genuine interests of all Malaysians has not been a priority in recent years, with the wider national interests taking a backseat to the political and religious ambitions of a few.

Four years ago three mosques were desecrated with pigs’ heads and police immediately linked the incident to earlier attacks on 11 Christian churches and a Sikh temple that followed an initial court ruling that did allow the use of the word “Allah” by non-Muslims.

Crucially, the bloodied remains of the pigs that were scattered around the mosques at Taman Dato Harun, Al Imam al Timizi and Sri Sentosa were left in plastic bags.

Unlike Christians, Muslims are not allowed to touch pigs directly, prompting widespread speculation that Muslims bent on inflaming tensions had wrapped the pigs in plastic and dumped their remains in the mosques while blaming Christians.

In the past week a church in Penang was firebombed with tensions fanned in recent months by Perkasa and Muslim hardliners after the court overturned the lower court ruling and enforced the ban. Allah was not the only word put forward.

Use of “Kaabah” for Islam’s holiest shrine in Mecca, “Solat” meaning prayer and “Baitullah” or “House of God,” were also written off for non-Muslims under the literary amendments.

But importantly a resurrection of the “A-Word” issue coincided with much soul-searching by UMNO following its worst electoral performance since independence in 1957. Prime Minister Najib Razak was returned at last May’s poll but with a substantially reduced majority after opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim and his loose coalition of parties won the overall popular vote.

Chinese voters, many of them Christian, deserted the BN coalition amid long-running accusations of corruption and racially discriminatory economic policies that favor *bumiputeras* – or native sons of the soil – and disadvantage all other ethnic groups in education, business and government position.

That desertion prompted widespread anger among Malays within UMNO – whose ability to rule was only ensured by heavy gerrymandering. Instead of focusing on what went wrong and winning back lost ground UMNO turned inward, cozying-up to the Muslim heartland of East Malaysia and pandering to the jaundiced beliefs of hardliners and the use of the word “Allah.”

This has cast doubts over Najib’s tenure as prime minister and his ability to pursue economic reforms aimed ending pro-bumiputera economic policies and freeing-up the economy.

Najib only got the top job after his predecessor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi failed to improve on UMNO’s standing at elections in 2008 and was ousted by a Mahathir-inspired party-room coup. Najib also failed to improve on Badawi’s standing at the last election.

There are now persistent accusations that Mahathir is plotting openly against Najib, leading to calls from the prime minister’s supporters to act before it is too late.

“The bile must rise in Najib’s throat each time he reads allegations that former PM Mahathir Mohamad is plotting against him,” commentator Mariam Mokter wrote recently. “If Najib were to arrest Mahathir for undermining his rule, his popularity rating which has dipped will soar to 97 percent overnight. The nation will be solidly behind Najib.

“When groups of people like Perkasa react against Mahathir’s arrest, Najib should arrest them too,” she added. “Najib has the power, why does he not use it? Mahathir did, when he was PM. He used his sweeping powers to silence his detractors. In situations which could damage his career he would direct from behind the scenes whilst his deputy took the flak.”

Mahathir’s own daughter Marina has sided against the ban on the word “Allah,” prompting an angry response from Perkasa and accusations her support of Christians was simply a cheap publicity stunt.

“I don’t want to comment about Perkasa,” she recently said. “They talk so much rubbish.”

Marina enjoys the kind of support her sycophantic brother can only dream of and despite the recalcitrant behavior of hardliners within Perkasa who would no doubt disapprove of a female prime minister anyway. Mukhriz, however, hasn’t said much at all although his name often appears alongside his father’s when talk turns to future Malaysian leaders.

Still, Najib does have other problems including the ongoing French court case surrounding Malaysia’s acquisition of two submarines and the murder of Mongolian model and translator Altantuya Shaariibuu who was involved with that deal. His wife Rosmah Mansor remains dreadfully unpopular.

But within UMNO moderates believe Najib has done his best given the political realities he inherited that include a party hampered by religious extremism and overshadowed by an ageing autocrat who no longer enjoys the broad support of those moderates or non-Malays. Najib's survival now depends on whether he can silence Mahathir and reign in the Islamic hardliners.

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