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General Election 2013: Religion as a Permanent Variable in Malaysian Politics?

By Farish A Noor

Synopsis

This general election will see the growing role of religion in politics. But if in the past it was Islam, the assertiveness of the other faith communities is emerging as a factor too as they begin to claim their rights and identities.

Commentary

THE MALAYSIAN general election is finally called for 5 May 2013, and the label 'the hottest elections ever' will not be an understatement this time. For what is at stake is the survival of the Barisan Nasional (BN) or National Front government of Prime Minister Najib Razak; and also the political fortunes of the opposition Pakatan Rakyat or People's Alliance and the future of Anwar Ibrahim.

Besides the economic reform measures that have been put in place by Najib, thrown into the bargain are various demands coming from almost every ethnic and religious constituency in the country. They range from the implementation of Islamic law to the protection of churches and temples in the country. It is significant that in this general election, many demands are being made in the name of religion and religious identity.

The rise of religious politics

Religion is at the front and centre of Malaysian politics today, with political Islam a visible marker in form and content since the 1970s. What is relatively new, however, is the role played by political religion in general in Malaysian politics, as demonstrated by the rise of Hindu and Christian political movements in the country.

Between 2004 and 2008 Malaysia witnessed, for the first time, the rise of politicised Hindusim that came in the form of the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) movement, that championed the cause of Malaysia's Hindu community. It was noteworthy that Hindraf's appeal was to the Hindus of the country, rather than to Malaysians of Indian or South Asian origin. Then in the general election of 2008 it was evident that some Christian leaders were also involved in mobilising their fellow Christians, and that trend seems to have continued and even sharpened today.

These developments indicate that Muslims are not the only ones who are now politically active in Malaysia, but other religious communities too. There is every reason to believe that religion in general and Islam in particular will be a key variable that impacts on the voting process at the coming elections in Malaysia.

Discussion on political Islam's role in Malaysian politics cannot be confined to the Malaysian Islamist party PAS alone, for it is clear that in PAS' contestation against UMNO, both parties will be turning to Islam as a source of politically and ideologically loaded symbols and ideas. In the current developments in Malaysia, it is obvious that many of the issues that divide – but which may also unite – PAS and UMNO happen to be Islamic ones.

Witness, for instance, the difficulties faced by the opposition Pakatan Rakyat coalition when dealing with the thorny issue of Islamic law and whether the word 'Allah' can be used by non-Muslim Bumiputra Malaysians in their Bahasa Malaysia bibles.

Islam as a unitary factor

PAS' unease with the stance taken by its coalition partners – the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Parti Keadilan Rakyat or People's Justice Party (PKR) - stems from a deeper theological question of whether the concept of a singular, monotheistic God that is found in Islam is similar to that of other confessional communities. Though the pragmatists of PAS may wish the debate to be closed so that the party can focus on the coming elections, the theologians of PAS maintain that this is an issue that cannot be resolved simply through pragmatic political alliances.

It is for these reasons that the Malaysian public sphere has been dominated by debates of a religious character: From calls on Muslims not to celebrate Valentine's Day to demands that Christians be allowed to use the word 'Allah', Malaysia's complex electorate seems to be guided by theological, as well as ideological, concerns.

As the Malaysian electorate heads to the polls, religion and religious loyalties may well be the deciding factor that determines which parties and leaders they vote for. The recent statement by PAS leader Hadi Awang that PAS may leave the opposition coalition if its involvement in Pakatan does not serve the needs and interests of Islam and the Malays shows that multiple loyalties are at work in PAS' calculations.

PAS may wish to remain in the opposition coalition if that guarantees its path to power, but it would not countenance the prospect of being part of a government where Islamist needs and aspirations are sidelined. If that happens the result may well be that it could choose to join up with UMNO instead.

The other religious divide

On the other side of the religious divide, the country's Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and other faith communities are also more politicised today than before, and are likely to take into account their religious identities and loyalties too. This may well be the case for the Christian Bumiputras of East Malaysia, who insist on their constitutional status as Bumiputras but who also zealously defend their Christian identity.

All of this means that Malaysian society is even more complex than ever before, with horizontal and vertical cleavages of ethnicity, language, culture and religion dividing them. To win power in Malaysia, all parties need to cultivate a bridge-building capacity to narrow these divisions, but not at the expense of losing their religious identities. Religion, in short, has now become a permanent variable in Malaysian politics. It is not about to be transcended any time soon.

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