

## **State control muddled understanding of Islam, forum told**

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**By Aedi Asri**

**Sisters in Islam co-founder Zainah Anwar says the rivalry between Umno and PAS to show who was “more Islamic” contributed to narrowed understanding among Muslims.**

KUALA LUMPUR: The Islamisation policy of the 1980s transformed Malaysians' understanding of the religion, but it was not a positive change, a forum to review current developments in Islam heard today.

Sisters in Islam (SIS) founding member Zainah Anwar said as politics became mixed up with religion, Islamic understanding in society became narrower during that period.

This was especially as religious authorities also began filtering what Muslims were exposed to, she said.

She related her experience as a student at a religious school for five years, saying it was different from the present approach used in teaching Islam.

Then, she said, she had learned about Islam as being beautiful and God as being full of love.

There was no accusation against other Muslims or focus on an “Islamic state”, she added.

In contrast, she said, the religion was today made to appear harsh.

“This is not Islam that I grew up with,” she told the forum titled “Islam’s Expansion in Malaysia: From the Era of Hairstyles to the Era of the Hijab”.

Other speakers at the event were Mohd Faizal Musa, a fellow at the Institute of Malay World and Civilisation in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), writer and activist Tan Beng Hui and economic analyst Azrul Azwar Ahmad Tajuddin.

Referring to the move by PAS to amend the Syariah Courts (Criminal Jurisdiction) Act 1965 (Act 355) to allow heavier punishments for shariah offenders, Zainah said it presented the religion as being focused on punitive actions.

“It deals with punishment only. Where is the beauty of Islam?”

She said the transformation in the mindset of Muslims was due to the rivalry between Umno and PAS, to show who was “more Islamic” in the race to attract support from Muslims.

The 1980s saw the government of then-prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad introducing the policy to inculcate Islamic values in the administration – an apparent effort to neutralise PAS’ “Islamic state” rhetoric.

This was also when the Muslim world, including Malaysia, was affected by the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

Zainah said the development of Islam in Malaysia today was no longer from the grassroots but by how Umno and PAS have defined it for their own political interests.

She said the concept of differences in opinions was highly regarded in the past.

“There was the concept of choosing the best among different opinions to serve the best interest of the community,” she said.

“All these existed within the Islamic tradition. Now they are forgotten and not used because of the (changed) ideology. ”

She said this had come about because parties wanted to win elections and were “fooling” the people in order gain political support.

She said the scenario in Malaysia contrasted with the spread of Islam in Indonesia, which maintained strong local grounding.

“In Indonesia, Islam that developed there is very much rooted in the (local cultural) ground, in the community,” she said.

She gave the example of the “pesantren” or traditional religious school in Indonesia, which is highly community-orientated and not inclined towards ideological Islam as seen in Malaysia.

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