

What's in a name – tahaluf siyasi and such

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When former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad accuses PAS of using Arabic words to manipulate Muslims, he is addressing an old concern.

PETALING JAYA: Some 23 years ago, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, speaking at the Umno general assembly, responded to calls by party delegates to ban the word “Islam” from the name of political parties, a move seen to stop its then arch enemy from mobilising support from Muslims.

“With so many Muslims and religious teachers supporting PAS, the use of the word ‘Islam’ to the party by PAS leaders can no longer be stopped,” Mahathir said at the Umno general assembly in November 1994.

“They will accuse Umno of banning Islam and not to ban the use of the word Islam in PAS’ name,” said the Umno president.

But PAS is not the only one using Islam on its name. Businesses and other organisations in Malaysia have traditionally used the name “Islam”, alongside many other Arabic-Islamic terms, either as a marketing strategy or to highlight their Islamic image.

Two days ago, Mahathir repeated the same concerns he had addressed two decades earlier.

Writing in his popular blog, the veteran statesman, still a staunch critic of PAS despite being at the forefront of the opposition camp, said PAS was manipulating Arabic words to serve its political agenda.

An example is the term “tahaluf siyasi”, the phrase popularised by PAS leaders to describe its cooperation with other parties.

The phrase again dogged headlines recently after PAS ended ties with PKR, just two years after cutting ties with DAP.

“Tahaluf siyasi” was first introduced to Malaysian voters after PAS elders released a working paper, giving their greenlight for the party to cooperate with DAP and PKR in a coalition.

“The verses of the Qur’an quoted in the tahaluf siyasi paper do not specify whether such political cooperation is legal or not,” said Mahathir, hitting out at the party for its use of Islamic and Arabic terminology to find support among Muslims.

For former PAS member, Wan Ji Wan Hussin, the use of Arabic words is a form of manipulation by the party.

“PAS has been using a lot of Arabic terms and it is used to sway people to vote for them, especially Malay Muslims. It is a form of abuse,” said the former committee member of the Selangor PAS Ulama wing.

Now a PKR member, Wan Ji said Malay Muslims should not be easily taken in by the use of such terminology.

He said there was nothing wrong in using Arabic terms, but warned of the hidden political agenda.

“Just because someone uses an Arabic term, it does not necessarily mean well. It does not mean that everything is halal or in accordance with Islam,” he added.

“It’s just a term, nothing spectacular.”

He said in the Arabic-speaking world, “tahluf siyasi”, which means political cooperation, is also used by non-Muslims.

Echoing him, Bebas member Azrul Mohd Khalib said a language does not enhance the value of a policy.

“Regardless, if the policy is being addressed in Arabic or any language, if it is a bad policy, it is still bad. The Arabic term does not legitimise bad policy,” said Azrul, a vocal critic of PAS’ policies.

But Azrul said Malaysians were more mature now, saying they are capable of knowing whether they are being lured by political parties or not.

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