

The Political Costs of Caning Kartika

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Malaysia has long tried to cultivate the image of being a moderate Muslim state that can serve as a model for others. Particularly in the wake of the attacks on the United States in September 2001, successive Malaysian prime ministers have worked hard to ensure that Malaysia would remain on the list of moderate Muslim states that could serve as the bridge between the Western and Muslim worlds.

Today, that image stands to take a significant pounding, thanks to a relatively isolated incident that has managed to grab headlines worldwide: A Malay-Muslim woman by the name of Kartika Sari Dewi Shukarno is set to be caned for the offence of drinking alcohol in public. Kartika's case has bedevilled lawmakers of Malaysia for the simple reason that nobody seems to know what to do about it.

Kartika was found guilty of drinking beer in the state of Pahang. The religious authorities in the state found her guilty of committing a syariah offence, and she was fined and sentenced to six strokes of the cane. Kartika herself pleaded guilty to the charges. But what baffles many observers is that the former model said she was prepared to be caned, and what is more, to be caned in public.

Former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad has asked if Malaysia would celebrate its independence day (on Aug 31) with the caning of a Muslim woman. Prime Minister Najib Razak has himself asked Kartika to appeal against her sentence. Needless to say, the case has brought Malaysia to the world's attention for all the wrong reasons.

The problem that this case poses for Malaysia is complex. For a start, Kartika's case was handled by the Syariah Court of Pahang, raising the question of whether the federal government can intervene to save her.

Adding to the confusion is the problematic and complicated relationship between religion and politics in the country. The borderline between Islam and politics has grown increasingly blurred after three decades of state-driven Islamisation. The enfeebled ruling United Malays National Organisation (Umno) is now trying its best to defend its own Islamic credentials in the face of the opposition Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS). At the same time, Umno would not like to gain the same reputation as the Taleban of Afghanistan.

PAS in turn is likewise split in its conscience, between moderates who wish to push the democratisation agenda and conservatives who want more Islamisation. Already in Selangor, where PAS came into power as part of the opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition, moral policing has been introduced by the conservative PAS leader Hasan Ali, who has called for religious functionaries to arrest Muslims who go against Islamic law.

PAS conservatives may feel that their electoral gains have given them the green light to further Islamise the country. They have thus called for a ban on the sale of alcohol and music concerts. But in the wider context of international politics, Malaysia is looking more and more like a parochial state where books are banned and people are whipped for doing things that would be regarded as perfectly normal elsewhere.

Malaysia's conservative Islamists, their religious convictions notwithstanding, do not seem to understand why the international community is upset with the idea of a woman being caned for drinking a pint. Perak Mufti Harussani Zakaria, for instance, has wondered why a fuss should be made over a woman receiving six lashes when, in his opinion, she should be receiving 80 lashes.

It is this sense of disconnect that adds a surreal air to the goings-on in Malaysia today. The Malaysian government is concerned that failure to enact Islamic law will compromise its standing in the eyes of conservative Muslims in the country. But to have Kartika caned would jeopardise the country's image internationally. Like it or not, Malaysia still depends on trade with the developed Western world, not Afghanistan.

This, then, is the dilemma that Malaysia faces at the moment, and there seems little consensus on how to proceed. Kartika's caning has been postponed for now. One thing, however, is certain: The costs of caning Kartika are simply too high. Should Malaysia cane her, it would have jumped one rung up the Islamisation ladder. After that, there may be no turning back.

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