



Islam in Malaysia

Debating Islam

KUALA LUMPUR

Moderates and radicals fight it out—peacefully

WHEN Robert Zoellick, America's deputy secretary of state, recently described Malaysia as a potential model for fledgling democratic regimes in other Muslim places like Iraq and Palestine, he was not, presumably, referring to its Islamic police. In an infamous episode earlier this year, officers of Kuala Lumpur's religious department raided a nightclub, arrested some 100 patrons for ungodly acts such as consuming alcohol and dressing immodestly, and carted them off in paddy-wagons. The episode, although unusual, highlighted how many Islamic strictures remain on the books—and how uncomfortable that makes many Malaysians.

"We are a very moderate Islamic country," Abdullah Badawi, the prime minister, recently declared. On the whole, he is right. Although Muslims are in the majority, and Islam is the official religion, large Buddhist, Christian and Hindu minorities are free to worship as they please. The government, which includes many non-Muslims, tends to concentrate more on the economy than on matters of morality. Kuala Lumpur, in particular, is a cosmopolitan and tolerant place, where the sexes mingle freely, and profane items such as pork and alcohol are in plentiful supply.

Yet religion remains an awkward subject in Malaysia. Malay Muslims have lived in the area and practised Islam for centuries. During the colonial period, however, large numbers of Chinese and

Indians, non-Muslims for the most part, settled in the country. The authors of Malaysia's constitution tried to strike a balance between Malays, who felt that they and their religion should enjoy pre-eminent status in their traditional homeland, and minorities, who were worried that they would become second-class citizens. The result is a document that guarantees individual freedoms, while according Islam a special status. Muslims, for example, can proselytise freely, whereas non-Muslims cannot attempt to convert Muslims. Muslims also have their own, Islamic court system to adjudicate in matters of personal law, while non-Muslims are assigned to the normal, secular courts.

Non-Muslims gripe that the government spends too much money building mosques and promoting Islam. They also claim that the Malays who dominate the bureaucracy sometimes make life difficult for them, by withholding the permits needed to open a new temple, say, or by obstructing the import of religious tracts. In 2003, for instance, over-zealous officials attempted to ban a translation of the Bible into an indigenous language of eastern Malaysia—although Mr Badawi rescinded the order a few weeks later.

But there are also many Muslim critics of Malaysia's Islamic justice system. Muslim women's groups were up in arms in 2002, when the government of the state of Perlis made it easier for Muslim men to

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take a second wife, by scrapping a rule requiring the first's consent. Over the years, state governments (which have authority over matters of religion) have expanded the scope of Muslim personal law beyond questions of marriage and inheritance, in order to curry favour with Islamically minded voters. Most have enacted laws banning Muslims from drinking alcohol, and other forms of "indecent behaviour".

It was on the basis of such a law that Kuala Lumpur's religious officers raided Zouk nightclub in January, and arrested the Muslim patrons while allowing non-Muslims to go free. The city's well-to-do Muslims, unaccustomed to government interference in their private lives, kicked up a stink, as did the local media. Amid all the furore, angry Muslim moderates turned up all manner of intrusive state laws, barring Muslims from expressing deviant views, contradicting religious leaders and even smoking. They demanded that the government should review all these laws, and scrap those that infringed on their constitutional freedoms.

The government's response to this outcry has been ambiguous. It did issue new regulations trimming the powers of the religious officers. It is also encouraging Malaysia's 14 states to adopt a uniform Islamic code. But in general, the ruling United Malays National Organisation is reluctant to hand the Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS), its chief rival for Malay votes, any opportunity to denounce it as un-Islamic. Wan Ahmad Farid Wan Salleh, an adviser to the prime minister on religious matters, cannot even bring himself to reject outright the idea of an Islamic criminal code, complete with amputated hands. He argues instead that the time is not right.

Meanwhile, Mr Badawi is trying to shift the focus of the debate by promoting an alternative vision of Islam, which he calls ►►

- ▶ “Islam Hadhari”, or civilisational Islam. It stresses the moral value of education, economic development, and protection of minorities, as a counterweight to PAS’s narrow emphasis on dogma. “You can be cosmopolitan and Islamic at the same time,” insists Mr Wan Farid. Moreover, he says, Muslims who stray from the faith should be brought into line by persuasion, rather than coercion.

Civil libertarians, however, dismiss Islam Hadhari as an attempt to fudge the issue. What about those Muslims who do not want to be brought into line, asks Malik Imtiaz Sarwar, a lawyer. He points to several cases involving Muslims who seek to convert to other religions. Islamic courts label them apostates and pack them off to rehabilitation camps. But the civil courts have so far avoided ruling on whether the constitution’s guarantee of freedom of religion extends to Muslims seeking to leave their faith. That, Mr Imtiaz argues, is too controversial an issue for judges or politicians to tackle—even in model Malaysia. ■