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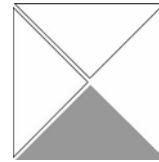
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MALAYSIA'S HOME-GROWN TALIBAN: IS THIS THE FUTURE OF 'MODERATE' ISLAM IN MALAYSIA? (PART II)

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

By Farish A. Noor

During the recent OIC meeting held in Putrajaya, the Prime Minister Dato Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi himself pointed out that "It is our duty to demonstrate, by word and by action, that a Muslim country can be modern, democratic, tolerant and economically competitive." (BBC, 'Islam must help curb extremism', 28 Jan 2005). However such sentiments, laudable though they may be, sound hollow when the host country itself – Malaysia – is witnessing the rise of an increasingly un-Modern (even anti-Modern), un-democratic and intolerant brand of scripturalist normative religiosity whose spokesmen and self-appointed 'defenders' go around disrupting parties and public events, arresting Malay-Muslim youths who have committed no crime apart from hanging out together, and then proceed to abuse them in the most degrading, humiliating and dehumanising manner.

Such actions do little to promote the image of 'Islam Hadari' that the present political administration is keen to foreground. How, pray tell, has the actions of the officials of JAWI served to promote the image of Islam as a creed of love, compassion and humanity?

Islam, Malayness and the Policing of the Malay-Muslim constituency.

In part one of this series of articles we have argued that what we are witnessing in Malaysia today is nothing less than the rise of authoritarianism disguised behind the cloak of religiosity. Parallels have been drawn elsewhere – from the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the religious purists of some Arab states to the right-wing religious-political fascists that we have seen in places like India and America, and this was meant to illustrate that the problem of religious authoritarianism is not unique to Malaysia, or to Islam.

Both analytically and phenomenologically, this trend can be categorised as 'fascism' of the textbook variety. But the real question is how, and why, have we come to this? That is what we shall turn to now.

Before we proceed, let us begin with some basic historical facts: During the much-appraised 'Golden Age' of Islam, there was no such thing as a policing apparatus of the state. Darius Rejali's (1) study of pre and post-revolutionary Iran is one of the works that come to mind, and in his book 'Torture and Modernity' he shows that in

early Iranian history (as was the case elsewhere in the world) social order was maintained by society itself.

'Policing' as we know it today is basically a modern phenomenon, which arises with the advent of the Modern state. We have argued elsewhere (2) that the conundrum of governmentality (imarat) is not unique to Islam or Muslim societies. The history of western political philosophy, from Hobbes to Locke to Rousseau to Kant have all grappled with the same problem: namely, how does a regime govern (i.e. control and manage) a society while at the same time ensure that it does not end up suffocating, dominating and imprisoning the society it is trying to serve? Muslim political theorists like al-Ghazali and ibn Khaldun have been grappling with the same question, and overall we see – in both the Western and Muslim worlds – the appeal for balance, justice and ethics to be brought to the fore.

All these scholars agree that while the need to maintain social order and stability in order to avoid anarchy (fawdawayyat) is a real political necessity, it should NEVER be used as a justification for authoritarianism, coercion (jabr) and tyranny (istibdad). (3) The problem, however, arises when there emerges regimes and elites who wish to expand the sphere of state control to its fullest maximalist potential for the sake of purely political ends. If and when such fascistic regimes appear, the tendency to expand the sphere of the state's power grows accordingly.

Today all over the Muslim world we have seen the emergence of right-wing neo-fascistic tendencies that aim towards a totalised control of society. The same fascistic tendencies were evident in the rise of the Nazis and Fascists in Europe, as well as the Communist regimes under Stalin and Mao, and even in the regime of Pol Pot in Cambodia. In all cases, the creation of a 'morality police' is the first step towards the state's penetration into the most private, intimate (and therefore vulnerable) aspect of the citizenry's lives: Here again George Orwell's bleak warnings in his novel '1984' come to mind.

This is why I have argued, time and again, that such 'morality' and 'decency' campaigns have little to do with standards of morality and decency, but rather everything to do with state power and control. And in any case, if these 'moral guardians' are so obsessed with morality and public decency, they should focus their attention on other genuine moral problems in our society, from the levels of corruption to the 'surat layang' culture of Malaysian politics, from detention without trial to the alleged killing of prisoners under custody.

Here in Malaysia it is evident that the process and practice of social policing is intended primarily towards one particular constituency: The Malay-Muslims.

The reason for this is obvious: Demographic factors dictate that whoever controls the Malay-Muslims of Malaysia will be able to control the rest of the country by extension. (As the Malay-Muslims make up an estimated 60% of the population.) Winning the Malay vote is therefore the key to winning power in Malaysia, but this can only be done if you control the Malay-Muslims as a whole.

The origins of this process go back to the 1940s, when it was discovered that the Malay-Muslims were only the majority community by the narrowest of margins. The results of the colonial census of the 1910s, 30s and 40s indicated that the Malays were hardly in a position to dominate Malayan society. The immediate result of this was the creation of the UMNO party (United Malay National Organisation), which brought together forty-odd Malay organisations under the banner of Malay ethno-nationalism. During the 1940s to the 1960s, the quest for Malay political dominance was the major factor that shaped the contours of Malayan politics. Even then, campaigns at 'policing' the Malays were already going on in earnest, following the earlier debates over who was a 'true Malay' and who were the 'hybrids' and 'mongrels' whose blood was no longer pure.

Parallel to this was the emergence of an authoritarian political culture that began to erode the fundamental rights of citizens, rendering certain issues like the discussion of 'ketuanan Melayu' (Malay dominance) as seditious and politically unacceptable. Laws were used to stifle dissenting opinion and the mainstream media was brought under control of right-wing ethno-nationalist groups.

The net result was of course the gradual slide towards authoritarianism and a politics of majoritarianism. But what the elites failed to note was the fact that their brand of exclusive communitarian ethno-nationalism was also being challenged by another set of ideas: namely a political vision of religion that eventually developed into a theocratic oppositional ideology.

By the 1970s and 80s, Malaysian politics became more and more convoluted with the politicisation of religion, particularly Islam. The main Malay-Muslim political groupings in the country were all competing for the support of the Malays but on Islamic, rather than racial, grounds. Islam was politicised as a result of the Islamisation race between UMNO and PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party). Throughout this period, there were hardly any Muslim groups in Malaysia that dared to challenge the narrow and ultimately self-defeating logic of this Islamisation race, save for a handful of intellectuals and activists, such as Sisters in Islam.

The dominant Muslim groups in Malaysia proceeded heedlessly, in their race to show off their Islamic credentials and to 'out-Islamise' the other. While both UMNO and PAS claimed that theirs was the 'correct' version of Islam, neither side has ever really shown any willingness to concede that differences of opinion and interpretation do exist in the Muslim world. (The persecution of the Darul Arqam movement, and the current harassment of the mystic Ayah Pin (Ariffin Mohammad) are cases in point).

Where has this got us – the Malaysian nation – thus far? Is Malaysian society any more 'decent' or 'moral' as a result of this moral-religious policing? Far from it, judging by the plethora of corruption cases that we see in the press. And has it made Malaysia's Muslims any more open or progressive in their thought and actions? Far from it, judging by the numbers of books on Islam that are regularly banned and the constant harassment of Muslim academics, intellectuals and activists.

The dream of creating a modern, tolerant, pluralist and democratic Islam in Malaysia seems to be receding, as the spectre of religious communitarianism, fundamentalism and even militancy casts its long shadow on the ASEAN region...

But worst of all, the policing of the Malay-Muslim community threatens to undermine the most sensitive project of all: nation-building itself. For what kind of a Malaysian nation are we indeed building today, when there is one set of laws for Malay-Muslims and another for the rest? While the Malay-Muslim parties like UMNO and PAS continue to out-do each other in the Islamisation race, they are in danger of entrenching deeper mistrust and misunderstandings between the communities at the same time. What began as a Malay-Muslim issue has now become a matter of national concern, and this writer would argue that this is now a Malaysian problem.

This is NOT a Malay-Muslim problem!

Let us return to the events of that fateful night when more than a hundred Malaysian citizens were harassed by the authorities: According to the media reports we have been given, '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).

This begs the most obvious, embarrassing and painful question of all: What were the non-Malay/non-Muslim Malaysian citizens doing when their friends (I am assuming that they did have some friends among the Malay-Muslims) were being harassed

thus? The report remains silent on this question, but one dreads to think of the prospect that while more than a hundred Malaysians were being arrested and harassed so publicly the rest who were present simply 'proceeded to another part of the club to enjoy themselves'.

IF that was what actually happened, then the JAWI raid on the club in KL has brought to the surface an extremely ugly and unpalatable aspect of Malaysian society.

Now before I get accused of non-Malay/non-Muslim baiting/bashing here, allow me to reiterate the main point: The real issue is that a group of Malaysians (regardless of their race/religion) were harassed while others failed to help or simply turned away. 'Islam' is not the issue here, nor is 'Islam' at fault; but rather authoritarianism disguised behind the cloak of religiosity.

Imagine a hypothetical situation where a group of extreme right-wing Hindus, Buddhists or Christians decided to act as self-appointed 'moral guardians' of their community, and then went around policing and harassing members of their faith community. Confronted by such a group I would not hesitate to defend the rights of my fellow Malaysians, despite the fact that I am not a Hindu, Buddhist or Christian. The bottom line is that the emergence of such groups is a threat to the cohesion and harmony of Malaysian society as a whole, and such a group would be a threat to the fundamental rights and liberties of fellow Malaysian citizens.

The apparent silence of the non-Muslims is the result of decades of divisive communitarian politics here in Malaysia. For so long, right-wing Malay-Muslim groups, parties and organisations have cowered the non-Malay/Muslim section of society by telling them that they have no right to comment on matters Islamic, and that they have no right to protest against the increasingly repressive laws and regulations that have been passed in the name of Islam. Needless to say, this has engendered a climate of fear and apprehension among many otherwise-decent Malaysians who might want to comment on such matters, but have been reduced to silence instead. But as this writer has said and written time and again: 'Islam' is simply too important to be left to Muslims alone. And if the powers-that-be in this country wish to make Islam the leitmotif of Malaysia's national culture, then as a consequence Islam becomes a relevant concern for ALL Malaysians, and not the Malay-Muslims only. The non-Muslims of Malaysia have every right to comment on the conduct, practice and development of normative Islam in Malaysia as it has a direct impact on both their private lives as well as their daily conduct and relations with Muslims. Again I make the comparison: If I was living in Hindu-majority India at the time when the extreme right-wing Hindu fundamentalists of the BJP/RSS were rising in power, I would feel that I have every right to comment on the development of normative Hinduism in the country, as it would affect me as well. I don't have to be a Hindu scholar to condemn what I see as the deliberate distortion of the creed by a bunch of extremist Hindu fascists, any more than a non-Muslim Malaysian citizen has to be a Muslim scholar to condemn the politicisation of Islam that will have an immediate impact on him/her.

If it be the case that Malaysians are now terrified to talk and discuss about religion and politics, then Malaysian society has reached an impasse of its own making. For silence on such matters is the first step towards the consolidation of fascism in our midst. This is the real danger that we face: In the absence of a sense of shared destiny, identity and social responsibility, we are in danger of balkanising our Malaysian nation and by doing so opening the way for fascism to take over, one step at a time.

There is, however, one way out of this impasse- though it would be a courageous step for some. It would entail going back to the universal, humanist fundamentals of Islam which is a common feature of all religions, and it would mean trying to develop

an open, dynamic and pluralist approach to the faith that rescues it from the clutches of narrow communitarian politics. But this gesture also requires that ephemeral quality that is so difficult to pin down, yet whose power is strong enough to shake governments and shape nations: Love.

Endnotes:

(1) Darius Rejali, 'Torture and Modernity: Self, Society and State in Modern Iran', Westview Press, Boulder, 1994.

(2) Farish A. Noor, 'Islam Embedded: The Historical Development of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) 1951-2003', Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MSRI), Kuala Lumpur, 2004. Volume II, Part II, (see: pp. 730-737, 'The Anti-Politics of the Islamic State'.)

(3) Muhammad Khalid Masud, 'Defining Democracy in Islamic Polity', Paper for the conference 'The Future of Islam, Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Age of Globalisation', organised by the International Centre for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP), Jakarta, 5-6 December 2004.

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

Next: Part III: Love, Humanism and Universalism as the weapons against Fascism

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http://www.muslimwakeup.com/main/archives/2005/02/malaysias_homeg_1.php

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