

BY MUHAMMAD
HANIFF HASSAN
For *The Straits Times*

SINCE the Iranian Revolution in 1979, there has been an increasing politicisation of Islam and Islamisation of politics in Muslim societies. This can be seen in countries like Malaysia, Egypt, Indonesia and Jordan. One of the issues that have emerged from this development is the Islamic character of the state.

Many Muslims believe that Islam is a comprehensive religion governing all aspects of human life. Unlike secularism, Islam does not segregate religion from matters of society and state.

Such Muslims can be broadly divided into two categories. The first comprises those who view religion's positive role in politics and public affairs, but do not subscribe to the idea of establishing an Islamic state as a religious obligation.

They argue that Islam does not dictate specific forms of political institutions for Muslims. Therefore, Muslims are free to adopt any system as long it meets the most basic principle of governance in Islam — justice.

Since God has entrusted man as His vicegerent in this world and no man can truly claim he is a true representation of divine will in public affairs, man therefore becomes the key determinant in managing his worldly affairs.

Rule by the majority is an important factor in deciding the various tendencies in human beings. In that respect, democracy, it could be argued, is the most appropriate system for man. A democratic system is not necessarily value-free while the role of religion is recognised as a possible basis for a value-based governance.

One clear example of this is Malaysia. During the Mahathir period, the Penerapan Nilai-nilai Islam (Inculcation of Islamic Values) policy was adopted, which called for the inculcation of universal Islamic values in the working culture of the government.

Since then, Malaysia has seen a surge in the development of a pro-Islam policy. This takes opportunity of the constitutional guarantee for Islam as the official religion of the Federation and the guarantee for the implementation of some aspects of Islamic law and the establishment of various Islamic

institutions at the state level.

The second category consists of what are currently known as Islamists. They not only view Islam and politics as two inseparable parts but also regard the establishment of an Islamic state as an obligation of Muslims wherever they live. The two most important characteristics of a truly Islamic state agreed upon by the Islamists are: The state is ruled by a Muslim ruler and syariah is the basis of law.

The Islamists require an Islamic state to fully implement the syariah in every aspect of life, which includes the Hudud law for criminal justice and punishment as well as the abolition of riba (usury) practices in economic transactions.

Although levels of support for Islamic-oriented parties vary from one Muslim country to another, the numbers who share the view that Islam should play an important role in state affairs are generally small, though growing. These two broad

views provide a wide space for a rich marketplace of ideas to be discussed.

Arguably however, neither view offers the most comprehensive option for this growing community of Muslims. It is difficult for either of these views to fully represent the totality of Islam as believed by these Muslims.

Although the first category asserts the important role of religion in public affairs, it lacks a clear vision of how such a situation should be brought about. It fails to articulate a detailed set of characteristics to describe governments that are Islamically oriented or inspired.

Its assertion that the contemporary form of the democratic Westphalian state is acceptable in Islam is perceived as mere submission to Western ideas, which are the products of a different historical experience and tradition from Islam. Strong contestation from the Islamists makes it difficult for the idea to gain acceptance among

Muslims. Muslims also believe that Islamic teachings and traditions are sufficiently rich to allow them to develop their own unique modern system of government through synthesis. In other words, Islamic principles could be employed to improve the existing system. Therefore, merely recognising the current system as Islamic does not reflect Islam's true potential for positive contribution to mankind.

The Islamists' view, on the other hand, is rather simplistic. It does not reflect the true nature of Islamic teachings that encompass moral values such as integrity, justice, equality, economic development, prosperity and meritocracy. Instead, it projects syariah as simply a legal code that needs to be enforced. Even if only one criterion is not met, a government is considered un-Islamic regardless whether it is just, clean and capable of providing worldly prosperity to its citizens.

Such a view defies the

complexity of today's reality. For example, beyond the two fundamental criteria proposed by the Islamists, some Western countries bear many positive characteristics that are consistent with Islamic values. Justice in Islam requires that due recognition be given to such Western countries despite the absence of the two criteria — a Muslim ruler and syariah — or the presence of un-Islamic practices in such societies.

Index of Islamic governance

AN ALTERNATIVE to the above views is to construct a set of Islamic characteristics in a state through an index, which could be called, for now, an index of Islamic governance. The concept is similar to the various indexes currently available to measure economic performance, competitiveness, democratic practices, human rights preservation and corrupt prac-

tices.

The index should contain detailed characteristics of a government deemed to be Islamic based on the comprehensiveness of the syariah, going beyond the two characteristics held by the Islamists and adding value to the contemporary democratic system. It should be based on a point system, which could include different weightage for different characteristics. The end result is a percentage point system measuring the "Islamicness" of a state.

This approach offers a close reflection of the state of syariah on the one hand, and the complexity of the contemporary system on the other. The end result would break the mindset of looking at the issue only through a binary black and white perspective. The index will help Muslims to see a state in terms of the degree of its Islamicness. For example, a state could be 70 per cent Islamic or 30 per cent un-Islamic, depending on the result, rather than seeing it

Getting a measure of Islamic governance

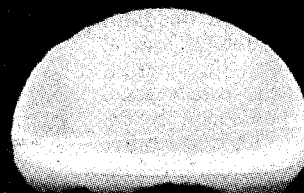


PHOTO: AP

sweepingly as Islamic or not.

While the index is most useful for measuring Muslim countries — the main concern of Muslims — it could also be used to measure non-Muslim countries. In that respect, it would not be a surprise if many non-Muslim countries score better in the index than Muslim countries. Singapore, for example, could possibly be more "Islamic" than a Muslim could realise.

With clear characteristics provided by the index, Muslims will also have a guide on how to assess how "Islamic" a state is. A state that is 70 per cent Islamic could not be dismissed as not fitting the criteria simply because 30 per cent of it is un-Islamic. This approach can therefore reconstruct the Muslim mind in the search for the ideal state.

Muhammad Haniff Hassan is a research analyst at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.