muuu!
muslim wakeup!
prayer is better than sleep

February 04, 2005

MALAYSIA'S HOME-GROWN TALIBAN: IS THIS THE FUTURE OF 'MODERATE' ISLAM IN MALAYSIA? (PART III)

This is the third and final part of a series of articles by Dr. Noor on the growing trend of religious authoritarianism in Malaysia. -- Ed.

By Farish A. Noor

After the Bali bombings and the recent attacks in Jakarta, so worried have the Malaysian authorities become that they have even launched a televised series on the dangers of religious militancy, aired on the television channels of the country. The message is simple and to the point: Islam, we are reminded, is a religion of Love and Peace. But what exactly does this message of Love entail, and how does one articulate a politics of Love?

The Malaysian government is quite right to express its concern about the possible rise of religious militancy in Malaysia and the ASEAN region. However this raises even more complex questions: How and why does militancy emerge in the first place? Part of the answer has to lie in the culture of authoritarianism itself, which shall be the focus of this, the final part of this series. Our argument shall be that authoritarianism rests on the denial of the common humanity that we share with others, and this denial of commonality can only be transcended through a politics that is predicated on the ethics of Love.

In the previous part of this series we had argued that the policing of Muslims in Malaysia is a logical extension of the policing and control of the Malays; which in turn is a reflection of the divisive, unstable and – ultimately – self-defeating politics of communitarianism in Malaysia.

'Communitarian ethnopolitics' in Malaysia means that the members of each community are forced to seek leadership, succour and support from within their community first and foremost. This is the first fallacy that has to be admitted by all of us, for it disguises the reality that there is no such thing as different 'races', but only one human race to which we all belong to. Proceeding from this fallacious premise, Malaysian politics is built on the (colonial) practice of divide-and-rule which guarantees both the failure of any project of nation-building as well as the impossibility of there ever emerging a group of leaders who can appeal to the nation as a whole.

Due to the overriding political goals of securing, dominating and ultimately policing the Malay-Muslim constituency in particular, all of the Malay-Muslim parties have been playing to the Malay-Muslim gallery, and not a single Malay-Muslim leader has been inclined to think of the 'nation' as a whole. Today both Malay-Muslim parties – UMNO and PAS alike – are trapped in this quagmire of exclusive racial-ethnic and religious communitarianism respectively.

Since both parties have been guilty of upping the stakes in the 'Islamisation race' that they unwittingly began themselves, neither party can escape from the vicious circle. No Malay-Muslim leader can now claim that he or she is willing to stop, interrogate and reform this Islamisation race, despite the fact that many of them may confess (in private) that it has gone too far and decidedly off the tangent.

The Short Road from Authoritarianism to Militancy

The net result of this divisive politics is an unstable political equation that can only be perpetuated by an authoritarian political system bolstered by repressive laws like the Internal Security Act (ISA). Time and again debates over issues like Malay supremacy, the overriding powers of the Executive, etc. have been stifled by the use of laws that regard such debate as seditious. This also accounts for the relative silence of the non-Malay-Muslim section of Malaysian society, who have been summarily told that issues like the Islamisation race is an 'exclusive Malay issue'.

In such a repressive, stifling and suffocating environment, it should come as no surprise if the oppositional groups in the country reflect the same culture of authoritarianism they oppose. This should, by now, strike most of us as common sense. A cursory survey of the contemporary history of the Muslim world will show that in almost all cases, dictatorial regimes and authoritarian governments gave birth to even more violent and repressive oppositional forces: The American-backed regimes of Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia and the Shah of Iran were both forced to confront increasingly violent oppositional groups that used Islam as a discourse of delegitimisation against the state. While in Saudi Arabia we have seen how the state's promotion of a highly conservative Wahhabi Neo-Salafiyya interpretation of Islam contributed to the rise of al-Qaeda and Osama ben Laden.

Closer to home, we see the emergence of increasingly aggressive and arrogant movements that claim to be the 'defenders of Islam'. In neighbouring Indonesia we have witnessed the rise of groups like the Laskar Jihad, Fron Pembela Islam, Majlis Mujahideen Indonesia and the like. Here in Malaysia, the heavy-handed actions of the state's own JAWI authorities recently is proof that such a brand of anti-modern, authoritarian statist religiosity is also taking root.

Now, more than ever, we need to clearly define and understand what we mean when we say that Islam is a religion of Love.

Love, Ethics and the Overcoming of Prejudice

Now 'Love' is not some wishy-washy idea that was in vogue during the hip and swinging 1960s. These days we often tend to confuse the real meaning of Love with the superficial expression of pedestrian sentimentality. Love ain't just about sending flowers and chocolates to your sweetheart on Valentine's day. 'Love' is, in fact, the

foundational idea that underpins all of ethics. It can be a force that is strong enough to shake governments and change societies, provided we understand its true import and the responsibilities it entails.

'Love' is the recognition of the common humanity we share with the Other, and as such it compels us to act for the Other and in defence of the Other as well. The developments in Malaysia today indicate that we, as a nation, are seriously wanting in Love. Let us return to the fateful events that took place in the nightclub in Kuala Lumpur a few weeks ago which sparked such a public outcry: According to the media reports, following the raid by the JAWI 'moral guardians' who barged into the club 'an announcement over the club's PA system instructed the non-Muslims to proceed to another part of the club 'to enjoy themselves' while the rest, about 100 Muslims, were told to form two separate groups, men and women.' (Sunday Mail, 23 January). What happened next can only be described as a series of actions that robbed all of those present of their human dignity, equality and solidarity.

First and foremost, the act of dividing the crowd itself smacks of the worst sort of sectarian bias that should immediately have been condemned. What was the subtext to the decision to divide the Muslims and non-Muslims? Were the JAWI 'moral guardians' implying that their regime of 'care' was exclusively intended for the Muslims only? Did this somehow imply that the non-Muslims (still summarily lumped together under the negative categorisation of 'kafirs') were doomed to hell in any case and therefore did not require saving? Did the JAWI 'moral guardians' contemplate – even for a fleeting second – the negative effects that their outrageous behaviour might have on the perception of the non-Muslims (not to mention tourists) who were present?

Then there is the question of how the Malaysian Muslim citizens themselves were treated, which can only be described as dehumanising, degrading and abusive. How, pray tell, does leering at the bodies of Malaysian women and making offensive remarks about their characters and physical appearance 'uplift' the moral character of those concerned? Surely here the immediate effect was the opposite: that such abusive behaviour merely dehumanised the men and women in custody and robbed them of their dignity as rational human beings – a foundational idea in Islam's view of the human being (insan).

The deliberate degradation and dehumanisation of the Other can only be described as 'Evil', for 'Evil' is precisely the denial of the common humanity that we share as one united and equal human race.

Here one is reminded of the ethical philosophy of the moralist Emmanuel Levinas – who was himself a victim of the holocaust and who suffered at the hands of the Nazis of Germany. Despite the brutalising treatment he received at the hands of his tormentors, Levinas lived on to develop his ethical philosophy that juxtaposed 'Love' to 'Evil'. While 'Evil' rests on the denial of humanity (and by doing so transgresses the fundamental principle of tauhid – unity of God and creation – that is central to Islam, one might add), 'Love' is the sustained attempt to demolish such barriers that divide us.

A politics of Love is therefore what is so badly needed here in Malaysia today. This would be a politics that sees all forms of sectarianism, communitarianism and the attendant strategies of alienation, discrimination, dehumanisation and 'Othering' as

fundamentally Evil, in the sense that they oppose the project of creating a united and equal nation. Our politicians talk about promoting Islam as a religion of Love and Compassion, but do they really comprehend the import of such lofty rhetoric?

The promotion of a universalist Islam of Love would mean first and foremost a sustained critique of the divisive politics we have created here in Malaysia, and which is now manifesting itself in terms of an increasingly dogmatic, authoritarian and exclusive religiosity utilised for clearly political ends. Can Malaysia's political parties reform themselves, and make that great ideological-ethical leap from the narrow politics of sectarianism towards the higher register of a truly inclusive national politics? As long as the public stays silent and passive before the march of state-sponsored authoritarianism, don't bet on it. What, then, is to be done?

Make Love, Not War!

What is a politics of Love and how does one practice it? If we proceed from the universal premise of a shared common humanity (that is found both in Islam and other religions as well as secular Western ethical philosophy as formulated by Levinas), then a politics of Love would mean a politics that is aimed at bridging cultural divisions and gulfs of race, ethnicity, religion, gender and class. It is, in short, a politics that sees the equal upliftment of the human race as a whole as its goal.

How does one practice such politics? Well, we begin by transcending the dialectical gulf of 'me' and 'you'; 'Us' against 'Them'. In practical terms this means voting and supporting political parties that make anti-racism, anti-sexism and anti-sectarianism their goals. (And if such parties don't exist right now, we shall have to invent them!). It also means taking into account the needs, suffering and predicament of Others, and recognising that the abuse of the rights of other (Malaysian) citizens is the abuse of your rights as well.

How do we combat this sustained assault on our fundamental rights and liberties? Well one can join an NGO and support those groups and movements that have been fighting for your rights all along. I can think of one NGO that needs your support and encouragement: Sisters in Islam. All the while it was they who were at the forefront of challenging the rise of religious authoritarianism in this country while most of us were partying the night away…

In summing up, we reiterate the main point that we have been trying to make all along: Namely, that in any complex, multiracial and multireligious society that is undergoing modernisation and development, the political leadership of that country will have to articulate a vision of the nation that is not only stable but also inclusive and reflective of its internal complexities.

The political leadership of any country, if it is to take the nation as a whole forward, has to rise above the sentiments of the mob and the Pharisees. A national leader who wishes to lead a nation has to lead the nation as a whole, and not simply his 'natural' vote bank or ethnopolitical constituency. This demand is not unique to Malaysia, but rather is a universal necessity of all modernising societies in the world.

How is this to be done in Malaysia, whose majority is Muslim and where Islam is set to remain as the dominant belief system of the majority, by default? Well, returning to the universal fundamentals of Islam, which presents a universal worldview that is

blind to the differences of race, ethnicity, class and linguistic differences would be a start. It would mean ending the excesses of the so-called 'moral guadians' and self-appointed 'defenders of the faith' who have hijacked Islam for their own political ends and returning Islam back to the care of ordinary Muslims, who need not be treated like non-entities and/or children incapable of thinking for themselves.

In the final analysis, it would mean freeing the normative expression of Islam from the clutches of demagogues, ideologues and power-hungry authoritarian fascists, so that in its daily praxis and expression both Islam and Muslims can be reflective, self-critical and intelligent in their approach and understanding to the questions of our times. This would be a benefit to Islam and Muslims, as well as non-Muslims, and by extension Malaysia as well. But most of all, it is in that spirit of enquiry, introspection, humility and dynamism that we will finally realise the dream of a truly Modern Islam (in the proper, analytical sense of the word 'Modern'), that is otherwise known as 'Islam Hadari'.

Dr. Farish A Noor is a Malaysian political scientist and human rights activist.