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Malaysia: Reviving the Stillborn Inter-Faith Committee

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Synopsis

Increasing religious disputes have led the Malaysian government to revive an inter-faith committee. However, the committee faces daunting challenges that will be difficult to overcome.

Commentary

THE MALAYSIAN government has revived an interfaith committee which, according to Prime Minister Najib Razak, could serve as a mechanism to resolve problems and issues (related to religion) through “honest and frank discussions”. The committee was actually formed almost a year ago, in April 2010, after the brouhaha over the issue of Christians using the word ‘Allah’ to refer to God, which saw protest demonstrations in Kuala Lumpur and even some attacks on churches in different parts of the country.

However, the committee was stillborn since it was roundly attacked even before it could sit down to meet. Non-Muslim members of the committee decided to boycott it after a comment by Deputy Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin that the committee only consisted of ‘small-fry’ and it would not have any influence. Then, the Perak Fatwa Committee objected to the panel, citing that all other religions could not be placed on equal footing with Islam. Not to be outdone, the Malay right wing NGO, Perkasa, opposed the appointment of Koh Tsu Koon, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department, as the minister in charge of the committee. Perkasa insisted that it had to come under the guidance of Jamil Khir Baharom, the Islamic Affairs Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department.

Finally, the council of muftis disagreed to the name of the committee ‘Special Committee to Promote Inter-Religious Harmony and Understanding (SCPIRHU)’ citing the term ‘Inter-Religious’ would cause confusion among Malaysian Muslims. Though the April 2010 inter-faith committee did not take off, efforts were made to revive it later in the year. Thirty-five new members were appointed and made public on 14 February 2011 by Najib when Malaysia joined other countries to celebrate World Interfaith Harmony Week for the first time.

Recent Developments

Najib showed perseverance in reviving the inter-faith committee. He has clearly expressed support for the committee and promised allocations to it so that it could perform its tasks. The process, if sustained, will mark a milestone in Malaysian efforts to advance inter-religious dialogue at the national level. It is worthwhile highlighting that the idea of an inter-faith panel was mooted as far back as the early 1980s only to be shot down by Muslim groups, including the government’s Islamic Development Department (JAKIM). Another initiative in

2005 by the Malaysian Bar Council to set up an Inter-Faith Commission suffered a similar fate with the then PM Abdullah Badawi quickly sweeping the proposal under the carpet.

The fact that so little publicity has been given to the new committee only shows how carefully Najib is approaching the issue of inter-faith dialogue. When talking about the new committee on 14 February, he made it clear that its discussions would be held closed-door as religious matters were “very sensitive” and if discussed in public would “lead to criticisms and opinions which may hurt others”. To address criticisms from Islamic clerics, the name of the inter-faith committee has been changed to the ‘Committee for the Understanding and Harmony among Religious Adherents’.

Najib also sought to downplay expectations by asking the public to be more patient with the interfaith committee and not to expect it to resolve all issues within a short span of time. Later in the week, Najib told a gathering of 800 Islamic religious teachers in Kuala Lumpur that Islam could not be put on equal footing with other religions, obviously to deflect any possible criticism that he was promoting religious pluralism.

The Challenges

The reactions in Malaysia arising from the controversy over the usage of the word ‘Allah’ by Christians in 2010 showed that the need for some mechanism to resolve religious disputes in the country was long overdue. However, while the creating of the inter-faith committee is a big step forward, the challenges it faces are so daunting that only the excessively optimistic will believe that it can succeed. The first challenge it faces is convincing key individuals and religious organisations within the government establishment, let alone Muslim groups outside the government community, that inter-faith dialogue is a good idea. This is important as the Muslim community in Malaysia is the key player in any inter-faith dialogue.

However, the history of inter-faith dialogue shows that the concept has never been well-received by the Muslim community. Thus, the willingness of all participants in the committee to be genuinely engaged in constructive dialogue and to find a common ground in resolving issues on such contentious matters as religious conversion and custodial rights will be a significant challenge they will face.

The second major challenge facing both the committee and the government is to prevent any serious politicisation of the interfaith dialogue. This will be difficult to achieve even if there are no politicians in the current committee. The reality is that religion, especially the official religion of Malaysia, Islam, is deeply embedded in politics in Malaysia. Moreover, religious and political discourse in Malaysia is often intertwined. Hence, while the discussions can be well controlled at the closed door sessions of the committee, its findings and conclusions will have to be disclosed eventually and become subject to public debate. Managing the issue then will be a major challenge for the government as things could easily get intractable.

As a country that often takes pride in its multiracial and multi religious richness, Malaysia in recent years finds itself confronted with the darker side of religious diversity. The revival of the inter-faith committee shows that religious plurality in Malaysia can no longer be taken for granted. And it has to be managed delicately with much perseverance and sensitivity if the process is ever to succeed.

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