

PLENARY ADDRESS 2 :
RELIGIOUS VILIFICATION AND DISCRIMINATION
IN MULTI-FAITH SOCIETIES: MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

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Definition of terms

The term ‘religion ‘ according to Durkheim provides a special functional definition :

Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden- beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community. (1)

Yinger gives a similar definition of religion. According to him, it is

...a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problems of human life. (2)

Thus, religious refers to ‘devout , God-fearing , person/ persons bound by a system of beliefs and practices. Vilification refers to ‘abuse, asperse, backbite, blemish, libel, malign, revile and discrimination means ‘difference, distinction, judgment according to The English Oxford Dictionary. In short, multi-faith societies paints a picture of a large group of people who embrace various religion.

Background of Malaysian society

I have selected Malaysia for this discussion due to its tremendous ethnic

composition of the population; it includes differences in religion, attire, food, and eating habits, attitude and social customs.(3)

The religious breakdown of the society is 58.6% Muslims, 18.4% Buddhists 8.1% Christians, 6.4% Hindus, 5.3% Confucionists, Taoists and/or adherents of Chinese traditional religions, 1.2% as tribal, while 0.5% classified themselves as 'other' (these being primarily followers of Sikhism and Bahai 'ism) (4)

Declaration

United Nations has a declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion and belief which was proclaimed on November 25 1981 (Resolution 36/55). In relation to vilification and discrimination , the declaration proclaim the principles of non-discrimination and equality before the law and the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief (Article 1). Article 6 , among others declare freedom to worship, establish and maintain relevant institution , issues and disseminate relevant publications, teach a religion and observe days of rest and to celebrate holidays and ceremonies in accordance with the precepts of one's religion or belief.

Notice that the Declaration in all its details with regard to religion stresses the importance of human rights over religion . It is about the freedom of the individual. This is looked upon as a Western notion. Many traditional societies in Latin America. the Middle East. Africa and Asia are not about individualism .

Thus, the well-being of the whole community is looked into and preserved. In short, the larger interest of society takes precedence over the interest of the individual.

The Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism proclaims a declaration on the freedom of religion or belief and the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief in 1988. In referring to Article II, it mentions no one shall be subject to discrimination by any State, institution, group of persons or person on ground of religion or other beliefs. The expression 'intolerance and discrimination based on religion or beliefs' means any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on religion or belief and having as its purpose or as its effects nullification or impairment of the recognition, enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamentally freedom on an equal basis.

The acknowledgement of the above two declarations in this country to an extent ensures the freedom of worship and tries to eliminate intolerance and discrimination within multi-faith societies. Vilification and discrimination takes place when two opposite attitudes which people of one religion may have toward the other religion. Some people look more at the ways in which religion come close to each other, than at the way in which they differ from each other. They say that there is a unity between them which lies beneath the differences which

Malaysia Political –Religious Scenario

First and foremost, it should be stated that Malaysia is not an Islamic state (in the sense that Islamic law is the constitutional basis of the state and its legislation). In the same breath, it is also not a secular state (in the sense that state and religious interest are completely separated). Malaysia is not an Islamic state, religion and politics are very much intertwined and interconnected.

Malaysia has not been exempt from the world-wide trend towards a growing religious consciousness , Until the mid-1970s, the ruling Malay nationalists party's (UMNO) commitment to Islam was mainly symbolic , often in response to their rivals- PAS (Pan-Malayan Islamic Party). It was not until later part of the 1970s and 1980s Islamic influence became increasingly apparent in the country. There has been increased consciousness among Islamic resurgent regarding matters related to personal morality such as liquor, gambling, attire , Islamic education program in the media and at the same time, there was a growth in Islamic propagation organizations.

As the relationship between state and religion became more interconnected , there has been increasing concerns as to how far the government 's “ Islamization” process could and will go. Islamization has made non- Muslims more conscious or aware about their own particular ethno-religious identity (6). This heightened awareness and consciousness has

In any multi-religious societies , there is a fine line between affirming one's religious identity and respecting the religious identity of others, and overstepping such boundaries. Malaysia has not been immune from individuals , groups who are over-zealous in religion.

I have listed down the following discriminations/concerns the minorities in Malaysia face from different sources. I would like to emphasize hereby that as far as I am aware there are no religious vilifications related to multi-faith societies. This is due to the appropriate laws governing such matters.

1. Land / Places of Worship

As recent as late January 2005, Hindu temples have been demolished in a southern state as published in a vernacular daily (Sri Muneswaran Temple and Nagakanni Temple in Negeri Sembilan) .Although the action of the authority is valid (temples built on government land and without following proper procedures) this action is perceived by the believers as discriminatory in nature. In 1978, a Hindu temple was desecrated in Selangor by some other faith fanatics. Chief Ministers Conference in 1983 agreed to control over apparently indiscriminate building of shrines and temples. This is also seen as infringing on religious freedom in this land. Many non-Muslims felt that the allocation of land for churches and temples has been declining in recent years. According to Tan Chee Khoo, Christians had applied for land even before Shah Alam, an

Buddhist temple was submitted but yet to be approved. A temple in Johor was almost 70% complete when a government injunction came freezing further construction pending inquiry due to public complaints. This project was stopped for 8 years with no official response. (8)

The problem concerning the allocation of land for the building of religious institution often stems from a difference in perception. Muslims believe that a community must be present prior to building a mosque whereas others see otherwise. In an attempt to establish some guidelines, the Ministry of Local and Housing set up a committee to look into the matter of places of worship for non-Muslims. This multi-racial committee stipulated that there must be a minimum of 4,000 -5,000 Christians in the area, before a religious institution could be built. Many argued that this criteria is not suitable since in many areas, number of believers are very small. This is seen as the authorities curbing their freedom of worship.

2. Language.

Al-Kitab, the Indonesian translation of the Bible was banned because it contained certain Arabic terms like Allah and Iman. Many Muslims felt that this could create confusion among their people and be used to proselytize them. The Christians protested strongly the ban and argued the government educational language policy had produced generation of young Malaysians who functioned

The Sikhs also was concerned with the prohibition of the use of particular words in Bahasa Melayu (such as Allah, kitab, etc) which the Sikhs viewed as infringement of their religious integrity . Many such words are used in their daily language, religious ceremonies , prayers and also found in their holy scriptures. Finally the issue was settled when the number of words non-Muslims could not use was reduced to four (Allah, kitab, Quran, and Muhammad).(9)

3. Education

Presently, Muslims students in Malaysia government schools are required to attend agama (Islamic religious) classes , while non-Muslims attend moral education classes (non-religious) Religious minorities are permitted to teach their respective religion to students of that faith after school hours in the set-up of their religious society. After independence , the Christian mission schools were absorbed into the government educational system. Compulsory religious subject in the curriculum were at first made optional, then eliminated altogether, while Heads of Schools were advised to remove religious symbols from the classrooms. However private religious school and institutions are allowed to function.

4. Media

Concerns has been raised by religious minorities in Malaysia regarding media access time for their own particular religious - programming. The main

5. Proselytization

The Non-Islamic Religious Enactment 1988 (Control of Propagation Amongst Muslims) is aimed at restricting the propagation of non-Islamic religion doctrines and beliefs among persons professing the religion of Islam. It includes prohibition of publishing materials if they are in the interest of the majority. For religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, such legislation does not have any major effect because they do not have a strong missionary tradition. Christianity is the only religion which has organized missionary activities on a large scale. The above constitutional provision does pose some problems for them. Some of the newer charismatic churches have refused to respect the mentioned constitutional provision and in some cases forced the government to crack down on these 'radical' groups which tried to proselytize Malays. One such case occurred during the period of political and racial tension in West Malaysia in October 1987 where the Internal Security Act was used upon church workers and members. Another attempt to limit witnessing of another faith has been the restrictions enacted by some local authorities of placing religious books/leaflets in hotel rooms.

6. Marriage

According to civil law, a non-Muslim can marry another non-

7. Conversion

On July 19, 1988 , A Bill was passed by the Selangor Government regarding the age of maturity for non-Muslims to convert. The Islamic Law Administration Bill (Amendment) 1989 states that non-Muslims upon attaining the age of maturity may choose to convert to Islam of their own free will. The Bill also states that the maturity age for female is after commencement of their menses and for males, about 15 years old. This Bill was controversial since Article 12 (4) of the Federal Constitution states that the religion of a person under the age of 18 years shall be decided by his parent or guardian. There has been a lot of protest by various religious bodies to this particular Bill.

A new issue has arisen in recent years with the influx of foreign workers in Malaysia. This issue is particularly relevant to the Hindu community. Some Bangladeshi (Muslim) male workers in the country marry Hindu girls and she becomes a Muslim. Her personal documents are changed to indicate her change in religious status. However , if the marriage fails and she want to revert to Hinduism , her children are not allowed to do so, which leads to endless identity problems for her offspring. This is perceived as not fair to the minorities.

Discussion

Religion by its nature , deals with one's fundamental values and commitments. In other words, religion provide the basis for one's identity.

The difficulty of governing and accommodating such as a diverse, ethnic, religious population like Malaysia cannot be underestimated. The country's leadership has adopted a pragmatic approach, stressing social interactions, harmony, cohesion and religious freedom as well as values to be inculcated among all members of the society. After the May 13, 1969, riots initiatives were created for new societal set-up. One such initiative was the *Rukun Negara* proclaimed on August 31, 1970. The first principle of this Rukun Negara is Belief in God. Through this principle, it has committed Malaysia to be a liberal society in which its members are free to practice and profess their own religion, customs, and culture consistent with the requirements of national unity building.

Despite the phenomenal religious diversity, many non-Muslim religious leaders have conceded that religious tolerance is still very much apart of the Malaysian government. The followers of different faith have been able to practice and often maintain their respective forms of worship. The Malaysian government has vowed to pursue a pragmatic stance in an attempt to win support from its citizens.. On one hand, due to pressure from Islamic opposition groups, the ruling party has increased its commitment to the "Islamization" of the country, although it has never been officially committed itself to establishing an Islamic state. On the other hand, the government has constantly re-iterated the need for tolerance among religious groups and re-affirmed its commitment to the religious freedom of all her people. Each group is given the right to religious freedom, but it is not permitted to manifest their religious distinctions in any way which condemns or is disrespectful to another religion.

When we look to the Islamic *shari'ah* , we find that one of the primary goals is the preservation of *din* (religion). The fact that religious minorities have lived under Islamic states throughout history of Islam, demonstrates that a certain level of religious freedom was granted to these groups. While non-Muslims have the right to religious freedom, such freedom is not absolute , nor without responsibility. One of the responsibilities of non-Muslim is that they consider the feelings of Muslims and respect the sanctity of the religion.

In Malaysia, to channel grievances of the multi-faith societies, the government has allowed the setting up various bodies such as Buddhist Association, Council of Churches of Malaysia, Christian Federation of Malaysia, National Catholic Educational Council, Association of Temples (Hindu), Tamil Reform Movement, The Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism, United Religious Initiative etc.

Malaysia has shown that increased state involvement in religious matters need not lead to the usurpation of the religious freedom of minorities. No doubt with the right leadership and level of tolerance , it is possible for multi-faith societies to retain their separate and distinct identity , yet still be integrated in the overall society.

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