

Transcript

This transcript was typed from a recording of the program. The ABC cannot guarantee its complete accuracy because of the possibility of mishearing and occasional difficulty in identifying speakers.

Stephen Crittenden: Now to South East Asia. Australia's highly respected Malaysia specialist, Professor Clive Kessler of New South Wales University has a short but powerful piece due to be published any day now, in the next issue of *Asian Analysis* at Aseanfocus.com

It's entitled 'Malaysia: The Long March towards Desecularisation'. And Clive argues that seismic shift is underway, with Malaysian society becoming more and more sectarian, and the secularists and pluralists on the back foot. In fact, the progressive era may well be over.

Well Clive is always an honoured guest on this program. But this time when I phoned, he redirected me, to Dr Farish Noor, Malaysian specialist now teaching at the Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin. Among other things, Farish recently interviewed Abu Bakr Bashir in Indonesia. And he too paints a picture of increasing sectarianism in both Malaysia and Indonesia, and a process which has been described as 'creeping Sharia'.

Well Farish Noor is on holiday in Paris this week with his wife, but he agreed to take some time off to talk to me, and I began by asking whether he agreed with Clive Kessler's picture of radical Islam capturing both of Malaysia's major political parties, PAS and UMNO, and progressive NGOs in the country, increasingly being marginalised.

Farish Noor: Not only would I agree with that, I think I would backdate that process going back to the '70s. I think what we are witnessing in Malaysia today is the natural development of something that began in the '70s when both UMNO and PAS were trying their best to, in a sense, engage in what I call the Islamisation race in order to put to the fore the Islamic credentials, rather than their national credentials, to basically out-Islamise each other; both parties trying to demonstrate how committed they were to Islamic and Muslim concerns. This is obviously intended to bolster their support among their majority Malay-Muslim constituency. But I think at the expense of marginalising non-Malays and non-Muslims in the country.

Stephen Crittenden: And am I right in thinking that a very important moment in that process was when Dr Mahatir who of course is usually seen as a secularist sympathiser, amended the Malaysian law I think in 1988, to raise the status of Sharia courts to being co-equal with the civil courts in Malaysia?

Farish Noor: Well that was one important event, but again, we have to put it in context. Throughout the '80s, we've seen a number of other initiatives, all of which were designed to basically place Islam firmly in the centre of Malaysian domestic politics, and also to re-orient Malaysia's foreign policy towards the Muslim world. There are both internal and external reasons for this. The external factor was simply Malaysia looking for a broader coalition of partners that would support Malaysia's international initiatives, so the Muslim world was one obvious constituency that they had to appeal to. But domestically, we have to remember that the demographic factor is important. The expansion of the Malay-Muslim constituency and the emergence of urbanised Muslim middle-class that I suppose Mahathir felt had to be co-opted into the state apparatus. So the elevation of the Sharia courts for instance, can be read as

that. It was an attempt to actually give equal status to these Malay-Muslims that had been absorbed into the Malaysian civil service so that they did not feel alienated or marginalised within the state structure. But of course the long-term result is that the state becomes dominated by Malay-Muslims, even if you look at the composition of the Malaysian civil service, which used to be more multi-racial; today the Malaysian civil service, and institutions like the Malaysian police, and the Malaysian army, are basically dominated by Malays.

Stephen Crittenden: Of course there's a very important case going on at present, a constitutional case involving an ethnic Malay woman named Lina Joy, who has converted to Christianity, and wants her papers changed to reflect that. There must be a lot riding on the outcome of that case. What do you think the outcome is likely to be?

Farish Noor: Well at this stage, because the case has become so politicised, and it has become the cause celebre of the Islamist opposition, and the Islamist public sector, this is going to be perhaps one of the most controversial legal cases to be fought out in Malaysia today. What is interesting, is that either way, the conservative Islamist lobby wins. If Lina Joy's conversion to Christianity is accepted and passed, then in a sense, it gives many of these conservative Islamist organisations a pretext to say that the Malaysian state allows Muslims to leave Islam. If her appeal is not accepted, then they can claim a victory. So either way, they win, in a sense.

Stephen Crittenden: Just going back to the first of those scenarios. If she won, you're suggesting that would be a pretext for some kind of big disruptive campaign?

Farish Noor: Oh, of course. I mean let's look at this in context again. The number of Muslims converting to Christianity or going to other religions is extremely small in Malaysia. Most of the cases involve marriages. They involve non-Muslims who had converted to Islam because the Malaysian law forces them to convert to Islam if they marry a Muslim, and in many cases these marriages don't work and then they revert back to their original religions, which could be Hinduism, Buddhism, or Christianity.

Now it would be wrong to say that there is a concerted attempt to convert Muslims to Christianity in Malaysia. However this is the scenario that is being painted by some of these conservative groups, again to win support from the Malay Muslims and to sort of produce and reproduce a stereotypical conspiracy theory, that somehow Islam and Muslims are under threat in their own country.

Stephen Crittenden: There's a debate going on within Malaysia just now, suggesting that Malaysia's Islam with a modern face is not at all the same as liberal Islam, and in fact, a conference was recently organised by Malaysia's Muslim Professional Forum, under the very interesting and provocative title, 'Liberal Islam - A Clear and Present Danger'.

Farish Noor: Well that is true, and I think the term 'Liberal Islam' is actually an interesting one, because it has no roots in the Malaysian context. This is actually a term that was brought in from Indonesia because in Indonesia, there exists a group of Liberal Muslims who organise themselves under the banner of Islam Liberal.

Stephen Crittenden: So you're saying that the term 'Liberal Islam' isn't even one that's used by Malaysians?

Farish Noor: No, I do not know of a single organisation or individual in Malaysia that

actually uses this term. But what the conference does show is that the co-operation between conservative Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia is actually increasing, to the point where similar themes, similar terms are now being shared by both sides. I think we're witnessing the emergence of a sort of pan-Malaysian-Indonesian conservative religious front, and this would involve basically NGOs movements, political parties that had been networking quite intensively for the past ten years.

Stephen Crittenden: Right. So one possibility is that the development of a more radical Islam in Malaysia and in Indonesia right next door, is just a coincidence. Are you suggesting that they're co-ordinated in some way, and if so, by whom?

Farish Noor: Well they are definitely co-ordinated, and they're co-ordinated by the major actors and players in the religio-political scene. A lot of the co-ordination takes place in joint conferences and seminars that take place not only in Malaysia and Indonesia, but also in neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan. And there have been many of these conferences, particularly in the wake of September 11th, when more conservative Islamist parties and NGOs have been organising meetings to discuss what they see as threats to the Muslim community worldwide. So a sense of global Muslim consciousness is definitely there. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but when the agenda is hijacked by more conservative forces, that wish to use these conspiracy theories in order to set up a kind of hate machine directed towards other religious communities, then I think it does become problematic, particularly for countries like Malaysia, with a multiracial, multi-religious background.

Stephen Crittenden: Farish, I'm interested in what all this means for the political career of Dr Mahathir's old foe, Anwar Ibrahim, who I've always thought of as an Islamist.

Farish Noor: Well I think at the moment, if we look at who Anwar is associated with, I think there are many who would argue that Anwar is actually much closer to the neocon establishment of the United States, rather than the Islamists. In fact simply judging by his public appearances, and the places that he's been invited to speak, you would get the impression that the man is trying very much to get over his earlier image as an Islamist leader. So in a way, Anwar struggles both worlds. He's very much in contact with the American political establishment, and he has made this clear on several occasions, including during his recent visit to Australia. But at the same time, he also maintains links with the conservative Islamists. Now this is of course highly problematic, because the two groups do not see eye-to-eye on practically every issue and it remains to be seen whether Anwar can actually play a mediating role in all this.

Stephen Crittenden: Yes, well I was going to say, the two poles, neocon and Islamist that are very far apart, it must be very difficult for him to straddle those poles.

Farish Noor: Well it actually in the end depends on where Anwar wants to place himself. If he were to aspire to a position of political leadership in Malaysia, then certainly the Islamist lobby is one that he cannot afford to avoid for the reasons I've mentioned earlier, you know, the demographic shift would indicate that the emerging Malay-Muslim constituency is a very powerful one, it's the biggest vote bank in the country, and you cannot afford to antagonise this vote bank.

Stephen Crittenden: One more question about Malaysia, and that is, I get letters from time to time mentioning the Sisters in Islam, as a modernising group in Malaysia, that's actually been very successful in recent years. But I'm reading in Clive Kessler's piece the suggestion that

groups like that, NGOs like that with a progressive face, really are being marginalised now.

Farish Noor: Well I would concur with that for one simple reason. I think again, what we are witnessing in South East Asia, is the emergence of a religiously inspired public sector, which would in the end I think, create a sort of parallel Islamic civil society. You would notice that in Malaysia and Indonesia over the past two years alone, there have been more than two-dozen new NGOs and lobby groups who have emerged. Many of these groups are opting to carry on the political struggle through non-political means, i.e. through civil society, through lobbying, through media campaigns, through public demonstrations, and what they are doing in effect, is marginalising the secular civil society in both countries. You mentioned earlier the Muslim Professionals' Forum, I mean this is basically a lobby group that involves professional Malaysians, but it is a sectarian one in the sense that its membership is exclusive to Muslims. So as we see more and more of these sectarian, communitarian movements appear in both countries, I think the secular civil society is going to become increasingly weakened, if not marginalised.

Stephen Crittenden: Now let's get on to Abu Bakr Bashir, who of course got out of prison recently in Indonesia. You interviewed him recently; what was it like to come face to face with the man?

Farish Noor: Well it was a very ambivalent and ambiguous experience, because of course you know, Abu Bakr Bashir's reputation precedes him and one is very much aware of the fact that you are talking to someone who understands very well the power of the media, knows how to use the media and wants to get his message across. And there are two ways you can do an interview like that. I think it should be very clear to anyone who knows anything about Indonesia or knows how these organisations work, that the mode of a critical interview would be very difficult, if not impossible because the man is very adept to the workings of the media and knows how to deflect questions. So the other option was to do what I did, which is basically allow him to say whatever he wanted to say, and by doing so, get a better glimpse of the internal workings of the man and the group that he represents, and I think that was what we were trying to do.

Stephen Crittenden: It can be a very clever interview technique from time to time.

Farish Noor: Yes, because I do believe that it is important to understand the mindset of such people. What fascinates me about Abu Bakr Bashir, is not so much what he says, because I've been doing interviews with radical Islamists for the past five years now, and in fact there were so many things that he said in that interview which reminded me of very similar statements made by leaders of similar profile in Malaysia, in southern Thailand, in Pakistan, in India, I've heard it all before. What is interesting therefore is the commonality of world view that is shared by people like them. The other thing that's interesting is to see how this language has not changed over the past twenty years, and here is the important point that we need to emphasise: Abu Bakr Bashir has not said anything new. He's been saying exactly the same things since 1985. The difference is, in 1985 he was an unknown character; today he is a public figure which means that public perception has shifted, in his favour. And that, I think, is the question that analysts and political scientists like me are trying to answer.

Stephen Crittenden: Well indeed. Let me quote what you say in the article: 'Thirty years ago, Bashir would have said the same things as he does now, but his would have been a lonely voice in the wilderness. Not so now, and not in the future. The moderates have not even begun to spell out an alternative vision that could match Bashir's and offer the same promise

of hope and restoration that he has. In a desert of broken dreams, the trade ambitions and fallen heroes, men like Bashir walk the earth like heroes.' You're basically saying there that Abu Bakr Bashir is now the man of the future. Is that what you're saying?

Farish Noor: Well I'm saying that as long as the structural and economic problems of Indonesia are not addressed effectively, and as long as Indonesia suffers under the poor leadership of leaders who don't have a concrete, long-term vision for the country's future, it is this uncertainty that gives Bashir's language, his discourse, the sort of fixity and stability that people need. It's very interesting, because for me the interview with Bashir was not the important one, it was the daily interviews done with people in the street, who spoke very highly of the man, and again and again, the same refrain was given: he is consistent; he is consistent. People like you and I may be terrified of his vision of the future, but he does have a vision at least. And here I think we need to understand the complex dynamics of leadership. Leadership is when someone takes the initiative and says 'This is the solution to all your problems. Follow me and everything will be fine.' Bashir's doing that, he offers a very black and white vision of the future.

Stephen Crittenden: And how important is it, Farish, whether it's Hamas in Palestine, whether it's Abu Bakr Bashir and his organisation in Indonesia, whether it's some of these new NGOs coming through in Malaysia, if they're able to satisfy people's needs for services, that you actually have a self-reinforcing system developing, and people are coming for the health care and for all sorts of other things that if they're able to establish an alternate Islamic civil society, that this actually is really going to lock in radical Islam in the future?

Farish Noor: Well you know, it will be locked in, in the sense that it will be institutionalised. I visited Indonesia, Jogjakarta and Solo this year after the earthquake, and I've also visited Kashmir earlier this year after the earthquake in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. In both cases, these Islamic groups were the first on the scene, and they're the only ones who remain on the scene. The international aid agencies came and went, the donor agencies came and went, but the Islamists are there because they realise that's their constituency, and it's their ability to root themselves and to give out public services in a very public way, and to entrench themselves, which has somehow embedded them in the context of these places. So in a way, groups like Majelis Mujahideen in Indonesia have now become permanent fixtures. And the other thing about these groups is that they have a very broad spectrum of concerns, i.e., they're there not only to preach but they also provide basic services: health, education, welfare, and they do it consistently on the basis of voluntarism. And I suppose this is a lesson for a lot of the liberal moderates, and the secular moderates, that unless and until they are prepared to actually commit themselves in the long run the way these Islamists are going to do, there is no way that they're going to be able to win over support on the local level. Actually I'm very sceptical about many of the activities conducted by the urban-based liberals and moderates, because they seem to be engaged in so many of these international conferences that they place in New York or Geneva or Paris, but you know, you're not needed there, you're needed in your own country, you're needed on the ground in places like Aceh after the tsunami, or in Jogja after the earthquake, or in Kashmir after the earthquake, and that's where you have to be permanently. You have to show your face, you have to be there to establish face-to-face contact with people who need you. The strength of Abu Bakr Bashir's group is that they are there on a daily basis. They don't leave, they root themselves there, and after the calamity has been dealt with, they're permanently installed.

Stephen Crittenden: OK. A final question. A process of desecularisation in Malaysia, certainly similar forces percolating around in Indonesia; what are the foreign policy

implications for Australia?

Farish Noor: Foreign policy implications: well I think for a start we need to get over our own cultural hang-ups vis-à-vis the question of religion and Islam in particular. I think so many of the problems we face at the moment is that we approach people like Abu Bakr Bashir through a very jaundiced lens. I will state clearly that my own position is completely radically opposed to what the man represents, but the man himself, this question was asked of me before, Would it not be better to put the man in jail, or keep him in jail? Well the problem is, as I said, if his discourse has become homogenised in Indonesia, then him being in jail makes no difference. The thing is, Abu Bakr Bashir's ideas have now become popular, and that's what we've got to deal with. We need to understand how and why there has been this shift, to a register that is more sectarian, more communitarian and even more radically violent. And I think the contribution that other countries, be it Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, I think the contribution that we can play vis-à-vis the internal problems of Indonesia is to help Indonesia actually sort out its political and economic, particularly economic problems, because it's the state of economic and political uncertainty that is actually helping Abu Bakr Bashir, and people like him, maintain their position in society. It would be a very different Indonesia today if the international community had made a concerted effort to help Indonesia get back on its feet immediately after the '97-'98 crisis. Take into account a very simple fact that the Indonesian economy has not really recovered; it's been almost ten years now. So what do you expect? I live in Germany, I work in Germany, and of course German history tells us that in a state of economic and political crisis, the groups that are favoured by this state of uncertainty are the most radical and extreme. That's how Hitler came to power. And in the same way that the countries of Europe should have helped Germany get back on its feet after World War I, likewise I strongly believe that the best way to deal with the problems of Indonesia today is to help the economy recover, to work towards more transparency, more democratic accountability, and to bolster the institutions of civil society, rather than to allow the process of globalisation to weaken the economy even further. A weak Indonesian economy, an unstable Indonesian political system, is going to be the thing that helps Abu Bakr Bashir and people like him, more than anything else.

Stephen Crittenden: Stunning interview, Farish, thank you very much for being on the program. Great to talk to you.

Farish Noor: All right. OK.

Stephen Crittenden: Weimar Indonesia, there you are. Dr Farish Noor of the Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin.