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Tudung Ban in Malaysian Hotels: Differing Political Responses

By Prashant Waikar and Rashaad Ali

Synopsis

The recent controversy surrounding a hotel policy banning the tudung (headscarf) for Malaysia's frontline hotel staff has elicited responses across the political divide. The statements from various political parties reveal their wider concerns for the upcoming general election.

Commentary

IT HAS recently emerged that frontline employees at five-star international hotels in Malaysia are not permitted to wear religious symbols while at work. In practice, such a policy has disproportionately restricted the right of Muslim women working at those hotels to wear the *tudung* (headscarf). As a result, this policy has been framed as an anti-*tudung* and thus, anti-Muslim one.

It is hardly surprising that this issue has been pushed to the centre of Malaysian political discourse. Irrespective of their racial and religious affiliations, political parties from both the ruling coalition and the opposition have issued frequent condemnations of this policy. Yet, there is also considerable nuance between specific stances they take – a fact made clear by the language they use to criticise hotels implementing this policy.

Squeezing Mileage: PAS versus UMNO

Indeed, the manner in which these parties articulate their criticisms reveal their political interests, and thus the machinations they rely on to achieve those interests. Each party, despite sharing essentially the same position on the issue, has sought to differentiate themselves from others and tailor their message according to their target

audience. With a general election looming, political parties will look to squeeze as much mileage as they can up until the casting of the ballot.

The statements issued by the Islamist party PAS and the dominant UMNO against the *tudung* restriction have been combative. Among the first to voice criticism, PAS information chief Nasrudin Hassan attempted to draw a false equivalence between the reactions people had towards the existence of the 'Muslims-only' launderette on Johor and the *tudung* restriction.

He claimed that while the launderette issue brought out emotionally-charged outrage from every level of society – thus implying most of Malaysia stood against a religiously segregated launderette – reactions to the *tudung* restriction have been soft. To him, this indicates two tendencies: that people are less concerned with anti-Muslim discrimination, and that Muslims are being denied the right to practise Islam. In this context, when Mr Nasrudin argues “Muslims... are not free to practise Islam” in a country “where Islam is the religion of the federation”, he is in effect implying that Islam is at risk of being suppressed in Malaysia.

Similarly, UMNO issued a series of statements through its regional leaders in the state of Terengganu, the Federal Territories (FT), and the women’s wing, stating to the effect that hotels which ban the *tudung* should be made to close down. Indeed, MP Bung Mokhtar agitatedly labelled those who institutionalise this restriction “*kurang ajar*”, or uneducated and rude people who “need to be taught a lesson” for their alleged insolence.

Additionally, FT UMNO youth leader Razlan Rafii stated that organisations central to tourism should not be allowed to institutionalise practices that may be “anti-Islam” given that Malaysia’s Muslim-majority demography makes it an ideal site for Muslim-friendly tourism. For UMNO and PAS, parties that draw heavily from Malay-Muslim support, coming out strongly against the policy was always a given.

A nuanced approach is hardly necessary considering an appeal to the religious sensibilities of the Malay masses would reinforce an increasingly prevalent siege mentality. This allows UMNO and PAS to present themselves as guardians of Islam and Malay rights, turning this into a timely pre-election reminder.

PKR and DAP

The multiracial but Malay-dominant PKR and the secular but Chinese-dominant DAP have sought to frame themselves as leaders capable of providing practical advice to resolve the *tudung* restriction, emphasising the need for legislative change, while also volunteering themselves to help those affected by the restrictions to get legal remedy. PKR vice-president Rafizi Ramli argued that a legislative measure he previously proposed, the Fair Work and Career Opportunity Act, would criminalise and hence provide legal recourse for those who suffer “discrimination based on religion, race, gender, and disabilities” at work.

Rather than focusing on the semantics of the *tudung* restriction, Mr Rafizi has placed it in the context of various forms of marginalisation people at-large face. This enables

him to offer a legislative solution which he can then present as a feasible mechanism to dismantle all practices that engender people to experience marginality.

PKR vice-president Nurul Izzah Anwar suggested – like her PAS and UMNO counterparts – that hotels guilty of restricting the tudung should have their licenses revoked. Yet, when read in the broader context of her party's response, her position has less to do with protecting Muslim rights per se, and more with protecting freedoms across the board – which the opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan alleges the government has failed to ensure.

It is also significant to note that the chief minister of Penang Lim Guan Eng pointed out that hotels in his state do not restrict frontline staff from wearing the *tudung*. His decision to emphasise this is politically strategic in that it functions as a timely counterpoint to the UMNO-led ruling Barisan Nasional's (BN) often repeated claim that Muslims would systematically become disenfranchised should the opposition win more state assemblies or gain federal power. This issue has allowed opposition MPs the opportunity to either present an alternate reality to the electorate, or to make disparaging remarks about the federal government.

Gerakan: Struggling to Project Autonomy?

UMNO's ally Gerakan leader Chai Ko Thing argued that upholding religious freedom, both in private and at work spaces, was of the utmost importance in a plural society like Malaysia. Indeed, Mr Chai stated that the government should work towards crafting a legislative measure that outlaws all forms of religious discrimination. He attempted to connect the injustice of a *tudung* ban with the various forms of ethnic and religious discrimination non-Muslims regularly face – not unlike their rivals PKR and DAP.

At the same time, he characterised calls for boycotts of such hotels as unrestrained. Gerakan's position effectively deviates from UMNO's significantly more assertive call to revoke hotel licences. The party's involvement in an incident they might ordinarily ignore signals their intent for the upcoming general election.

Hoping to contest 12 parliamentary seats and 33 state seats, but struggling to be political relevant especially to the ethnic Chinese, Gerakan has to find its place within the ruling coalition dominated by the Malay-Muslim rhetoric of UMNO while simultaneously appealing to its non-Muslim voter base by trying to project itself as a party with a mind of its own.

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