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In the Name of God: Preserving the Sense of Security in Malaysia

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The controversy over the Christian use of “Allah”, the divine name Muslims use for God, has taken a new twist as more provocations surfaced. The sense of insecurity in Malaysia can be eased through dialogue inspired by mutual respect and accommodation.

A MUSLIM blogger in Malaysia initiating a fund-raising drive for a church damaged by arsonists. Night patrols by Muslim groups to protect Christian houses of worship. Calls for dialogue between Christian and Muslim community leaders. If it all sounds extraordinary, it is. It is rare, if at all, that a Muslim is heard raising funds for a church. It is rarer still to hear of Muslim NGOs preserving the sanctity of churches. The last time the idea of an inter-faith platform was floated, it got shot down swiftly amid concerns over the harm such an inter-faith initiative could do to Muslim rights and identity.

All these moves – from the fund-raising to patrols by Muslims -- are as unexpected as they are unprecedented in the context of inter-religious relations in Malaysia. All the same, they are a significant upshot of the current controversy triggered by a High Court judgement allowing the Herald, a Catholic weekly, to use “Allah” to refer to the Christian God. These developments within the Muslim community, despite their unease, give cause for some longer term optimism:

For amid all the tensions, unfolding is a new threshold in inter-faith acceptance. Significantly, these are initiatives from the Muslim majority -- not the minority Christians and non-Muslims -- even as more mosques are coming under seemingly retaliatory attacks, the latest being the desecration of two mosques near Kuala Lumpur with pigs' heads. Is the deep psychological barrier dividing the Muslim and Christian communities finally being breached?

Capitalising on the New Momentum

Significant is the government's bid to launch some kind of an inter-faith platform. The way Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin disclosed it, this is the new way forward. "The time has come," the DPM said, "for an inter-faith consultative forum." Indeed such a dialogue reportedly took place, comprising the leaders of the various faith communities, on the initiative of IKIM, the government-backed Institute of Islamic Understanding now headed by former premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

It may appear like the government is reacting to the more sure-footed response by the Islamist opposition party PAS which from the start has unequivocally pushed for an inter-faith forum. Still, the UMNO-led government's response is necessarily correct. With PAS – ironically -- leading the drive for inter-faith understanding outside the government, the road to social bridge-building looks set to get a big collective push, finally. Some NGOs were even quicker to act. In the state of Pahang, several civil society organisations from both the Muslim and Christian communities had already met ahead of the IKIM meeting. We can expect more such engagements to follow.

If carefully nurtured, the cumulative effect of such bridge-building initiatives will be the gradual revival of goodwill amongst the faith communities. This could rebuild the crucial attitudes of mutual respect, tolerance and acceptance. The psychological breakthrough in the Malay/Muslim community should not be wasted. This new mindset is a critical factor in soothing the soured relations between the UMNO-led government and the minority communities, especially since the electoral debacle in March 2008 that saw the ruling coalition losing its two-thirds majority.

Value of Inter-Faith Forum

So what should the Muslim and Christian communities thrash out as they sit down to talk heart-to-heart? Their mutual concerns and fears, of course. Given the extreme sensitivity, this should start off behind closed doors, but gradually opening up to the wider population. The anxieties of the minorities should be obvious by now. The more open political climate has allowed them to vent their pent-up frustrations over what they perceive as restrictions on their rights. The Herald's suit against the government over the use of the word "Allah" – which triggered the current controversy -- could not have happened 20 years ago.

What about the Muslims? The "Allah" controversy is inextricably linked to the broader tensions over pre-existing issues of religious rights and identity between the Muslims and non-Muslims. To the Muslims, this latest tension is by far the most sensitive because it touches on the most fundamental theological principle of their religion -- the Oneness of God. It is so fundamental to Islam that it is the first article of faith for Muslims. Where Islam and Christianity drift principally apart is over the Christian belief that God is not One but Three, as embodied in the theology of the Trinity.

In the huff over the use of the name of "Allah" to refer to the Christian God, suggestions have thus been made by Muslim leaders of possible "confusion". That is actually a codeword for their anxieties over proselytising activities of Christian missionaries – an understated but simmering issue.

Aggressive proselytisation by Christian evangelists has been a long-standing concern amongst Muslims, not just in Malaysia. In Indonesia, there have been serious concerns over *kristenisasi* or christianisation. Many Indonesian Muslims believe that Christian evangelists harbour a mission to convert Indonesians by the 21st century. Malaysian Muslims believe this missionary zeal could spill across the border into Malaysia where the influence of Indonesian Christianity is seen in Malay-language Bibles with words borrowed from Bahasa Indonesia.

Proselytisation

Indeed, the problem of proselytisation was raised by Anwar Ibrahim, the opposition leader who has also argued that there is no Islamic prohibition against non-Muslims using the name of Allah. “From my understanding.....there is nothing in Islam that forbids the use of the word ‘Allah’ but what is expressed is the fear of proselytisation by the Christian missionaries,” he was quoted by the Malaysian Insider as saying. Significantly, Anwar proposed that laws be considered to “stop the proselytisation in this country”.

The restiveness in the Malaysian Muslim community over the current controversy is in a way a defensive reaction. It is a reaction to what is perceived as the increasing assertiveness of the non-Muslims of their rights to religious expression at the expense of the Muslim faith.

What’s happening in Malaysia can easily explode into greater insecurity, if not open conflict. Given the delicate situation, it is just as well that leaders across the Malay political divide are mindful of not politicising the controversy even as they compete for Muslim support amid increasing provocation. The growing restraint by all faith communities, as noted by Prime Minister Najib Razak, could lead to an inter-religious closing of ranks to contain the fallout.

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