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Freedom of Belief and the Paradox of “Islam Hadhari”: Perspective of an Indonesian

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THE LAST-MINUTE cancellation of an international inter-faith conference in mid-May underscored the current unease over issues related to religion in Malaysia. The inability of the conference to proceed as planned reflects a certain paradox in the government’s policy of Islam Hadhari. Under Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the Malaysian government has been enthusiastically promoting Islam Hadhari or Civilizational Islam to emphasise the universal values and pro-development aspects of Islam. The goal is to present Malaysia as a moderate Muslim country which could be a role model for other Muslim countries in promoting harmony, progress, and economic development.

Issues related to religion

The failure of the inter-faith conference to take place was decried by some Malaysian Muslim leaders. Former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, criticised it as “a mockery of the government’s claims of being a moderate Muslim administration”. The conference was supposed to be an attempt at minimising the tensions between the Muslim majority and the religious minority groups in Malaysia. Its indefinite postponement only added up to the current atmosphere of religious disharmony in the country.

To be sure, Malaysia is a plural society where the different communities are generally free to practise their respective religious beliefs. Nonetheless, the relationship between the majority Muslim community and the minority groups has come under some stress over the last five years. Ironically enough this situation has arisen despite the government’s ardent campaign on Islam Hadhari. Two out of the ten principles of Islam Hadhari are “freedom and independence to the people” and “protection of the rights of minority groups”. Yet one of the biggest challenges confronting the government is the issue of freedom of belief.

In January this year, Islamic officials arrested a Muslim woman and sent her for rehabilitation. Her “mistake” was to have a non-Muslim husband. She was forced to divorce her Hindu husband and asked to keep her baby away from the father to avoid the child being converted to Hinduism.

In March, R. Subashini, a Hindu wife whose husband converted to Islam, failed to have her divorce endorsed by the Civil Court and was instead referred to the Shariah Court. According to the Malaysian Constitution, the Shariah Court is created to manage the affairs of Muslims, while non-Muslims would go to the Civil or Federal Court. Ms Subashini feared that by going to the Shariah Court, she could lose her right to custody of her children.

In another case, Islamic authorities raided on 28 April a house belonging to a Hindu husband and his Muslim wife. The authorities forced them to separate as they were charged with having an illegal marriage. The authorities also took their three-year old daughter to prevent her from being converted into Hinduism.

Spirit of Classical Islam

The most widely-covered case was the one on Lina Joy, a Malay woman who was born a Muslim but converted to Christianity. Ms Joy was charged with “*murtad*” (apostasy) which according to Malaysia’s Islamic law, attracts punishment.

All these cases are evidences of the paradox of Islam Hadhari, which Abdullah is trying to “export” to other Muslim countries. In Malaysia itself, the concept seems to have no strong roots, despite Abdullah’s claim that it is being accepted as an ideal model by all Muslims in the country. The problem is that there is neither a clear definition of Islam Hadhari nor commitment on the part of the government’s functionaries to the concept.

Many Muslims in Malaysia still believe in the superiority of Islam. It is not easy to create a tolerant environment if one group feels more superior to others. In any case, the spate of religion-related issues that are now under public glare despite Prime Minister Abdullah’s Islam Hadhari seems to be contrary to the spirit of the classical Islamic civilization where dialogue and mutual respect were its distinct characteristics.

This was expressed by Anwar Ibrahim when he was quoted in the media as describing the postponement of the inter-faith conference as against the spirit of Civilizational Islam. Anwar said that “a dialogue can enable us to quell the tensions that arise from our differences. Islam has always enjoined Muslims to engage in dialogue with other religions, from the Abbasids in Baghdad to the Andalusians in Cordova”.

Progressive Islam

For Muslims who regard themselves as progressive, the model of Civilisational Islam is the golden age of classical Islam, especially in Baghdad and Cordova where religious harmony and tolerance was pervasive. Here comes the irony: for many Muslims in Malaysia, the role model of Islam is not the Baghdad or Cordova periods, but “the pious first generation” or what they used to call “*al-salaf al-salih*,” from which the ideology of Salafism takes root.

The latter generation of Muslims, including those who lived in Baghdad and Cordova in the golden age, was considered an aberration. It is common knowledge that many Muslims are against philosophy and speculative thinking -- two of the most significant attributes of the Islamic golden era of the past.

Accordingly, the same spirit is demonstrated by Malaysia’s political opposition, the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS). PAS leaders often criticise Mr Abdullah’s concept of Islam Hadhari on the ground that it emphasizes too heavily the worldly aspects of life, neglecting the spiritual aspects as exemplified in the early periods of Islam. Like many Salafis, the PAS leaders would prefer the life of the Prophet’s era as a model of Civilizational Islam rather than the latter ones represented by the Abbasids of Baghdad or the Umayyads of Cordova.

A clear definition of Islam Hadhari is seriously needed to decide the actual position of the government. It seems that this lack of conceptual grounding, as well as the lack of commitment to its implementation within the state apparatus, has been critical in creating the paradoxical situation surrounding Mr Abdullah’s Islam Hadhari.

On the one hand, Malaysian leaders want to make their country modern, progressive, and tolerant, but

on the other, it seems they are powerless to secure the civil liberties and religious rights of its citizens.

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